

**5 ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES  
FOR REACHING**

**UNCHURCHED  
PEOPLE**

**Carey Nieuwhof**

# **5 ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES FOR REACHING UNCHURCHED PEOPLE**

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# Introduction

This short eBook is offered as bonus to my blog subscribers. Thanks for being part of a tribe of leaders committed to leading better now.

5 Essential Strategies for Reaching Unchurched People is a compilation of five blog posts about reaching unchurched people.

The posts, put together, form a five-part strategy that I think is essential for churches that truly want to reach the unchurched:

- I. Understand the Unchurched
- II. Match your Method to the Mission
- III. Find a Fresh Angle
- IV. Engage Indifference
- V. Evaluate Your Effectiveness

At the end of each chapter you'll find a short section called Engage with three questions designed for personal or team study.

Naturally, this book is most applicable to church leaders. But I think some of the principles translate easily for marketplace leaders. Chapters I and V in particular can help business leaders trying to get a handle on a shifting culture and their effectiveness in it.

Finally...I'd love to hear how it's going for you. Please leave a comment on the blog or send me an email. (Just hit reply to one of my emails when it lands in your inbox.)

I truly hope this book helps you and your team lead better now and realize the mission to which we've been called.

Carey

# I. Understand the Unchurched

## *15 Characteristics of Unchurched People*

If you're like many Christians, you have an authentic desire to share your faith with people who don't yet follow Jesus. I know I do.

One of my deepest longings is that every person would come to know the love and salvation that Jesus extends to them.

Our vision at [Connexus](#), where I serve as lead pastor, is to be a church that unchurched people love to attend – a vision we share with all [North Point strategic partner churches](#).

But unchurched people are changing.

Even since I started ministry 18 years ago, there's been a big shift in how unchurched people think. Particularly here in Canada, we are a bit of a hybrid between the US and Europe. Canadians are less 'religious' than Americans, but less secular than Europeans.

Gabe Lyons and David Kinnaman have outlined helpful characteristics of unchurched people in [UnChristian](#) and David tackled it again in [You Lost Me](#). I won't repeat those characteristics here. (Both books are fantastic reads.)

Post-modernism has a deeper toehold here than in almost anywhere in American except perhaps the Northwest and New England, where it might be about the same.

Here are characteristics of unchurched people that I'm seeing today.

**1. They don't all have big 'problems.'** If you're waiting for unchurched people to show up because their life is falling apart, you might wait a long time. Sure, there are always people in crisis who seek God out. But many are quite content with their lives without God. And some are quite happy and successful. If you only know how to speak into discontent and crisis, you will miss most of your neighbours.

**2. They feel less guilty than you think.** They don't feel any guiltier about not being in church on Sunday than you feel guilty about not being in synagogue on Saturdays. How many Saturdays do you feel badly about missing synagogue? That's how many Sundays they feel badly about missing church.

**3. Occasional is regular.** When they start coming, they don't always attend every week. Giving them easy, obvious and strategic steps to get connected is important. Disconnected people generally don't stick. (I wrote more about the [declining frequency of church attendance](#) here.)

**4. Most are spiritual.** Most unchurched people believe in some kind of God. They're surprised and offended if you think of them as atheists. As they should be.

**5. They are not sure what "Christian" means.** So you need to make that clear. You really can't make any assumptions about what people understand about the Christian faith. Moving forward, clarity is paramount.

**6. You can't call them back to something they never knew.** Old school 'revival' meant there was something to revive. Now that we are on the 2nd to 5th generation of unchurched people, revival is less helpful to say the least. You can't call them back to something they never knew.

**7. Many have tried church, even a little, but left.** We have a good chunk of people who have never ever been to church (60% of our growth is from people who self-identify as not regularly attending church), but a surprising number of people have tried church at some point – as a kid or young adult. Because it wasn't a good experience, they left. Remember that.

**8. 'Something' is generous.** Because even giving 10% of your income to anything is radically countercultural, the only paradigm of giving they have is a few dozen or hundred dollars to select charities. I hope every Christian learns to live a life of sacrifice and generosity, but telling them they are ungenerous is a poor way to start the conversation. They are probably already more generous than their friends.

**9. They want you to be Christian.** They want you to follow Jesus, authentically. Think about it, if you were going to convert to Buddhism, you would want to be an authentic Buddhist, not some watered down version. [Andy Stanley is 100% right](#) when he says you don't alter the content of your services for unchurched people, but you should change the experience.

**10. They're intelligent, so speak to that.** Don't speak down to them. Just make it easy to get on the same page as people who have attended church for years by saying "this passage is near the middle of the bible." You can be inclusive without being condescending.

**11. They hate hypocrisy.** Enough said.

**12. They love transparency.** When you share your weaknesses, everyone (including Christians) resonates.

**13. They invite their friends if they like what they're discovering.** They will be your best inviters if they love what you're doing.

**14. Their spiritual growth trajectory varies dramatically.** One size does not fit all. You need a flexible on ramp that allows people to hang in the shadows for a while as they make up their mind, and one that allows multiple jumping in points throughout the year.

**15. Some want to be anonymous and some don't.** So make your church friendly to both. Also see the previous point. This is huge.

Keep an eye on the characteristics of unchurched people as they change again. You'll always have a hard time reaching people you don't understand or can't communicate with.

## **Engage**

*What characteristics have you most seen in your context?*

*Which contexts differ between the generations of unchurched people in your community (say Millennials v Busters)?*

*What can you do to better understand the people you're trying to reach?*

## II. Match Your Model to the Mission

### *9 Signs Your Church Is Ready to Reach Unchurched People*

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

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 9 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 but 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](#) (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 path way 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. Those are 9 signs I see that your church is ready to reach unchurched people.

## **Engage**

*Which of the 9 characteristics most describe how your church is positioned today?*

*Which of the 9 characteristics least describe how your church is positioned today?*

*What do you need to do in the next few months and over the next year to bridge the gap between where you are and where you need to be?*

### III. Find a Fresh Angle

#### *Design Your Message Series for Unchurched People*

Some critics believe speaking to unchurched people means you will have to water down truth. I couldn't disagree more.

Can you craft a message series for unchurched people and still be faithful to scripture?

*Absolutely.*

Can you preach to a room full of church people and unchurched people at the same time with the same message and help them both take a step in their faith?

*Without a doubt, yes.*

The only question is how.

While we won't nearly exhaust the subject here, let's get started and tackle the biggest issues in creating a message series that connects with unchurched people: angle.

Preaching to unchurched people is not about watering down content, preaching 'baby' sermons or avoiding hard subjects.

It's really all about the angle you take on a subject.

Let me give you an example.

I wanted to preach through a Biblical book recently, and I picked Esther.

I could have called the series Esther. But that would have been, well, interesting to

people who like the book of Esther.

So after thinking it through, I called it [“Your Big Moment”](#). After all, that’s what happened to Esther (and Mordecai, and Haman) – she had her big moment, when she least expected it. Because people can relate to wondering about whether or when their big moment will come, we found an angle that worked for church and unchurched people. And I managed to cover the story of Esther in the process.

The problem with most message series is that they are focused on what the speaker wants to say, not what the listener wants to hear. If you only want to ever reach Christians, that’s a great strategy.

If you want to engage unchurched people, in my view, it’s a terrible strategy.

So where can you get ideas to find the angle? Obviously, you should talk to unchurched people...but in addition to that, here are five ways you can stay on top of what people in your culture and community are thinking about:

**1. The Amazon Top 100 List.** Check out the [Top 100](#) to see what your neighbours are already thinking about. Finding 6 books on eternity and near death experiences on the list caused me to create a 7 part series called “Afterlife”. The series resonated deeply because so many unchurched people were already investigating the issue on their own.

**2. Movies.** This doesn’t mean you have to do an “At the Movies” series, but it does mean what people are watching gives you a clue as to what they are thinking. Horror movies are perennially popular. I really don’t like horror movies personally, but in crafting a series for 2014 on evil, I’m going to make sure we cover our culture’s ambiguous attitude toward evil: on the one hand we dismiss it, on the other hand we simply can’t.

**3. Media Coverage.** The media covers certain issues again and again. One of them, for example, is financial uncertainty. If you’re talking about money, for example, research stories that talk about how financial uncertainty impacts average families daily. Household debt levels, being underwater on a mortgage, have expensive car payments and saving too little for retirement are issues that people are struggling with right now. Provide solutions and talk about it biblically.

**4. Google Trends.** I learned about this Google feature from [Rich Birch](#) (so many helpful insights and tips [on his blog](#) and new [podcast](#)). With Google Trends, at any moment, you can see [what people are searching for on Google](#). That will get your mind racing.

**5. Magazines.** Next time you’re at the supermarket, scan the headlines of the magazines by the checkout. Again, you may not want to do a series on 101 sex tips, but when we did a series on sex a few years ago, it led me to call one of our message

“Sex Tricks”. Interesting, isn’t it? In the end, it was all about how sex tricks us when we remove it from the context of marriage. The subjects these magazines cover again and again connect with people and give you clues into what’s on their mind.

Once you have started to get a sense of the what’s going on around you, there are five things to consider as you draft the series:

**1. Frame what people NEED to know within the context of what they WANT to know.** There’s what people want to know. That can easily drive a topical series on issues like suffering, relationships and even creating a better life. But then there’s what people need to know, like specific teachings, doctrines and even sections of scripture. That’s where the angle becomes everything. For example, when I read through Psalm 101, I knew I wanted to preach it. But how do you angle a Psalm? The psalm is all about how David crafted a life of integrity and how he deleted certain influences from his life while saving others. We called the series [Save and Delete](#) and dangled this question in front of people: can you delete certain people from your life?

**2. Look for people issues.** Churched and unchurched people struggle with pretty much the same things. They have relational issues, financial issues, personal doubts, health concerns and insecurities. They feel like God is more distant than he needs to be. They struggle at work. And when they’re incredibly successful, they struggle with thinking there has to be something more. When you connect on those issues, you connect with everyone. Christian and otherwise.

**3. Don’t be trendy—just be relevant.** If you talk about the current NFL season a lot or title a series after what’s #1 at the box office today, your series has a tiny shelf life. It will go stale within weeks or months. But let the trends point you to the ongoing issues underneath. Every #1 romantic comedy points you to the underlying tensions of love and relationships. Angle the series from that perspective and you will always have an audience.

**4. Cover only one issue with each message.** Don’t do need a 3 point or 30 point message. Do a single point message (more on that later this week). Reduce each week to a single point and make most of your series 3-8 weeks. Less than 3 weeks is not really a series. More than 8 weeks and you’ll lose people’s attention. Covering one main idea per week makes a series far more memorable. As is often said, the person who makes three points in a talk makes no points.

**5. Title it with the invitation in mind.** This one is key. If you title your series “5 Signs You’re an Emotional Disaster”, how on earth is someone who attends your church going to invite his friend to it? So we called a series on love “Like It or Love It” and wrote it up this way:

What do you mean when you say you love someone? What should you mean? You say you love chicken wings, but you also love her. Can one emotion cover both

situations? Where's the line between liking and loving? We'll explore Christianity's radical teachings about love in a way that can change what you like, what you love, and how you live.

So much easier to invite your friends to.

## **Engage**

*Which message series have you done recently that could have been easily tweaked to suit an unchurched audience?*

*What are some issues people you know inside and outside the church are struggling with?*

*Brainstorm two or three series ideas you could teach through in the next six months.*

## **IV. Engage Indifference**

### ***Reach Unchurched People Who Think They Don't Need God***

There's a growing sea of indifference toward the church. But don't let that discourage you.

The number of people in Canada (my country) who profess "no religion" is now at 24%, up from 16.5% a decade earlier.

That's a massive shift in a mere ten years.

As I reflect on it all, I'm left with this growing realization.

*People are learning to live comfortably without God.*

Want to see where this might be heading? Go to Western Europe, where people have very comfortable lives and only a splinter regularly attend church. They just don't see their need for God.

Rather than being met with a wall of hostility, Christians are mostly being met with a wall of indifference and perceived irrelevance.

I believe that means a massive shift in attitude and approach for those of us in leadership in the local church.

Much of the church's outreach over the last 60 years has been based on a few assumptions that are less and less true every year:

Young adults will return to church when they have kids.

People will turn to God when they hit a crisis.

Most people will come back to what they left when they were young.

When people have spiritual needs, they will look to the church to fulfill them.

Instead, here's what I see as increasingly true among unchurched people who are learning to live comfortably without God:

Affluence (even many of our poor are affluent from a global perspective) has left people with a sense they have all they need to face life.

People don't always turn to God in a crisis; they honestly don't think the church can help.

You can only come back to something you knew. When you are on your second or third generation of 'unchurched', there is nothing to come back to for many people.

Personalized, Google-able spirituality doesn't demand the assistance of anyone or anything else.

So how do you reach a growing number of people who are learning to live comfortably without God?

**1. Build relationships.** Jesus was deeply relational, and it seems he liked relationships with people outside the 'church' more than he liked hanging around people inside the 'church'. One of the best ways to encourage people to build relationships with unchurched people is to stop running ministries in your church every night of the week. Encourage the Christians in your church to get involved in their kids schools, to play sports in a community league, to get to know their neighbours. Pick a few key ministries and do them well (we encourage people to serve on Sundays and be in community group one night a week; that's about it). Salt only realizes its purpose if it gets out of the box and into the food it needs to season. You can't influence people you don't know.

**2. Speak to success, not just failure.** In your preaching and in your conversation, if you are only prepared to speak to people in their moments of weakness and despair, you're going to miss a big chunk of your city. If every example you share is of someone in a crisis or who has deep problems, you will never connect with people who like their lives or who have decent marriages, even without God. That kind of talk is also a bit of a guy-repellant.

So what might you say? A few ideas:

**i. Talk about success, but ask questions about its emptiness.** Most successful people I know are always on a quest for more. Success promises,

but never (quite) fully delivers. Speak to that. Ask questions like “do you ever wonder if there’s more?” Or “ever wonder what that gnawing desire is really all about?”

**ii. Assume people are doing their best.** The derogatory and condescending caricatures of unchurched people by some Christians are just insulting...especially if you have unchurched people in the room. Most people are doing their best. They really are. If you start with acknowledging that and empathizing with them, they will accept your challenge at the end. Even value it.

**iii. Respect their intelligence.** Most people have done some homework. Often quite extensive. They believe what they believe or don’t believe for what they see as good reasons. When you respect them, they are more likely to respect you and your views.

**3. Value the good you see.** The 'everything secular is evil' attitude of many religious leaders is not only a bit off base biblically, it’s also ineffective. Common grace is still at work in the world. If you read Acts 10, God appears to have valued people like Cornelius for his prayers and his gifts to the poor, even before his conversion. Jesus never started a conversation with an outsider by condemning them (that’s actually how he started his conversation with insiders...think about that), even if he finished it with a challenge (“go and sin no more”). Maybe that’s because Jesus actually loves unchurched people.

It’s going to take a lot of us rethinking our cultural assumptions as we move into this next era.

## **Engage**

*Who do you know that seems to be living comfortably without God?*

*Does your church know how to speak to people who have experienced success?*

*What things could you do as church leaders to better encourage people in your church to build relationships with unchurched people?*



## V. Evaluate Your Effectiveness

### *7 Reasons Churches that Want to Reach Unchurched People...Don't*

So what happens when you're motivated to reach unchurched people, you've made many changes, but you're still not making the progress you'd hoped?

First, understand that among all the leaders who want to reach unchurched people, many don't; too few churches see real traction in this area.

Why is that? Often it's because we never fully get to a place of transformation too quickly fall back into old habits.

There are at least 7 frequent mistakes churches make. Some of these we've talked about already. They bear repeating because if you measure your effectiveness against these 7 issues, you will become more effective in reaching unchurched people.

Here are 7 reasons why churches that want to reach unchurched people...don't:

**1. Your desire to reach unchurched people is an intention, not a strategy.** You're honestly only doing a variation of what you've always been doing and hoping for different results. Wanting unchurched people to attend and creating a church unchurched people love to attend are two very different things. If you haven't made radical changes to how you do church, don't expect radically different results.

**2. You've ended up in No-Man's Land by trying to please everyone.** Your church is too contemporary to make insiders happy and your approach is still too dated, irrelevant and unengaging to capture the imagination of unchurched people. You've made as many changes as you think you can navigate without alienating your existing membership, but not brought about nearly enough change to really engage

outsiders. You are in no-man's land. In an attempt to please everyone, you have pleased no one.

**3. Your real vision is about you.** On the wall, your vision is about Jesus, the Kingdom and the world, but down the hall your reality about how to keep Mr. X from writing yet another angry letter and how to appease Ms. X who says your church just isn't deep enough. You say it's about others, but you spend all your time on insiders. Keep that up, and no matter what your mission and vision say, your church will have a vision no bigger than its (contentious) members.

**4. Your people don't know any unchurched people.** This can be a real problem. How can people who attend your church invite unchurched people if they don't know any? As stated earlier, one of the ways we combat that at Connexus is to offer very little mid week programming—mostly just community groups for people to gather in at most one night a week. It's a lot easier to invite unchurched friends to church when you have some. Most churches keep their 'salt' inside the box...it never actually touches any food.

**5. You speak insider.** If unchurched people show up, you confuse them by the way you speak. If they have to learn code to understand what people in the hall way are saying (We were blessed by great fellowship the other day) or what's being said from the front (sanctification is a process of regeneration led by the Holy Spirit), they'll leave. Talk like normal people. Be clear. Remember, being unclear does not make you deep. It just makes you unclear.

**6. You judge them.** If you start reaching unchurched people they're going to look like, well, unchurched people. Their lifestyle will be different. Sex won't just be for married people. You'll deal with addictions, family break down, competing ideas about who God is and much more. Stop judging. Start loving. Very few people get judged into life change; many of us get loved into life change. Start with judgment and they're gone.

**7. You're not sure what to do with them when they get there.** You have no clear steps. No environments designed with new people in mind. You don't know how to engage their questions, to journey with them. Even if they come, they probably won't stick around if you can't lead them into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

That's what I've seen as I've talked with many churches and church leaders. And those are things we constantly guard against at Connexus.

## **Engage**

*Which of the seven reasons is least true of your church right now?*

*Which of the seven reasons is most true of your church right now?*

*What tangible steps toward improvement could you take?*

## Conclusion

Re-engineering your church—and your leadership—to reach unchurched people isn't for the faint of heart, but it is so worthwhile.

It's so rewarding to see person after person decide to be baptized and move into a growing relationship with Jesus. It's almost equally awesome to see many, many Christians commit themselves to a lifetime mission of reaching unchurched people.

In case you were wondering, I also work on implementing these strategies daily, because we're not done yet. There are so many more to reach, including friends I care about deeply.

So keep going. One day, you'll be so grateful you did.