

NINE SIGNS YOUR CHURCH IS READY TO REACH UNCHURCHED PEOPLE

by Carey Nieuwhof | <https://careynieuwhof.com/>

Almost every church I know says they want to reach unchurched people. But few are actually doing it.

Part of the problem stems from the fact that many churches don't really understand unchurched people ([here's a post on fifteen characteristics of today's unchurched person](#)).

And part of the problem is that our model of church is designed to reach and help church people, not unchurched people. Churches haven't embraced change deeply enough.

So you can say you want to reach people all day long. You can teach about it every week. But if you haven't designed your church around ministering to people who don't go to church, you might as well be preaching that you want to lose weight while eating a triple cheeseburger.

Your model simply doesn't match your mission.

So how do you know that your church is actually ready to reach unchurched people?

Here are nine signs your church is ready to embrace unchurched people:

1. Your main services engage teenagers. I've talked with many church leaders who want to reach unchurched people who can't understand why unchurched people don't like their church. They would be stumped until I asked them one last question: do the teens in your church love your services and want to invite their friends? As soon as I asked that question, the leader's expression would inevitably change. He or she would look down at the floor and say 'no'. Here's what I believe: if teens find your main services (yes, the ones you run on Sunday mornings) boring, irrelevant, and disengaging, so will unchurched people. As a rule, if you can design services that engage teenagers, you've designed a church service that engages unchurched people.

2. People who attend your church actually know unchurched people. Many Christians say they want to reach unchurched people, but they don't actually know any unchurched people well enough to invite them. One of the reasons we run almost no church programs at [Connexus](#) where I serve (other than small groups and few other steps toward discipleship) is that we want our families to get to know unchurched people. We want them to play community sports, get involved at their kids school and have time for dinner parties and more. You can't do that if you're at church 6 nights a week. We don't do many ministries because our people are our ministry.
3. Your attenders are prepared to be non-judgmental. Unchurched people do not come 'pre-converted'. They will have lifestyle issues that might take years to change (and let's be honest, don't you?). Cleaning up your behaviour is not a pre-condition for salvation, at least not in Christianity. What God has done for us in Jesus saves us; not what we have done for God. Is your congregation really ready to love unchurched people, not just judge them? ([I wrote about why Christians should let non-Christians off the moral hook here.](#)) One of Jesus' genius approaches was to love people into life change. If your people can do that, you're ready to reach unchurched people.
4. You're good with questions. This one's still hard for me. I like to think that every question has an answer. I think one of the reasons unchurched people flee churches is they feel shut down when every question they ask has a snappy or even quick answer. They will find answers, but you need to give them time. Embracing the questions of unchurched people is a form of embracing them.
5. You're honest about your struggles. Unchurched people get suspicious when church leaders and Christians want to appear to have it 'all together'. Let's face it, you don't. And they know it. When you are honest about your struggles, it draws unchurched people closer. I make it a point to tell unchurched people all the time that our church isn't perfect, that we will probably let them down, but that one of the marks of a Christian community is that we can deal with our problems face to face and honestly, and that I hope we will be able to work it through. There is a strange attraction in that.

6. You have easy, obvious, strategic and helpful steps for new people. I am still such a fan of thinking steps, not programs ([Here's an older but awesome \(free\) Andy Stanley podcast](#) of all [Seven Practices of Effective Ministry](#)). One sure sign that you are ready to handle an influx of unchurched people is that your church has a clear, easily accessible pathway to move someone from their first visit right through to integration with existing Christians in small groups or other core ministries. Most churches simply have randomly assembled programs that lead nowhere in particular.
7. You've dumped all assumptions. It's so easy to assume that unchurched people 'must know' at least the basics of the Christian faith. Lose that thinking. How much do you (really) know about Hinduism or Taoism? That's about how much many unchurched people (really) know about Christianity. Don't fight it. Embrace it. Make it easy for everyone to access what you are talking about whenever you are talking about it.
8. Your 'outreach' isn't just a program. Many Christians think having a 'service' for unchurched people or a program designed for unchurched people is enough. It's not. When you behave like reaching unchurched people can be done through a program or an alternate service, you're building a giant brick wall for unchurched people to walk into. You might as well tell them "This program is for you, but our church is for us. Sorry."
9. You are flexible and adaptable. In the future, you will not 'arrive'. I think the approach to unchurched people and the strategy behind the mission of the church needs to be flexible and adaptable. Don't design a 'now we are done' model to reaching unchurched people. You might never be done. Churches that are adaptable and flexible in their strategy (not in their mission or vision) will have the best chance of continually reaching unchurched people. "How quickly can your church change?" will become a defining characteristic of future churches. (If you want to read more about change, I wrote [Leading Change Without Losing It](#) last year. Additionally, John Kotter's [Leading Change](#) is a must-read classic.)

Those are nine signs I see that your church is ready to reach unchurched people.

What do you see?