

Foreword by Ed Stetzer

Rick Richardson

# YOU FOUND

New Research on  
How Unchurched  
Nones, Millennials,  
and Irreligious Are  
Surprisingly Open  
to Christian Faith



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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).

# Introduction

## The Challenge Congregations Face in America

I love pastors and leaders of churches, and I also feel their pain and disappointment when things don't go well. I have been a pastor at various churches for some years, and even when I have not been on staff, I have almost always served as a leader in my church in some capacity. I think of a few of the pastors and leaders for whom I am praying these days. Let me tell you about one of them.

Pastor Nate is a loved and effective pastor. He is there when people are in crisis. He is a good communicator with a warm heart and pastoral understanding in his sermons. He is really likable and liked, even loved.

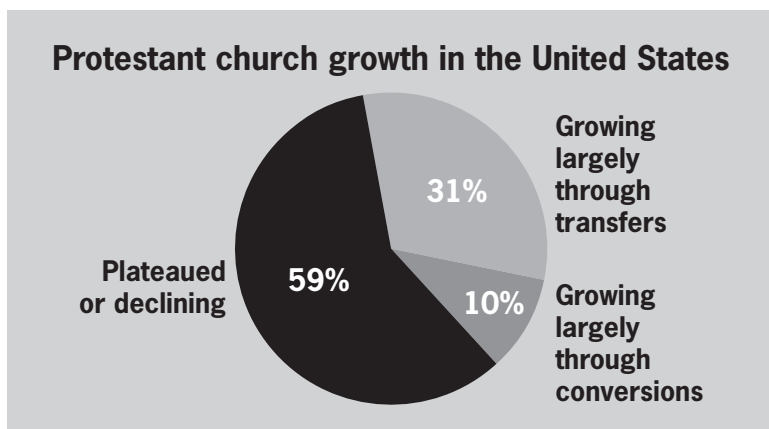
Nate also has a big heart for reaching people who don't know Jesus. He is Southern Baptist, after all. Part of why he went into ministry was his heart for neighbors and friends and family members who did not know Jesus. But over the years, the everyday demands of the church ministry he leads pushed out any time he might have had to reach out. He wasn't sharing his faith with his friends much and had started to give up on even trying, but his church didn't seem to mind. They liked having Nate all to themselves. Who wouldn't? Nate would

not have put it this way, but his life was a parable of gradual mission drift over years. He had lost some of his passion and almost all of his personal practice of reaching out to people outside the church. His church was not growing, and it was even shrinking some, though not a lot. The church would certainly be able to go on for years, but something central was missing from Nate's life and ministry, and he knew it.

Lately Nate has been trying to make changes. He started reaching out himself to friends and neighbors. He is meeting with a few other pastors to share stories and keep himself accountable. He has told his elders he wants to change, and he has appointed a woman from his church, Shelley, to help him lead the change and get other people involved in reaching out.

There is a further problem that has derailed the effort. A few months after Nate began to make changes, he discovered that one of his church volunteers had abused kids in Sunday school. He and the church ended up in an article in the local newspaper. His church has had to pay legal fees. They have been caught up in controversy and pain. A few families have left. The staff person who headed the children's ministry needed to be reassigned. All of Nate's steps toward growing in outreach have now been swallowed up by the leadership crisis. And Shelley, who has so much passion to help Nate and the church make a difference, is frustrated and feeling helpless.

Nate and Shelley long to see friends and family members come to know God and to connect to a congregation. They long to see their church making an impact in the community. They long to grow as a church by reaching people who are unchurched, but presently these longings are going unfulfilled. Instead, the church is shrinking, the everyday business of the church consumes most of the energy of most of the leaders, and the additional crisis has consumed everything else.



Source: Billy Graham Center Institute and Lifeway Research, Measuring Evangelism in the Protestant Churches Study.

**Figure 1.1.** Protestant church growth in the United States

Nate and Shelley are not alone. As a whole, the church in America is struggling, and pastors and leaders and church people are feeling it. Eighty percent of all churches in America are plateaued and declining.<sup>1</sup> For Protestant churches in America, the numbers are better but still not good. Over the last three years, 59 percent of Protestant churches in America are plateaued or declining.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, 31 percent are growing but primarily through transfers, which come at the expense of the churches that are declining. Only 10 percent are growing primarily through reaching new people and therefore fit our definition of a conversion community.<sup>3</sup>

These healthy and vibrant churches are growing; attracting new, unchurched people; and making a difference in their communities. But for most churches, if trends and business as usual continue to characterize the American church context, churches will decline, people will drift away from any congregational involvement, and communities will experience increasing moral and social decline.

What can be done? Is the culture's drift away from church congregations inevitable?

## A Few Good People

There is an intriguing interaction between Abraham and God in Genesis 18:20-33 that has a bearing on the decline of churches in America and what could be done about it. In the passage, the writer reports how God tells Abraham he is going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Apparently, both cities have become so morally and socially degenerate and so devoid of any redeeming people that they are fit for nothing but destruction. Abraham takes issue with this and argues with God. Summoning his courage, Abraham asks whether God would spare the city if there were fifty righteous people. God says yes. In an odd scene, the two protagonists, God and Abraham, begin the Middle Eastern practice of bartering. Abraham slowly whittles God down to ten. If even ten righteous people can be found, would God spare the city? Yes.

Sadly, not even ten righteous people can be found.

It was not the presence of evil people, unjust relationships, or violence that doomed Sodom and Gomorrah. It was the lack of good people, bonded with one another, working for justice, compassion, and reconciliation. I will come back to this theme several times. The primary problem the church faces is not the shifting or hostile culture around us. The primary problem we face is us. Whenever the church recovers its quality of life and boldness of witness, it grows, even against immense cultural barriers. We *can* be the ten righteous who catalyze the sparing of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In 1867 British philosopher John Stuart Mill explained, “Bad men need nothing more to compass their ends, than that good men should look on and do nothing.”<sup>4</sup> Almost one hundred years later, in 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. echoed that sentiment in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” when he wrote, “The ultimate tragedy of Birmingham was not the brutality of the bad people, but the silence of the good people.”<sup>5</sup> When good people do nothing, communities deteriorate.

Congregations, including Christian congregations, keep communities alive and healthy.

Healthy congregations create communal bonds that build social connections of caring between people. They contribute to their community through civic involvement, social service, and concern for the hurting. Healthy congregations can make significant cultural contributions to communities related to music, or art, or architecture, or practicing positive relational presence. Healthy congregations host volunteer organizations, and members often volunteer for nonprofit service organizations that meet the needs of underresourced people. Healthy congregations reach new people and provide meaning and direction in life to many individuals who otherwise might merely live for themselves.

### **Consequences of Ineffective Conversion Growth**

But most congregations today in America are struggling to be healthy and vibrant, and many are missing the mark. There are numerous consequences.

*Pastors and leaders often feel like failures, and their efforts to make a difference feel futile.* Pastors often go into ministry to lead a healthy, vibrant congregation that could reach people and influence communities. Instead, too many are presiding over congregations that are shrinking in numbers and impact, and they are often expected to do what feels impossible: turn it all around. Carrying that weight and not achieving success burns out many good people.

I think of Gary, who is a more effective preacher than many and is more loved by his people than most. Despite his gifts and vision, and the work he did over ten years, he watched his congregation go from 900 to 650, losing many leaders and members to the hot new church nearby. Every December he was overwhelmed with a feeling of desperation to meet budget. He knew that if the church didn't break

even, he would have to cut church expenses and fire people, and he was always wondering when the axe might fall on him. Carrying this weight, his morale went down and his preaching suffered. He struggled to maintain his edge and freshness.

Then he entered a downward spiral in his relationship with the worship leader of the congregation. They didn't see eye to eye. The worship leader had decided that worship needed to be intense and designed for the really strong believers, and he was resistant to making any allowances or adjustments for newer people who were still seeking and merely curious about faith. As a result, the church stopped reaching new people, and church members felt as if they had to choose between the vision of the two leaders. Gary was much more concerned with remaining vibrant through reaching newer people, and the worship leader did not value that effort. In response, Gary asked the board chair whether he could let the worship leader go, as the conflict was undermining trust in Gary's leadership and unity in the direction of the church. The board chair said no, which left Gary feeling as if he had to choose between fighting and maybe even splitting the church or leaving on a good note, if that were still possible. He chose the latter. He left celebrated and thanked, but he was not interested in further congregational leadership opportunities. He took a different kind of job. Gary had lost hope and energy, and the congregation kept shrinking and turning inward.

Gary is certainly not an extreme example but a fairly typical one. This story represents so many who have lost hope and have left congregational leadership feeling like failures. Often lead pastors are judged on three main criteria: (1) Is the congregation growing? (2) Are we meeting budget? and (3) How was last week's sermon? By two of the three, most pastors in America feel as though they are not making it. Some feel that they are struggling with all three. Others feel that the list is a lot longer than three!



*People without direction and connection stay that way.* Most churches are not reaching new people or bringing in fresh vision, gifts, and contributions to the life of the congregation. Most Americans are trending away from congregational involvement. As the papers and studies have touted, the “nones” are on the rise! Nones are people who tell us on surveys that they have no preference for any particular religion and no allegiance to any religious group or organization. They include atheists, agnostics, and “nothing in particulars” on surveys. They are such a significant and growing group of congregationally disconnected people that I devote a major part of a chapter to reaching out to them. They also appear as supporting actors in many other chapters. Pew Research, the gold standard in this kind of research, tells us after surveying thirty-five thousand Americans in 2007 and then again in 2014 that the nones have grown from 16 percent of the population in 2007 to 23 percent of the population in 2014.<sup>6</sup> Even more alarming for the future of congregations, the percentage of nones from among older millennials (born 1981–1989) has risen from 25 percent to 34 percent in seven years, and for younger millennials (born 1990 to 1996) has risen to 36 percent.<sup>7</sup> Nones are the fastest-growing religious identification in the nation.

Now, let me say, the word *nones* probably does not mean what you think it means. We will explore how people often misunderstand what nones represent. They are not necessarily antireligious, anti-Christian, or even antichurch. Many are very spiritual, and more of them than you might expect are receptive to congregations and faith conversations. Nevertheless, it is a startling statistic signifying a stunning trend in American society. Churches and congregations are losing their influence and social status for an increasing percentage of Americans, particularly where there are the most consequences for congregations of the future—that is, among emerging adults.

Although I will bring a counterbalancing perspective in this book, we still must face the reality that the number of increasingly alienated people from churches and congregations is growing. Can it be turned around? How much should we in congregations even value connecting with people who feel disinterested or alienated from religious institutions in America?

Jesus consistently valued the alienated and the disconnected most. That was his point in three stories he told about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a prodigal son (Lk 15). The alienated, those “lost” to religious life in Jesus’ time, were profoundly valuable to Jesus, such that he sought them, loved them, healed them, and confronted every religious person who pushed them away. Congregations seeking to emulate Jesus and his values similarly have to be profoundly concerned at the loss of so many people and so much influence for good in their lives.

*Congregations are feeling less and less successful in the mandate Jesus gave them, to make disciples (followers of Jesus) who make disciples.* In other words, at the heart of Christian faith is the generative impulse to develop reproducers, people who come to faith and then pass that faith on to others, who pass it on to additional others. That is the basic pattern for how Christian faith went from being a tiny minority in a backwater country to being the largest religious movement in the world.

Rodney Stark, as a sociologist of religion, documents that growth in his book *The Rise of Christianity*.<sup>8</sup> His study of demographic growth and its cause led him to emphasize the combination of the message, lifestyle, and compassion for the hurting that led to explosive and viral growth. Ultimately the most powerful empire in the world forsook its pagan gods and turned to the Christian God. In some ways, winning the empire ended up changing Christians more than the empire. But there were also many good consequences, including the elevation of women, the incorporation of the Ten Commandments into the moral

values of society, the restraining of the worst dimensions of despotism in the emperors, and the amelioration of the worst effects of slavery.

One of the compelling stories Stark reports on in *The Rise of Christianity* is that when plague hit Roman cities, Christians, unlike others, stayed and cared for both their own and others who were stricken. As a result, once plague had swept through the cities, these urban centers belonged to the Christian population, not through conquest but through self-sacrifice and service. Stark explains,

For the Christian, there is an 80 percent probability that any one of his or her Christian friends and relatives survived the epidemic and remained in the city (as a result of the commitment to care for the sick and the results of this care). For the pagan, these odds are only 50 percent (since many fled and others died alone). The consequence of all this (the Christians who remained and the pagans who fled) is that pagan survivors faced greatly increased odds of conversion because of their increased attachments to Christians.<sup>9</sup>

Congregations today need to recover that focus on making followers of Jesus who reproduce themselves in faith and in the ethical and compassionate behaviors that imitate Jesus. But one of the problems is that too many pastors are consumed with running the organization rather than reproducing faith and action in people. As a result, many churches feel more and more marginalized, powerless, and aging. Rather than churches feeling that their influence is growing, most churches feel as though their influence is stagnant or shrinking.

### **Hope for the Future**

But the picture is not all bleak. There are many signs of light and hope—signs that many more congregations could be seeing a different reality in their common life.

I think of a church in Colorado that is located less than a mile from a lower-income elementary school.<sup>10</sup> This church saw a need in its community, so it started a back-to-school outreach where it now sets up tables out in the parking lot and provides thousands of kids with school supplies, new clothes, and free haircuts. It partnered with Food for Hope, so every Wednesday it takes 140 bags of food to this lower-income elementary school so that the kids will have something to eat over the weekend. Other churches in the area are also involved with Food for Hope, which strengthens the broader witness of the church in this area. The church's primary intent is not to recruit people to church, but people have still committed their lives to God in the process.

Besides the church's outreach to the nearby elementary school, it also has a compassion fund that allows it to help people pay portions of their utility bills, rent, or mortgage. Pastor David says, "They often get single moms who come, and they're looking for help with their rent, and a lot of these ladies are battling addictions, so they're not spending their money wisely. And we'll help them." Because this pastor can relate to people in this situation, he is able to say, "I know what you're going through. I've been there, but there is a better way." Pastor David often has the opportunity to share about Jesus in a kind yet clear way.

The church is actively looking for ways to meet the needs of its community. It has a designated local missionary, constantly looking for outreach opportunities. Outreach is central to the heartbeat of the church. As David shared about the outreach opportunities his church is engaged in, he explained, "What I seem to notice is that when you can meet a need, people know and the community knows that you care about them." This care often is what builds bridges to faith among the unchurched people in their broader community. In one year, the church has seen 150 people come to faith in Christ.

We surveyed many churches that have served their communities but not grown through people making new commitments to Christ—but it does not have to be that way. We can reach people and see congregations grow. Many people and congregations show us a different future: one in which churches are vibrant, the alienated are connected, reproducers multiply, and society is seasoned with salt and seeing brighter light from churches.

### **Overview of Contributing Research Projects**

This book is based on a study of such congregations. First, the Billy Graham Center Institute, in partnership with Lifeway Research, surveyed two thousand unchurched people to find out how they viewed American congregations, what they thought about faith, and what they would respond to as congregations seek to connect with them.<sup>11</sup> The Billy Graham Center Institute is the research arm of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College and is pursuing a number of research projects to help equip churches and Christians to engage culture, revitalize the church, and renew society. In our survey of two thousand unchurched people from across the United States, we found out some very surprising things, including that unchurched people are much more receptive and interested in spiritual conversations and invitations to congregations than we might think from reports in the media.

Then the Billy Graham Center Institute, in partnership with Lifeway Research, surveyed three thousand congregations across the country to find out how they are doing in overall conversion growth. We identified the top 10 percent that are growing successfully through conversion and found that the most effective churches consistently combine serving their communities and connecting to unchurched people. Conversion growth and community influence go together. We also interviewed fifty-seven pastors from those

top-10-percent churches and forty-one previously unchurched people from those top-10-percent churches to find out what they're doing right.

Sprinkled throughout the book, I will also unpack the results from our Small Church Evangelism study. The Billy Graham Center Institute, in partnership with Lifeway Research, and the Caskey Center for Church Excellence surveyed fifteen hundred small churches (under 250 people) and discovered the top predictive factors for sustained church growth through reaching new people. The top predictive factor we found was hospitality to the unchurched. If there is a silver bullet, this is it. I will look at all the factors we identified.

This book distills the key findings from several different research projects, but it also builds on them by demonstrating how these ideas can be practically applied in church contexts. Even before our research, we were helping churches across the country turn outward. For the last seven years, we have been field-testing best outreach practices through our cohort leader labs. We have worked with over 182 churches to date. (The total number of churches includes 120 churches involved in cohorts that are led by the Church Evangelism Initiative of the Billy Graham Center as well as 62 churches involved in cohorts that are led by the Evangelical Covenant Church in partnership with the Church Evangelism Initiative.) Each cohort consists of six to twelve lead pastors and a key leader from each church who champions reaching out and making an impact. It has been profoundly rewarding to apply best practices and see churches change. Building the bridges between research and application in churches has created a very exciting synergy. Many churches that have adopted some of these practices have seen the results. And they have been all sizes—from ten thousand, to five thousand, to one thousand, to five hundred, to two hundred, to fifty.

We do an evaluation every year of what's happened in cohort churches, and after one year, 100 percent of pastors say they are personally reaching out more.<sup>12</sup> Once pastors start living what they are trying to lead, in this case outreach, they can become much more effective at leading. Most pastors feel very ineffective at leading outreach. We run cohorts for two years because we want to get churches to the tipping point of culture change, but it's encouraging to see such significant change within the first year. Whenever leaders want culture change, they have to start by modeling the change they want to see in their church or their people. So these results after a year are very exciting!

Our cohort churches are also developing reproducers. Again, after just one year in the cohort, 35 percent of churches begin to see new people coming to faith and inviting others into faith.<sup>13</sup> They are becoming reproducers! Why not 100 percent? Because churches adopt the practices we suggest at differing rates and therefore with differing levels of impact over time. One of our early adopters, Matthew Rogers, a pastor of a church in the Chicago area, jumped in right away. He started modeling reaching out, and then he quite quickly appointed an outreach champion to be the partner with him and begin leading the ministries in his church to integrate outreach in meaningful ways. Britta is Matthew's church champion for outreach, and she has seen her friend Kristin come to faith and come to church because of the new emphasis on developing reproducers within every ministry of the church. When asked about how this process has affected her personally, Kristin's voice was filled with emotion as she shared,

I think that it has given me more purpose outside being a mother. I didn't realize that I was a mother-missionary! That's part of what God calls me to do. Not just raise my children, but there are all these moms just a stone's throw away from me. We can do something with that. I kind of always knew it, but I didn't know it in a purposeful way that's joyful and meaningful in my life.

Matthew, the lead pastor, would say he and his church are experiencing a culture change. Our churches often need a makeover, a culture change, in order to focus outward more.

What follows in this book is what we gave Matthew and now want to give you: a strong biblical foundation and best practices from congregations that are effectively reaching people and having an impact in their communities. These best practices were discovered through research and then applied in 182 churches across the country through pastor cohort leadership labs.

As you go on this journey and read this book, get a group of leaders from your church to read and apply it with you. Encourage one another and stimulate one another's creativity. Hold one another accountable by working through the discussion questions together. We have also provided resources and exercises for you online that you will be able to access after purchasing this book. See appendix one for more information. Begin to grow your morale, vision, and impact through outreach.

I believe—and have seen—that if you turn outward as a church, you can reach people and change your community. And after all, isn't this what we as people and congregations are meant for?

## **Overarching Structure**

Here is a preview of what is to come:

Part one will analyze the serious problem mistaken of myths about the church and the receptivity of unchurched individuals to congregations. We will see that some church people are behaving badly with statistics. We will look at the false narrative many churches have adopted about the attitude of unchurched people to congregations and its negative consequences—making congregations and leaders pessimistic and passive about reaching new people and influencing their communities. There is a better and truer narrative about the degree to which unchurched people in America are receptive to congregations, and that narrative needs to be



told. In particular, we found surprising receptivity among unchurched millennials (people born between 1981 and 1996), nones (people who say they have no religious preference on surveys), and the nominally religious. As we embrace and pursue a new narrative about the receptivity in all these groups, it will give us more hope, optimism, and activism when it comes to reaching new people and influencing communities.

Part two will sum up the major findings from our two studies of Protestant churches: one surveying three thousand churches and one surveying fifteen hundred churches for a total of forty-five hundred churches. These surveys have resulted in us identifying two key factors that you can pursue to become a conversion community that reaches and influences new people. Qualitatively, we define a conversion community as a congregation that is seeing changed lives and growing primarily through reaching new people rather than by adding already churched people from some other congregation. I will unpack later the key quantitative criteria I used for defining conversion communities. The term *conversion community* was suggested by my friend Doug Schaupp, who used it as a central concept in his book *Breaking the Huddle*. These two factors structure the whole change process we lay out in this book to revitalize your congregation through your mission. Part two explores the cluster of factors that is captured by this question: How do you get all your leaders participating in the mission of God to reach people and restore communities? Your leaders represent the DNA of your church. If your leaders have a missional DNA, your church and everyone who comes into your church will catch that DNA. This missional-leader development process is one half of what our research showed can revitalize your congregation.

Part three will unpack the other cluster of factors captured by this question: How do you develop a missional culture in your whole congregation? The results of our interviews with nearly sixty top-10-percent conversion-community churches showed us the key factors that

characterize missional congregations. These factors have enabled them to grow by reaching new people and influencing their communities. In this part, we get to hear from both pastors and the previously unchurched, who tell us why they came to Christ and to a particular congregation. We found three simple practices that any church could adopt and adapt for becoming more missional and reaching more people. Parts two and three, then, are the heart of the vision we want to communicate that came out of our research and has been field tested. These two parts structure the book but also seek to pass on a vision for the kind of congregation your church could become and the kind of impact you could have.

I have had a front-row seat in seeing what I am presenting work. After ministering among college students for twenty-five years with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, including time spent as national field director of evangelism, I became a pastor of evangelism and discipleship in an Anglican church and practiced what I will recommend in this book. After my time as a pastor at that church, I then helped with the first Willow Creek Church multisite campus, planted by Jim Tomberlin in DuPage County. I was the evangelism champion for that plant. We saw a number of people give their lives to Christ, and I was part of a larger church culture that made a difference in my community.

Since then I have been involved in Community Christian Church in Naperville, Illinois, with Dave and Jon Ferguson, and now I attend a small urban Anglican church plant called Cornerstone in Chicago's West Loop. I have also worked to establish a relational connection to my parish Catholic church, Old St. Mary's in the South Loop of Chicago, because of the wonderful impact they are making in my neighborhood. So I am not just a researcher; I am also a practitioner, and I love to bridge strong missional theology with good cultural analysis and church best practices to help churches and pastors thrive in their mission. I also must admit, I have learned just as much from my mistakes as I have from making wonderful progress. Our findings

are based on Protestant churches because that is where my primary expertise lies, but they also have significant relevance for congregations in other wings of the church, like Catholic or Orthodox.

Not only am I a practitioner but I have also led the process of testing every one of these insights and best practices in local churches in many cities through our leadership cohorts. Pastors have seen their church DNA change, new people reached and retained, their congregation revitalized, and their communities influenced for good.

### **Keys To Recovering Missional Imagination**

Jesus once said, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers” (Lk 10:2). Jesus had a vibrant and contagious missional imagination. As I talk to church leaders around the country, I often feel like I hear the opposite message: “The harvest is sparse, the workers are many, and the competition for the few interested unchurched people is intense. People in our culture just don’t care about the gospel any more, and they don’t like the church.” Our team’s research findings don’t agree. I think Jesus’ assessment and prayer are still relevant for America today. Imagine if churches and leaders around the country started to radiate hope that the message we have and the service we offer is needed, welcomed, and wanted by many, and can still affect the direction of the unchurched and the quality of life in our communities. Such a rooted and realistic hope could change a nation. That is the power of missional imagination.

I want to offer a few keys that are foundational to recovering a missional imagination for the harvest in North America. These are the underlying assumptions for this book. If you don’t agree with them, you will at least know where I am starting from and why. The three key foundations for recovering missional imagination are:

- becoming reenchanting by the power and beauty of the mission of Jesus

- recovering the reality of the receptivity of the unchurched people in our culture and the ripeness of the harvest
- recapturing a vision for the church and its potential for being brighter light and stronger salt in our world

Here in the introduction I will say a few words about being re-enchanted by the mission of Jesus. Then the bulk of the book will focus on research that uncovers the reality of the receptivity of the unchurched in America and how we can recapture the church's potential for becoming brighter light and stronger salt in our world.

It can be very difficult for us to be reenchanted by the mission of Jesus since for many of us familiarity has bred a loss of wonder and awe. But I would suggest that is because we have lost sight of just how revolutionary, captivating, and unconventional Jesus' mission was. Jesus reached the lost, alienated, socially ostracized, and religiously discarded people of his day, and he did so with compassion and courage. I love the story recorded in Luke 19:1-10 as a paradigmatic example of why Jesus went to the towns and villages of ancient Palestine. Jesus says about a despised and discarded Jewish sellout to the Romans: he is why I came, to seek and to save the lost. His main detractors were among the righteous, respectable religious establishment. Jesus' typical convert would have echoed today's common refrain, "I am spiritual but not religious. As a matter of fact, religious people don't even like me or want me around." But Jesus did more than just reach the dregs of religious society. He also restored these broken and discarded people. After all, his most compelling (and enchanting) description of his mission is recorded in Luke 4:18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

How can you get more compelling and beautiful than such restorative work among the broken hearts and the bits and dregs of the world?

Jesus not only reached people and restored them; he also reproduced himself so that millions and ultimately billions could benefit from his heart and compassion. He did so by calling together twelve apprentices, modeling the life he wanted them to live and give away, and then sending them out with power and hope for the whole world. He reproduced his heart in the hearts of others. As a result, his movement was not for a moment but for millennia, and his mission was not to a few but to multitudes through all time. That is compelling and powerful and beautiful. When the church recaptures just a bit of this beauty and power, then people in it and in the world take notice.

Jesus also had a funny way of building his kingdom: he gave it away. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (Jn 20:21). That was his way, to reproduce and then release laborers to the ends of the earth. He didn't build his own kingdom in his own time, maxing out his power and influence. He gave away his life to others, then released them to go everywhere to everyone to light a million little torches that could be carried to every nation.

What did Jesus do? He reached. He restored. He reproduced. He released. A strategy to change the world. And whenever we recover it, we once again join that world-changing movement and contribute to it. We start becoming brighter light and stronger salt.

I want to notice just a few things that stand out and speak to some of our current debates over the mission of Jesus.

Jesus did not come just to dialogue, accept, and understand. He came to influence. He came to announce good news. He came to change lives and create congregations or gatherings of his followers on mission.

In this book, I am unashamedly concerned to see the renewal of congregational life in America. Though I have the greatest respect for the research and writing of Elizabeth Drescher in *Choosing our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of American Nones*, and I deeply believe in respecting the religious and spiritual journeys of people who are very different from me, I only partly agree with her conclusion toward the end of the book, where she says,

The energies of the majority of Americans who continue to affiliate with institutional religions, then, is best spent not in attempts to “recapture” Nones and draw them back into churches, synagogues, and mosques. It seems a far better spiritual investment to listen more deeply to their stories so that we can develop a richer, more complex story of the American spirit.<sup>14</sup>

I agree we must listen deeply, affirm and learn all we can, and so enrich the American conversation and culture. But in the end, I also believe in being deeply faithful to one’s own tradition, Scripture, conscience, and God, and to communicating respectfully, thoughtfully, and with profound conviction one’s sense of the truth and the vision of the good for all people. Only faith communities that have maintained such commitment, conviction, and clarity of communication have continually experienced renewal and vitality. The biblical word that captures this kind of passion and commitment is *evangelism*, which means communicating the good news of God’s intervention through Christ in history to put right everything that has gone so wrong—not through conquest but through sacrifice, humility, love, and a death on a cross. Churches and denominations that lose the priority of this kind

of vibrant communication and spiritual influence will dwindle and only ultimately feed the none-ing of America of which Drescher writes. So I am in this book and in my work and life a prioritist for evangelism, despite the fact that the word *evangelism* conjures up very negative images and associations for too many in America. As you will see, I want to reimagine and revitalize a chastened but courageous and clear evangelism, not discard or distance myself from such intentionality to influence.

I am also concerned to reimagine and revitalize the experience of conversion to faith in the context of congregations. Conversion can happen in a moment or over a long period of time.<sup>15</sup> But congregations that are not conversionist, and that do not offer the hope of vibrant change in life direction and in quality of life, will again have little to offer that cannot be found in the broader culture in any association one might join. It is the transformative power of the Christian message and of Christian congregations that will lead to the revitalization of religious, or at least Christian, life in America. No amount of strategy, structure, or civility can replace such vibrant generativity of life, hope, and faith in Christ that is lived out in communities. The greatest problem churches face is not the none-ing of America but rather the none-ing and secularizing of the church. When congregations recover the mission, passion, and conviction of their founder, culture shift and religious disaffection will not undermine or marginalize vibrant congregations. They will continue to grow and be bright light and savory salt in their communities. Our research across the country confirms that conviction.

Jesus may have said it best in Matthew 4:19 when inviting his first followers to join him: “Come, follow me, . . . and I will send you out to fish for people.”

May we be reenchanting and then reignited by the mission of Jesus. With that foundation, we can look at our culture and its people and

begin to have a missional imagination for them. Ready for the ride? Let's next look at the unchurched, why they are disconnected from congregations, and what we might be able to do about it. We will immediately begin to discover some real news about the unchurched but also some "Chicken Little" statistics that are getting in the way of our mission and ministry as congregations.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Churches in America are plateaued or declining at a significant rate. Where do you see your church: plateaued, declining, or growing? What factors are affecting your congregation's trajectory?
2. Rick mentions several consequences of so many plateaued or declining churches, including a sense of discouragement or failure on the part of pastors and leaders, the disconnection of many people from the church, and the congregation feeling ineffective in the mission of being brighter light and stronger salt in its community. Among those consequences, where would you most like to see change in your congregation and why?
3. Rick mentions several keys to recovering a missional imagination, including becoming reenchanting by the power and beauty of the mission of Jesus, recovering a vision for the receptivity of the unchurched people in our culture, and recapturing a vision for the church and its potential for being brighter light and stronger salt in our world. Where do you feel your congregation is strong on missional imagination, and where do you need to revitalize?



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