

**‘SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED AND PROVEN  
WAYS TO REACH THEM’** by Thom Rainer.

*This is a summary by Terran Williams of the recommended book by Thom Rainer with the above name. The hope is that some church leaders may find this helpful as they seek to sharpen their ability to draw and disciple unchurched people into their church.*

***The potential value of this summary to church leaders ...***

*Though there is far more to a church than merely reaching unchurched people, no doubt a church that fails to be both committed to and effective at reaching the lost is a church that has genuinely failed to fulfil the Matthew 28:19 commission Christ gave us. The value of this summary is that it gives us a fantastic, well-researched window into the minority of churches in the USA that are greatly succeeding in their mission to reach the lost and assimilate the new believers into the life of the church.*

*Being on a leadership team of a South African church, this book has limited application to me, but given the similarities of my context in terms of similar levels of openness to Christianity, globalization, and a similar socio-economic and educational context, there is lots I feel that even my church can learn from these churches in the States.*

*A brief disclaimer is that just because a church succeeds in attracting unchurched people does not mean that it is now a model church in its entirety. It is my conviction that New Testament values of church (such as every member ministry) and patterns of church (such as team leadership rather than being a personality-driven church) must not be compromised as we give ourselves to the Great Commission as a church, but then neither can our commitment to flesh out New Testament values and patterns justify the lack of evangelistic effectiveness. We need both.*

**OUTLINE:**

***Part One:*** research on 350 people who recently became Christians and joined a church that is known for its success in reaching unchurched people.

***Part Two:*** research on 100 pastors who lead churches that are known to be highly effective at reaching unchurched people.

## PART ONE: LISTENING TO THE FORMERLY UNCHURCHED

A few years ago Thom Rainer, one of the major church growth consultants in the USA led his team to interview 350 people who had recently committed their lives to Christ and become integrated into churches. They found these people in 38 different states, and found them in churches that were growing strongly through conversion growth (which is less than 4% of all American churches - sadly, on average, for every 85 Christians in America, only 1 person is reached for Christ every year). And through lengthy interviews, they found out what had drawn these people to these churches. The results are included here in part one...

Here were a few of the surprise discoveries...

- *The name of a church is not that important.* Only 11% of these recently churched people said that the name of the church affected their choice to join.
- *Church is not as unfamiliar or frightening to the unchurched as we may think.* 50% of them had been a church service once in the year before, and 50% two or more times.
- *It is dangerous to over-rely on church-service-evangelism. It is important to mobilize all Christians to share with people one-on-one how to become a Christian.* 53% of the newly churched people said someone from the church had explained to them how to become a Christian either before they visited or while they were looking in. 35% said no one did. 12% said someone from another church did.
- *Communicating solid doctrine appeals to the unchurched.* 91% of them said that doctrine (i.e. the beliefs of the church) was an important factor in choosing this church.

**The main findings of the research: So what are the main things that made unchurched people come to and then join these evangelistically effective churches?**

- The pastor and his preaching - 90% said this.
- What the church believes (ie doctrine of the church) - 88%
- The friendliness and warmth of the members - 49%
- Someone from the church witnessed to them - 41%
- A family member invited them - 35%
- Sensed God's presence and was drawn by the atmosphere of the church - 37%
- The invitation of a non-family friend - 25%
- Children's and youth ministries - 25%
- Other groups and ministries - 12%
- Worship style and music - 11%
- Location - 7%

Since the pastor and his preaching was the most important draw-card, what exactly about the pastor and the preaching were they drawn to?

1) The pastor's preaching:

- **Bible-centred:** The pastor preaches from the Bible, helping me to really understand it - 211 of 350 mentioned something to this effect.
- **Application-orientated:** The pastor preaches in a way that spoke directly to my life - 147 of 350 mentioned this.
- **Authentically delivered:** The pastor is a 'real' person - which includes 'down-to-earth, friendly, humorous, relates well, regular guy, not holier-than-thou' - 121 of the 350 said this.
- **Conviction-filled:** The pastor preaches with conviction and passion - 120 of 350 said this.
- **Captivatingly communicated:** The pastor really knows how to communicate effectively to me, and to all kinds of people in the crowd - 89 of 350 said this.

2) About the pastor, but not necessarily about his preaching:

- **Accessible:** The pastor made some kind of personal contact (e.g. phone call, invited to a meal, or a special class etc) with them - 105 of 350 said this. We had access to the pastor in a special looking-in class - 87 of 350 said this.
- **Follow-worthy:** The pastor is a good leader, a person I'd like to follow - 88 of 350 said this.

Since friendliness and relationships play such an important part in drawing a person into the church, what specific conclusions did the study show?

- Three of the above-listed factors that drew an unchurched person to join a church were all about relationships:
  - The friendliness and warmth of the members - 49% said this.
  - A family member invited them - 35% said this.
  - The invitation of a non-family friend - 25% said this.
- *However, it is hardly ever the only factor in drawing a person to a church* - many other factors (personal situation, direct evangelism, preaching, pastor etc) play a role too.
- *God sometimes works to reach unchurched people without using any relationships.* A full 38% of people said that relationships did not play a part in them choosing a church, even though most of them were initially invited to the church through someone they knew.
- *A person is far more likely to be reached through a family member than through a friend or associate.* 43% said that a family member had the greatest influence in them coming to the church. Fascinatingly, wives are the most evangelistically potent family member, with 70% of all unchurched men coming to church through their wives.

- *On the first or second visit, an unchurched person is specifically alert to the genuine warmth and interest of the people toward them.* Scarily, most churches think they are friendly but in fact they're only friendly to people they know. Unchurched people can feel whether the warmth they do receive is manufactured or real. The friendliness of the church towards new people is directly related to the church's over-all evangelistic effectiveness. Usually the pastor sets the tone of friendliness and warmth of the entire church.

### What other things make an important first impression for unchurched people who are visiting?

- ***Good facilities:*** Clean rest rooms, adequate parking (and help if they couldn't find a parking), chair comfort, air conditioning, enough seating space, attractive and neat landscaping are all massive first impression factors. 161 of the 350 said that these issues were very important to them when they first visited.
- ***Children and youth facilities and ministries:*** The quality of the children's and youth facilities / ministries available was massively important to parents! 102 of the 350 said this. Their major concerns were safety, accessibility and not-too-far-away venue, the ability to be notified if needed, the apparent concern and attitude of the adult worker they were exposed to, and the cleanliness of the kid's area.
- ***Excellent forethought/planning of worship gathering:*** 111 of 350 said this. One person summed it up like this, 'I visited one church but the service started late, the music was messed up, the sound system person was incompetent, the leaders seemed a little clueless - I never went back. But then I visited another church - and you could tell that everything had been given careful attention. They had both wonderful organization and opportunity for spontaneity. Everything was planned, but they were still sincere. You didn't get the impression they were performing. I joined that church.'
- ***Warm and effective greeting teams:*** 117 of the 350 said this. Some of the feedback of these people included: 1) Make sure the greeting team are trained. 2) Make sure the greeting team are a variety of people and ages. 3) Make sure the greeters are placed in strategic places. 4) Make sure the parking team doubles up as a greeting team. 5) Make sure that only the friendliest people are the greeters. 6) Include new Christians and new members on this team because they're generally the most enthusiastic.

## How to retain members and to increase return visits among guests...

It's one thing drawing people to start visiting - it's another thing to assimilate and retain them. But how? The points listed below are a summary of Thom Rainer's book 'High Expectations' which was the result of a massive research project.

In response to the question, '**What keeps you active in the church?**' the most common answers, ranking from most to least mentioned, are:

- 1) This church gives me opportunity for ministry involvement
- 2) Being part of a small group keeps me involved.
- 3) Obedience to God motivates me.
- 4) The relationships I have with others in the church keeps me involved.
- 5) The pastor and his preaching keeps me fired up.
- 6) The worship services continue to inspire me to stay active in the church.

### ***Some action points to retain people more effectively ...***

- Clearly and repeatedly communicate what we as a church believe (i.e. doctrine and the Gospel) - *people are drawn to uncompromising (but not ungraciously communicated) conviction and truth.*
- Expect much from the members of the church - and call them to much - *people are drawn to a church that expects something from them.*
- Have an entry-point class (which introduces people to both the faith and the church) - *people really value an entry process where the church beliefs are clarified and they are invited to make a commitment to the church.*
- Get them involved in small groups - *people are looking to relationally belong.*
- Clarify the purpose, vision and mission of the church - *people are drawn to a clear and compelling purpose.*
- Involve people in ministry opportunities - *people are looking to contribute.*

## **PART TWO: LISTENING TO LEADERS OF CHURCHES THAT REACH THE UNCHURCHED**

Part Two reveals the research results based on interviews with a 100 pastors of American churches that effectively reach unchurched people (only 4% of American churches fall into this category).

- The average tenure of a pastor in America is 3,8 years, whereas the average tenure of a pastor who leads a unchurched-impacting church is 11,8 years.
- Most (90% of them) pastors of unchurched-impacting churches had a seminary (i.e theology and ministry training) education. Interestingly, they generally said that the seminary had equipped them to preach, but had failed in equipping them to lead.
- The personal characteristics that these 100 pastors feel are most important in ministry:
  - 1) personal holiness / integrity / example
  - 2) spiritual disciplines of prayer and Bible study, dependence on God
  - 3) ability to bring change and cast vision
  - 4) Bible knowledge
  - 5) Personal evangelism skills
  - 6) Communication skills

### ***What motivates these pastors to keep on reaching the lost?***

- 1) A theology of 'salvation is found in Jesus alone, and apart from him you are lost'.
- 2) A passion and an enthusiasm to reach the lost, through personal relationship as well as through the church ministry.
- 3) 43% of all these pastors set up accountability with others in which they were asked a question to the effect of, 'So, how have you reached out in relationship, conversation and invitation to unchurched people lately?'
- 4) A desire to be excellent in everything that is done, because that's what it takes to draw people.

### **What kind of leadership and approach it takes to reach the lost.**

The 100 pastors were asked, 'What are the most important things to do as a leader in order to lead a church that effectively reaches the unchurched?' The following fifteen answers came up most often in the answers:

- Be real and vulnerable - unchurched people are drawn to 'real' leaders. 92% said this.
- Train the church to reach people for Christ. 88% said so.

- Encourage the church to build relationships with unchurched people, and to invite them along. 84% said this.
- Lead by example in your efforts to relate to and reach the lost. 72%
- Make sure that joy and enthusiasm is the dominant mood of your church. 68% said this.
- Preach the Gospel regularly, and with conviction - don't hold back on any aspect of the major doctrines of the faith. 63% said so.
- Mobilize small groups to reach out and to assimilate new people. 60% said so.
- Reach out to people in crisis. 57% said so.
- Make sure that your church has quality child-care. 57% said this.
- Put lots of energy and money into reaching kids and youth for Christ. 52% said this.
- Have courses / classes for people looking into faith and/or the church. 48% said this.
- Find and release at least one evangelism leader who assists the pastor in mobilizing the church evangelistically. 47% said this.
- Be patient, growth through conversion does not come quick, but by God's grace, it comes. 33% said so.

### **What kind of leaders are most likely to lead churches that effectively reach the lost?**

These 100 leaders were asked, 'What are your personal strengths? And your weaknesses / struggles?'

Here are the twelve most common strengths and the twelve most common weaknesses / struggles listed, from most common to least common (all of these points were listed by at least half of the 100 pastors).

#### ***Strengths:***

1) The ability to cast vision 2) A sense of humour 3) Work ethic  
4) Persistence 5) A refusal to tell others to do what you will not do (e.g. reaching out to the lost) 6) Integrity of character 7) An ability to bring change 8) Love for God's Word 9) Communication skills 10) Faith and optimism 11) Love for people and people skills 12) Team building / mentoring skills

#### ***Weaknesses and struggles:***

1) Lack of time for pastoring individuals 2) Impatience with how long it takes for change to come about 3) Weak staff leadership skills 4) The pain of constant criticism 5) Tendency to put task above people 6) Tendency to not pray enough 7) Tendency to be so big-pictured that they neglect important details 8) Tendency to run ahead of the church's ability to cope with the rate of change 9) Tendency to lose it with some people 10) Feeling like there just isn't enough time 11) A tendency to not develop a long-term strategy 12) A tendency to not communicate to all the key people when making a big decision.

## Since preaching is the number one attracter for the unchurched, what do these 100 pastors say about it?

According to these leaders, there are eight key adjectives for the kind of preaching that attracts the unchurched...

- 1) **Passion:** Generally, preaching should be your number one passion in ministry by far! For 93% of the 100 pastors this was true.
- 2) **Mainly expository and then topical:** Though you should use several styles of preaching, the most common ones should generally be expository (52% of the time) and topical/thematic (37% of the time).
- 3) **Ongoing development:** Bring your preaching under the influence of, in order of priority, 1) a mentor 2) reflecting on your experience 3) a preaching course 4) seminar training 5) books about preaching 6) Bible study and 7) a communications expert.
- 4) **Bible-gravity:** Make sure you preach the Bible - refuse to be Bible-lite. Find your authority in the text. Help people to fall in love with the Bible.
- 5) **Relevance:** Make sure you preach in a way that relates to the lives of the people. Don't just preach about the Bible, but preach about their lives from the Bible.
- 6) **Vulnerability:** Make sure you regularly give people windows into your humanity and your struggles as you preach.
- 7) **Illustration:** Learn to communicate using pictures, illustrations and stories.
- 8) **Well-prepared:** Try put about 20 hours of preparation into your message (22 hours is the average preparation time of pastors who lead unchurched-impacting churches, compared with 4 hours in comparison churches). This preparation time enables you to really think about effectively and captivantly communicating the message, especially with unchurched people in mind. (Note: when the church is still small, it is unwise to spend so much time preparing, since there are too many other important demands at this stage.)

Book details (available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

Thom Rainer, 2001, 'Surprising insights from the unchurched and proven ways to reach them' Zondervan Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan