

Surprising Insights From The Unchurched, And Proven Ways To Reach Them

By Thom S. Rainer, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, 281 pages.

Reviewed by Bishop Emeritus Donald N. Bastian

Sometimes in an age that finds it easy to lament the ineffectiveness of the church, it's good to ask: "What are churches doing right?" That is, wherever churches are thriving and consistently incorporating new converts into their congregational life, what common features do they tend to share?

Thom S. Rainer wanted to know. And he chose a little-used way of finding out. He did not seek out the unchurched and ask them what they would look for if they went on a search for a church to attend. Instead, he decided to ask those he calls the "formerly unchurched."

A formerly unchurched person, by Rainer's definition, is "one who has not been in church, except sporadically, for at least ten years (most for a lifetime) but has recently become active in a church. All the formerly unchurched have also recently become Christians, not merely church attenders."

Myths abound about the unchurched. In his very first chapter Rainer explodes nine of those myths held by many who misunderstand what is of concern to the unchurched. For example, contrary to the opinion of some, the unchurched are not turned off by denominational labels. His study shows that this is not a big concern to them. Further, Rainer points out, pulpit fare does not have to be thin gruel in order to hold the

attention of the unchurched -- the opposite is so. And, pastors do not have to be superstars to succeed.

Rainer is founder and dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, KY. He has been pastor or interim pastor of 10 churches, has written broadly in his field and often speaks at conferences about church growth concerns near to his heart.

His book is a report on a study he and his research team have made, but it is organized and written with such care and skill that it makes a very interesting read. The scope and depth of the study will be quite evident to the reader. Rainer and his team interviewed 353 of the formerly unchurched, asking them many open-ended (but not leading) questions. This involved thousands of hours of interviews. The team also talked to 350 "transfer Christians" (Christians of longer duration), who had interesting insights into what drew them to the particular churches where they are now members. Additionally, extensive, in-depth interviews were conducted with 101 effective evangelical pastors, and six years of study were undertaken involving more than 2,000 effective evangelistic churches.

Only evangelical churches were considered in the study, but those chosen are from seven different denominations (including Wesleyan, Nazarene, Assemblies of God, and United Methodist) plus 37 independent congregations of varying traditions. These churches are from all regions of the country and include Anglo, black, Hispanic and other segments of the population. An effective evangelistic church, according to the study's definition, is one that has no fewer than 26 conversions a year and a conversion ratio of

less than 20:1. That is, to qualify, a church of 300 members should have at least 30 conversions a year.

Surprising Insights From The Unchurched is filled with anecdotes, testimonials, facts, figures and charts. Its insights are sometimes arresting, sometimes affirming -- and in several respects deeply convicting.

For example, one chart shows responses to the following open-ended question: "What factors led you to choose this church?" The most common answer (from 90 percent of respondents) was "the pastor and his preaching." The second most common answer (from 88 percent of respondents) was "doctrines." Put these together and it becomes immediately evident that the formerly unchurched touched by this study are hungry for the content of the Christian faith well-presented by pastors to whom they are attracted. Only 11 percent of respondents said they were led to choose their current church by its worship style/music. In fact, music was second to last on the list in percentage points.

Interest in preaching and clear doctrine was not a one-shot response. It comes up repeatedly throughout the book, making it all the more worthy of deep reflection. And, the insights gleaned from the 101 pastors interviewed were essentially the same as those from the 353 formerly unchurched. Rainer writes, the formerly unchurched were, "not only interested in knowing about doctrine, they were attracted to conservative, evangelical churches that were uncompromising in their beliefs."

Getting the formerly unchurched to come to church for a few Sundays is one thing -- assimilating them into the church as active participants in ministries is another. At this point, the study turned up another significant fact. Rainer writes, "We found an

overwhelmingly convincing relationship between effective assimilation and involvement in small groups. Most of our data was on Sunday school ..." The importance of a well-directed Sunday school comes up several times in the book. The combined findings of a Barna study and one by Rainer's researchers showed that "New Christians who immediately became active in Sunday School were five times more likely to remain in the church five years later than those who were active in worship services alone." Small groups provide a basis for friendship, Christian fellowship and further Scriptural teaching.

Rainer's study ranges wide in its findings. The facilities of those churches that are reaching the formerly unchurched are generally characterized as clean and attractive; with excellent, up-to-date nurseries; good signage; well-maintained parking lots and friendliness everywhere. Worship services are joyful events. Churches that are effective in reaching the unchurched are shown consistently to have at their core preaching and teaching that is doctrinally sound and urgent, but they are also committed to excellence in all aspects of church life.

The positive influence of the pastor in a thriving, growing church came to the forefront so regularly in interviews with the formerly unchurched that Part Two of the book devotes five chapters to a review of findings gleaned from interviews with pastors of effective churches. What do they say are their greatest strengths ... and their greatest weaknesses? Rainer reports that to a person they were quite willing to speak freely of both.

In a list of 12 strengths, 72 percent of them said their greatest strength is vision casting. And in reporting on their greatest weakness, 72 percent said it is pastoral

ministry -- counseling, hospital visitation, weddings and funerals. This, plus the 11 other acknowledged weaknesses, indicate that this type of leader tends to be more managerial than pastoral.

However, the larger picture gleaned from the formerly unchurched plus self-evaluations of the 101 interviewed pastors shows them to be leaders who have engendered trust, demonstrate integrity, have a strong work ethic, a good sense of humor, and who tend to be impatient when things don't progress. They are forthright about both their perceived weaknesses and strengths. To their followers, they are "real." Above all, they are committed passionately to their belief system and to reaching the lost for Christ.

To a large number, the ministry of preaching is primary. Rainer writes, "The leaders whose churches are reaching the unchurched are passionate about preaching." They list preaching as "their most exciting and challenging task." They give ample time to preparation. In fact, this note concerning the centrality of preaching and doctrinal teaching is so prominent throughout the book that a whole chapter is devoted to preaching at the end. These leaders have a conservative, Biblical theology about the lost and a passion to reach them, a passion that is contagious to their churches.

This book could be useful as a tool for pastors or lay leaders who are restless about the drift of our society away from the church. It contains 40 pages of indices laying out the materials used in the study. Some of these could be adapted for local church use with great benefit.

I have gone through Rainer's book carefully twice. It is at the same time encouraging and deeply convicting -- encouraging in setting forth a picture of people everywhere who are ripe and reachable for the gospel, and convicting in raising the bar as

to what a concerned pastor and church must do to develop a corporate life that will be attractive -- even magnetic -- to the unchurched. Every page has on it riveting information and insights that will open eyes wide to the challenge. To me, it is a seminal book.