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- PRESENTS -

# HOW THE UNCHURCHED REALLY FEEL ABOUT THE AMERICAN CHURCH

## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS



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## **HOW DO THE UNCHURCHED REALLY FEEL ABOUT THE CHURCH?**

**CHURCH ANSWERS RESEARCH  
HAS NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS.**



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I love the process of discovery. The journey begins with a question and swerves through multiple twists and turns before finally arriving at an answer. This research project took several months to complete. Our team wanted to know if unchurched people felt differently about the church than those who are regular attendees. A survey of current research did not yield the results we desired, so we embarked on a study of our own. We found new, surprising insights from the unchurched.

In some ways, this journey began 25 years ago with a previous research project that yielded the book *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*. The study was a breakthrough in many ways, shattering long-held myths about how the unchurched felt about the church. Consider some of the findings from 2000-2001.

1. The unchurched occasionally attend church, especially during holidays like Christmas.
2. The pastor does not need to be charismatic and dynamic to reach the unchurched.
3. The unchurched care about doctrine and deep teaching about the Bible.
4. Family connections are why many of the unchurched start attending church.
5. When the unchurched begin to connect with a church, they desire to serve and help others.
6. High expectations in churches are attractive to the unchurched.

What about now? Do the unchurched today have feelings similar to those of a generation ago? We wanted to know, so we asked them. We also asked church people how they felt about the church, and we compared the two groups. The answers surprised us. We wanted to share them with you.



**Sam**  
President, Church Answers

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

Do people who attend church regularly have different perceptions of the church than those who do not attend regularly? We surveyed 604 people in the United States from a variety of backgrounds. We asked the same questions of two groups.

1. Those who attend church regularly.
2. Those who do not attend church regularly.

After comparing the two groups, we found new, surprising insights of the unchurched.

**Finding 1: Unchurched does not always mean no church.** Similar to our research from 25 years ago, we found many of the unchurched still had some connection to a local church. Additionally, over half (63%) of those who are not active in church today claimed they were regular in church as children. For most of the unchurched, their views of the church are not detached from personal experiences with the church.

**Finding 2: The unchurched and churched believe local churches are generally good for their communities,** with almost 6 out of 10 unchurched people agreeing or strongly agreeing. Neither group had a negative general perception of churches.

**Finding 3: The unchurched struggle to connect with the churches in their own communities.** There appears to be the concept among the unchurched that churches have the potential to do good (Finding 2). Still, they do not personally experience this potential with the churches around them locally. Only 38% of the unchurched agree or strongly agree that they have a positive perception of churches in their local communities.

**Finding 4: The unchurched believe churches are still relevant but not trustworthy.** A significant surprise emerged in the data: Non-attendees view the church as more relevant today than churchgoers! But the issue of trust was a different story. Attendees generally trust their churches (81%) and pastors (76%), while trust levels were lower among non-attendees with churches (30%) and pastors (35%).

**Finding 5: The unchurched are open to friendships through church but are intimidated to visit because they don't feel welcome.** Over half of non-attendees believe the church would be a good place to make new friends, but they are intimidated to visit a church alone.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

**Finding 6: Confusion keeps the unchurched away more than church rules.** Church rules are not a deterrent for the unchurched. Our study revealed only 4 out of 10 unchurched people believe churches have too many rules. It's not the rules themselves but the lack of clarity about the church. Over 60% of unchurched people agree or strongly agree churches are confusing for outsiders. Surprisingly, the same percentage of the church attendees hold the same view! Both the church and the unchurched agree that the church is confusing to outsiders.

**Finding 7: Higher confusion and lower trust levels mean the unchurched have doubts about raising their families and discovering their talents in the context of the church.** While attendees overwhelmingly believe the church is a good place to raise families (85%) and discover their talents (75%), the unchurched do not share the same perception. Only 44% of the unchurched agree or strongly agree the church is a good place to raise families. Additionally, only 29% of the unchurched agree or strongly agree that the church is a good place to discover and grow their talents.

**Finding 8: The unchurched don't attend mainly because of indifference and not because of busyness or antagonism.** We asked the unchurched why they do not attend church regularly. As expected, a variety of answers surfaced. However, clear themes emerged. They are not upset with the church or too busy for the church. They are mainly indifferent to the church.

**Finding 9: The catalyst for the unchurched to start attending church is both a spiritual and personal connection.** What is the prompt? What causes someone to begin attending church? The answer to indifference is intentionality. The unchurched start attending to grow spiritually and because someone invited them. It's the combination of spiritual and personal connections.

**Finding 10: Church people care more about worship style, programming, and denominational preferences than the unchurched.** But the top reason church people attend a particular church is because someone invited them. The church and unchurched alike attend a particular church primarily because someone invited them.

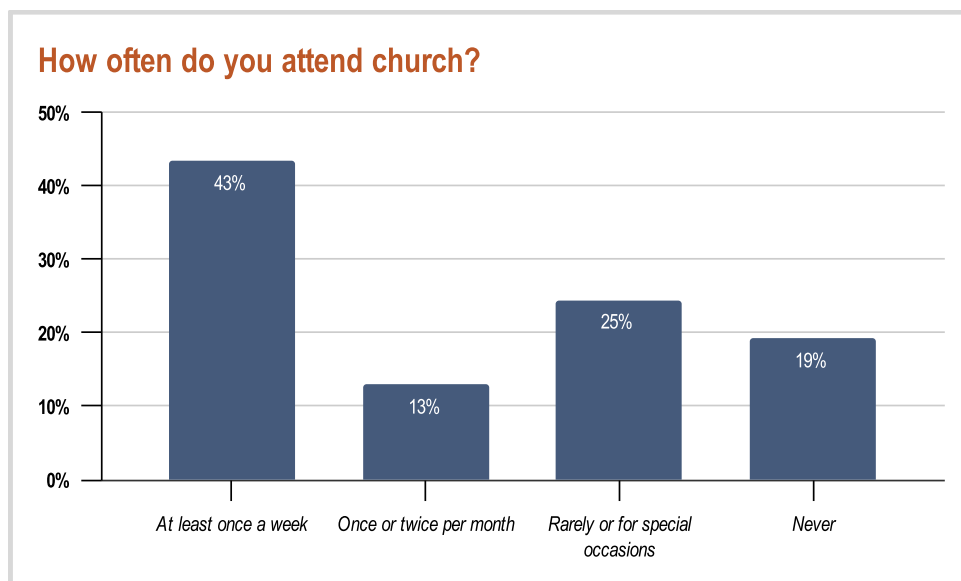
**Finding 11: The unchurched have a slightly stronger preference for non-denominational churches when selecting a congregation.** Baptist, Catholic, and Methodist congregations top the list for the church.

## METHODOLOGY

Our study began with a simple question. Do people who attend church regularly have different perceptions of the church than those who do not attend regularly? We wanted to know how both the churched and the unchurched feel about the church. We designed a group of questions to ask both groups.

1. Those who attend church regularly.
2. Those who do not attend church regularly.

“Regularly” is defined as at least once or twice a month, but over three-quarters of this group attend weekly. There were 340 respondents in this group. Those who do not attend answered they “rarely” or “never” go to church. There were 264 respondents in this group. We surveyed a total of 604 people in the United States from a variety of backgrounds. The results have a 95% confidence level and a +/- 4% confidence interval.



This report will refer to the first group as “churched,” “churchgoers,” or “attendees,” and the second group as “unchurched” or “non-attendees.” Both the churched and unchurched groups were comprised of people from various backgrounds. The respondents represented generational, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, and regional diversity in the United States. Since we limited our research to people in the United States, this research is on the American church specifically.

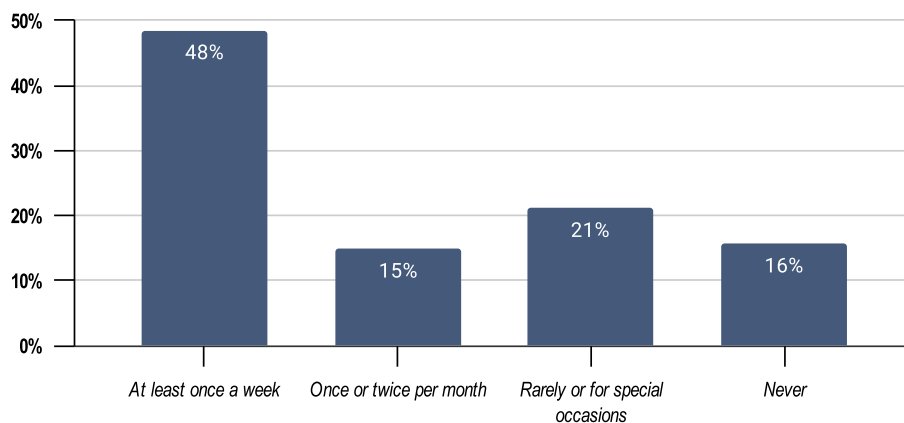
## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

How do the unchurched really feel about the American church? Do these feelings differ from those who regularly attend church? Let's dig into the results of our research.

### ***Finding 1: Unchurched does not always mean no church.***

As expected, churchgoers are more likely to have attended church as children. Almost 9 out of 10 (89%) of regular churchgoers today were also regular in church as children. However, over half (63%) of those who are not active in church today claimed they were regular in church as children. As such, the term “unchurched” in this report refers to the broad group who do not attend church. Some in the unchurched group could be referred to as “dechurched,” those who once attended but no longer do. For simplicity, we will use the term “unchurched” here. Our study's results align with other surveys, such as [Gallup's 2022 survey](#), which revealed that 67% of Americans reported attending church regularly while growing up.

**Unchurched: When you were a child, how often did your family attend church?**

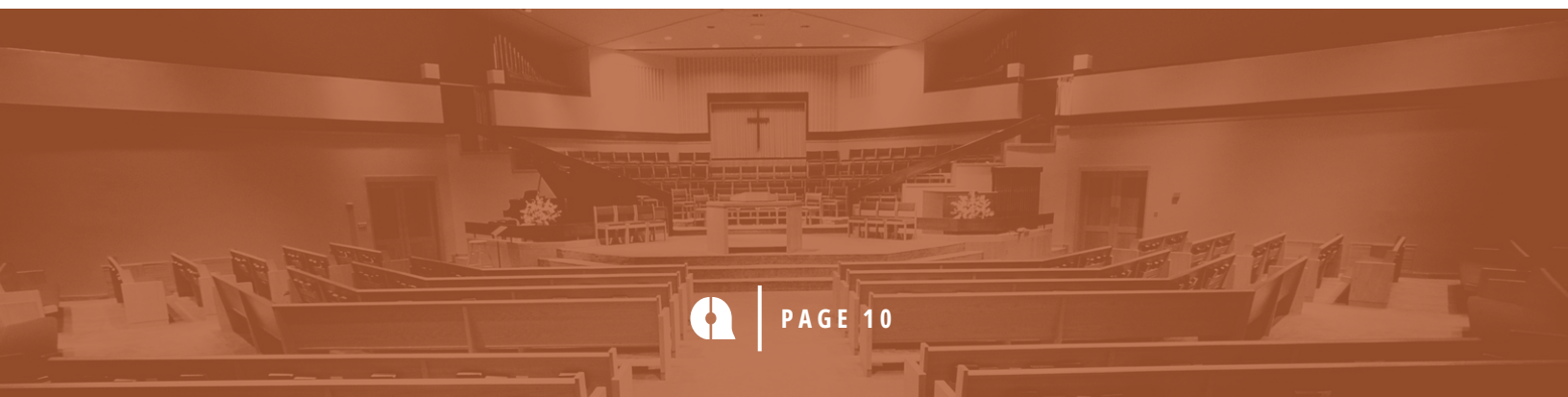


## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

What can we gather about how the unchurched feel about the church today? First, do not assume “unchurched” means “no church.” Most unchurched people have at least some experiences with the church, though, for some, they are likely well in their past. Others in the unchurched group will attend a church service for a special occasion, like a Christmas Eve service.

- The feelings the unchurched have about the church are not entirely detached from reality. Many of them have enough experience with churches to formulate the perspectives they hold.
- The perceptions of the unchurched are not uninformed. The results of this survey are not driven by ignorance nor created in a vacuum.
- Consider how unchurched views of the church are likely filtered through childhood experiences. Since most of them grew up in the church, their feelings are rooted in past connections. These connections may be positive or negative.

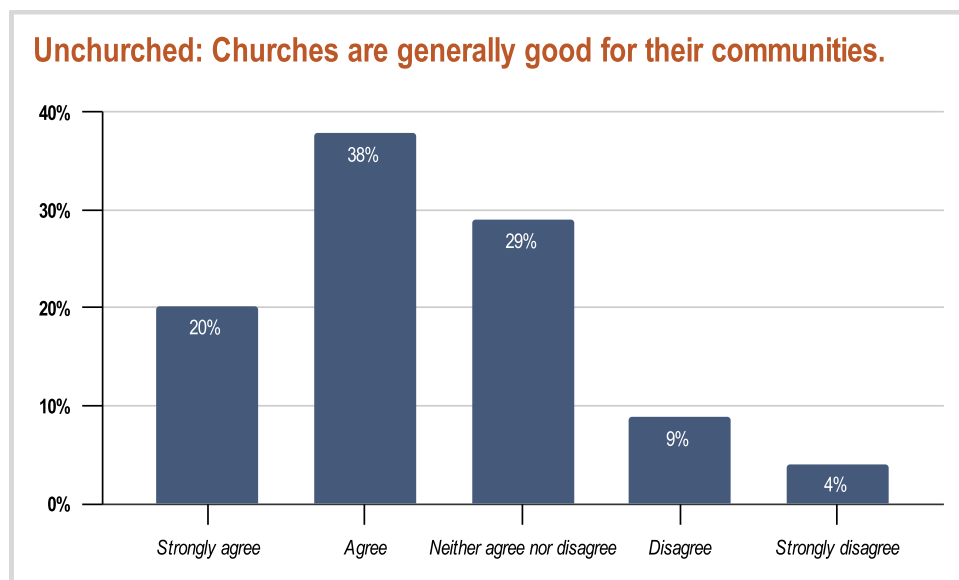
The unchurched in America are not isolated from the church, at least not yet. As renowned church researcher [Dr. Ryan Burge has noted](#), the number of those who never attend church has doubled in the last 15 years, reaching 85 million. Almost every state in the U.S. has experienced a dip in overall church attendance, most between 5% and 10% declines. Every generation is experiencing a decline in church attendance, as has every race in America. America is not yet a godless nation, but we are becoming a less churched nation. For now, most of the unchurched have some connection to the church. We will have to revisit this question in 25 years to see if anything changes with future generations.



## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

### ***Finding 2: The unchurched believe churches are generally good for their communities.***

The church group, as expected, had stronger perceptions of the general goodness of churches. However, both the church and unchurched believe churches are generally good for their communities, with almost 6 out of 10 unchurched people agreeing or strongly agreeing. Neither group had a negative general perception of churches.

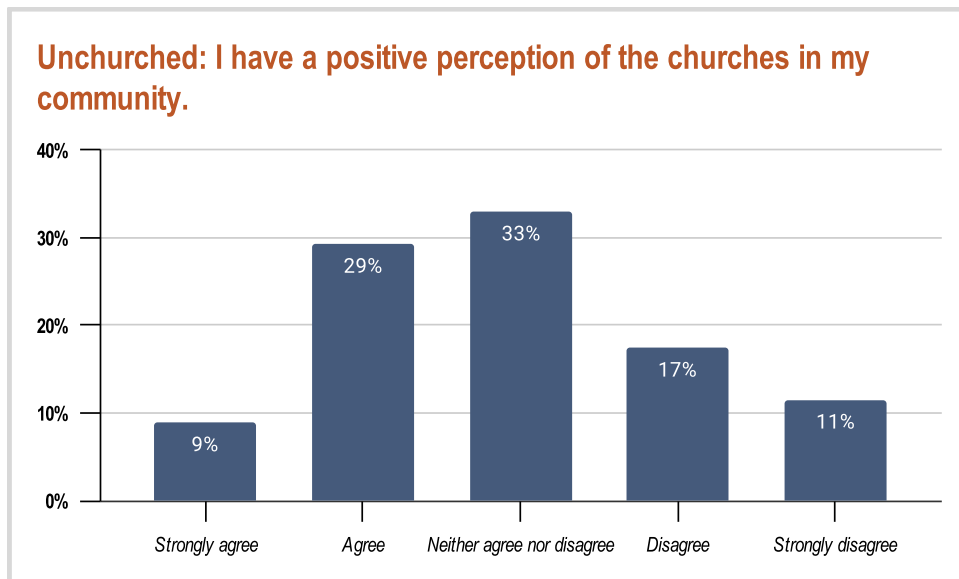


Later in this report, we will reveal why the unchurched say they do not attend. Still, the general perspective of churches is far more positive than negative among the unchurched. Pastors and church leaders should not assume a pessimistic or negative attitude from those who are not regular in church. Indeed, there is reason for optimism. The following finding, however, will reveal that, despite the overall positive perspective of churches, the unchurched struggle to connect with specific local churches in their communities.

## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

### ***Finding 3: The unchurched struggle to connect with the churches in their own communities.***

The churched have a positive perception (86% strongly agree or agree) of the churches in their communities, while the unchurched have less of a positive perception (38% strongly agree or agree). Non-attendees believe in the general goodness of churches but do not have an overall positive perception of the congregations in their own communities. There appears to be the concept among the unchurched that churches have the potential to do good, but they do not personally experience this potential with the churches around them locally.





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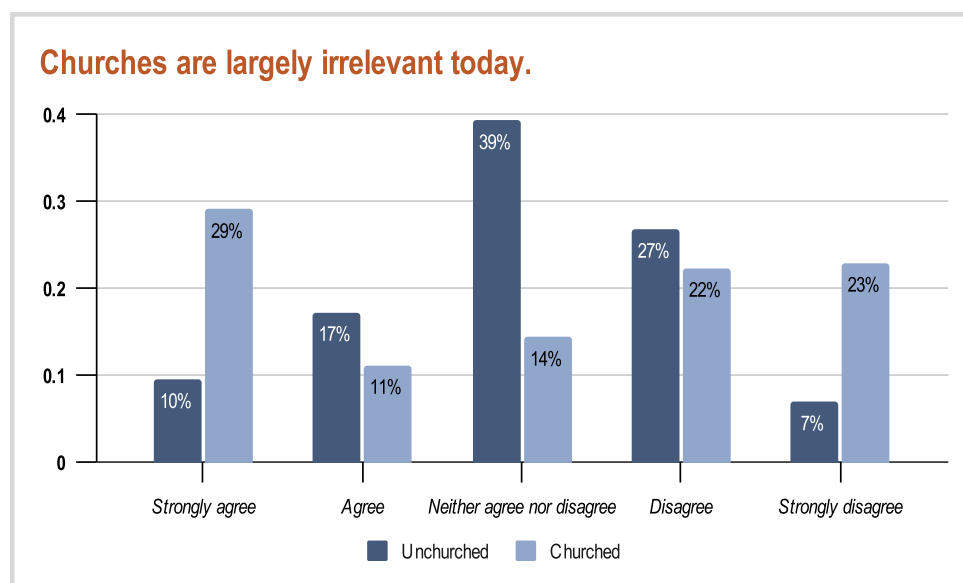
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## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

### ***Finding 4: The unchurched believe churches are still relevant but not trustworthy.***

A major surprise emerged in the data: *Non-attendees view the church as more relevant today than churchgoers!* We had to recheck this data several times because it was counter to many common assumptions. Here is what we found.

Among the churched, 40% agree or strongly agree that the church is largely irrelevant today, while only 27% of the unchurched believe the church is largely irrelevant.



But the issue of trust was a different story. Attendees generally trust their churches (81%) and pastors (76%), while trust levels were lower among non-attendees with churches (30%) and pastors (35%).

The dichotomy is fascinating.

- ***Churched people:*** I trust the church but believe it's irrelevant today.
- ***Unchurched people:*** The church is still relevant but not trustworthy.

The unchurched seem to believe the concept and ideals of churches are helpful to communities, but the actual churches and current leaders cannot be trusted. They like the idea of the church from a distance but would rather not get close because of trust issues.

## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

The churched seem to believe their churches and leaders are trustworthy because they are close to them. At the same time, a significant portion of them don't think their church is relevant to others.

Why might this dichotomy exist between the two groups? We believe two major reasons are insularity and scandals.

1. **Insularity:** Only 1% of churches have an ongoing evangelism emphasis. How have churches grown in the last twenty-five years? For most, it was not due to evangelistic efforts and conversion growth. It was not due to biological growth. [Transfer growth has driven most of it](#). As a result, churches are full of people who are long-time believers, with few new believers among them.
2. **Scandals:** Since the unchurched are not hearing from the churched, headlines and media reports sway their perceptions. Again, these perceptions are not necessarily negative (they believe churches are good for communities and think they are relevant today). The unchurched simply do not have a personal connection with churched people that helps build trust.

The perception problems of churches are both self-imposed and self-inflicted.

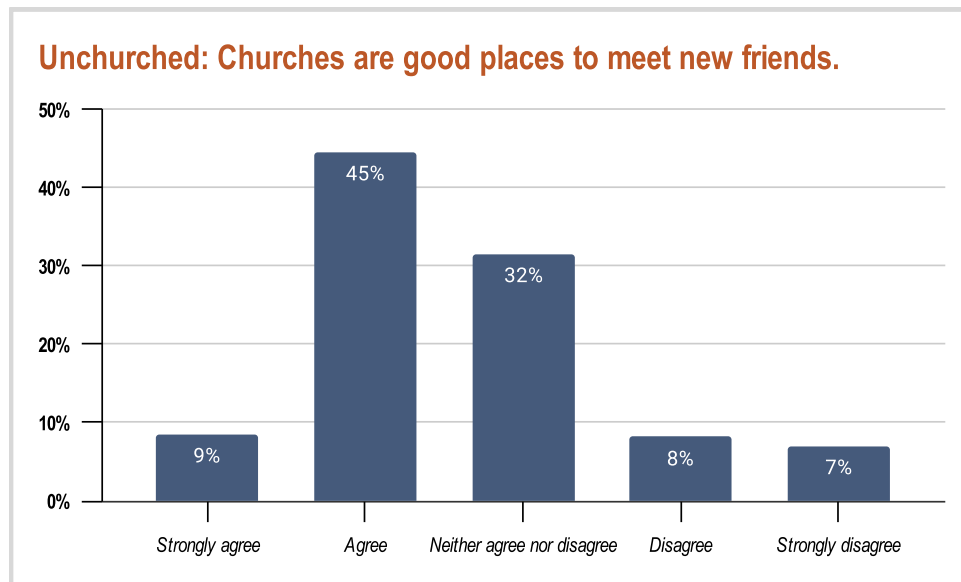
- Churches have a *self-imposed* perception problem not shared with the unchurched: "We're irrelevant!"
- Churches have a *self-inflicted* perception problem swaying the perceptions of the unchurched: "We have scandals and cannot be trusted."

Facts are our friends: While biblical doctrine will always offend some, the bulk of church perception problems are self-imposed, self-inflicted, and largely fixable.

## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

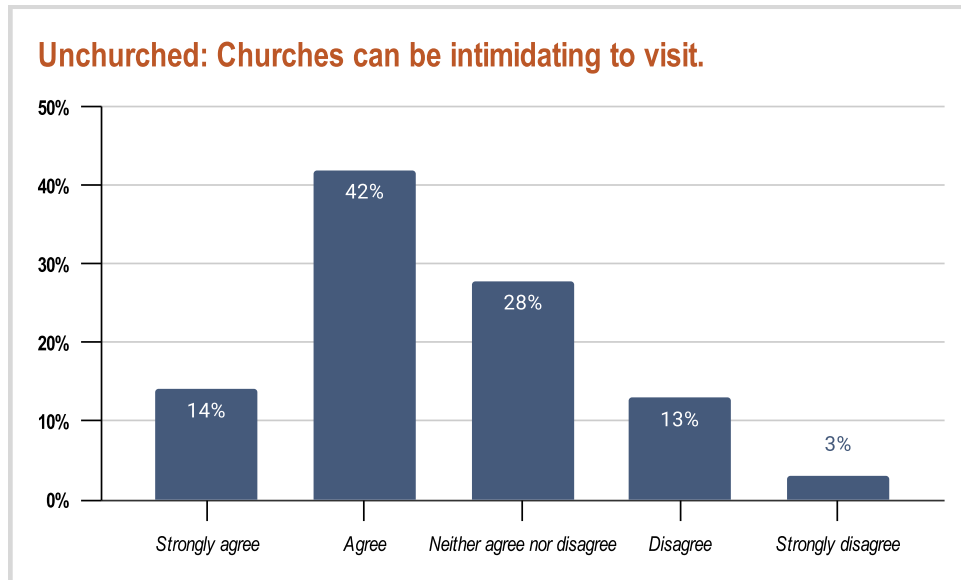
***Finding 5: The unchurched are open to friendships through church but are intimidated to visit because they don't feel welcome.***

Over half of non-attendees believe local churches would be a good place to make new friends, but they are intimidated to visit a church alone.



As seen in the above figure, the unchurched are highly receptive to friendships through local churches. Why might they connect on their own? The answer from our research was revealing. According to the unchurched, they are too intimidated to visit on their own. Almost 6 out of 10 unchurched people agree or strongly agree that churches can be intimidating to visit.

## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED



Attendees tend to believe churches are welcoming places to new people (85% agree or strongly agree), but non-attendees do not share this perception. Only 47% of the unchurched agree or strongly agree churches are welcoming places to new people.

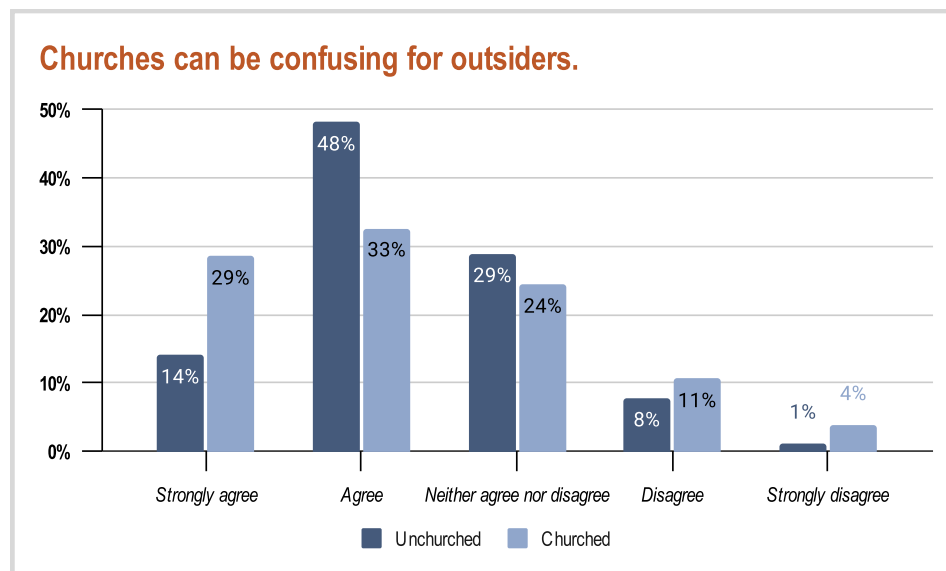
How might a local church overcome this perception problem? The answer has not changed in over two decades of our research. As demonstrated in *The Unchurched Next Door*, nearly 8 in 10 unchurched persons would come to church if they were invited by a friend who also accompanied them to a worship service.

## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

### *Finding 6: Confusion keeps the unchurched away more than church rules.*

In our research 25 years ago, we learned the unchurched were drawn to churches that clearly taught Scripture without watering down doctrine. In this previous research, high-expectation preaching and church doctrine were two key factors leading the unchurched to a church. This trend continues today.

Church rules are not a deterrent for the unchurched. Our study revealed only 4 out of 10 unchurched people believe churches have too many rules. If the perceived rules and requirements of churches are not a factor keeping the unchurched from coming, then what else might be a factor? Confusion.



It's not the rules themselves but the lack of clarity about the church. Over 60% of unchurched people agree or strongly agree churches are confusing for outsiders. Surprisingly, the same percentage of the church attendees hold the same view! Both the churched and the unchurched agree that the church is confusing to outsiders.

How can you achieve clarity among members and outsiders? Offer a membership class and invite new people to attend!

## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

Regardless of what you call the class or when you hold it, every new member class should cover three essential points about your church: information, doctrine, and expectations.

**Information** provides newcomers with the basics about your church: staff, worship style, ministry philosophy, and practical details like the location of restrooms.

**Doctrine** clarifies what you believe. It's important not to assume people understand historical denominational differences. Even churches within the same denomination in the same town can differ significantly. Avoid surprises, don't downplay doctrine, and be clear about your beliefs and identity.

**Expectations** are often overlooked when communicating with potential new members. While you don't want to overwhelm new people, failing to clarify expectations early on contributes to an unhealthy culture of consumerism in the church.





# How Would You Grade Your **Membership Class**?

Our guess is that your **Membership Class** needs some serious attention. Perhaps it hasn't been updated in several years. Perhaps it doesn't reflect your heart and passion for the local church. Perhaps it's just plain boring.

*You need help to make it succeed!*

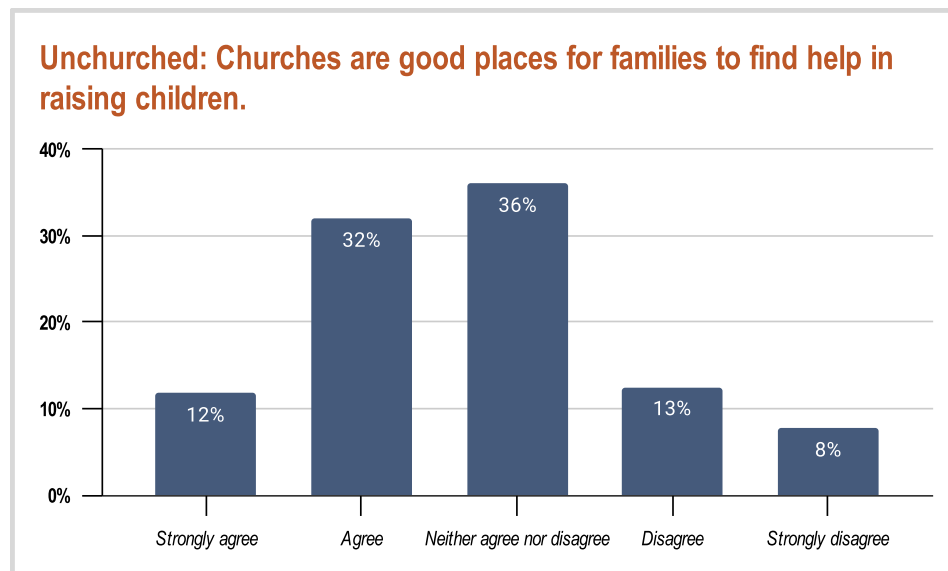
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## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

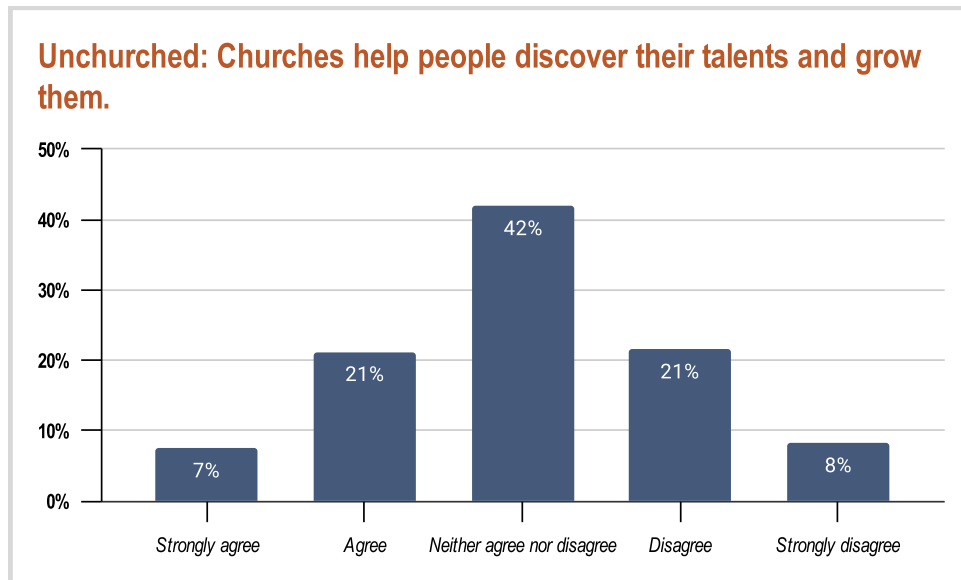
***Finding 7: Higher confusion and lower trust levels mean the unchurched have doubts about raising their families and discovering their talents in the context of the church.***

While attendees overwhelmingly believe the church is a good place to raise families (85%) and discover their talents (75%), the unchurched do not share the same perception. Only 44% of the unchurched agree or strongly agree the church is a good place to raise families.



## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

Additionally, only 29% of the unchurched agree or strongly agree that the church is a good place to discover and grow their talents.



While these figures are not grim, they are about half as positive as the perceptions of attendees, and a significant disparity exists between the two groups.

## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

***Finding 8: The unchurched don't attend mainly because of indifference and not because of busyness or antagonism.***

We asked the unchurched why they do not attend church regularly. As expected, a variety of answers surfaced. However, clear themes emerged. They are not upset with the church or too busy for the church. They are mainly indifferent about the church.

On the survey, the unchurched could select up to three reasons why they do not attend church regularly. Their answers are sorted from most common to least common.

### **Unchurched: Why do you not attend church regularly? Choose up to three answers.**

|                                             |     |
|---------------------------------------------|-----|
| I don't believe church is necessary         | 37% |
| Got out of the habit                        | 33% |
| I have different beliefs than the church    | 32% |
| I am not a person of faith                  | 26% |
| Bad experience in a previous church         | 16% |
| Too busy                                    | 15% |
| I moved to a new community                  | 11% |
| I don't feel welcome                        | 11% |
| I would not know anyone there               | 11% |
| Other (please specify)                      | 8%  |
| Activities of children                      | 7%  |
| No one has invited me                       | 5%  |
| Divorce or major change to family situation | 5%  |
| Poor health                                 | 4%  |

The top two answers point to a level of indifference. Non-attendees do not view church as necessary, or they simply got out of the habit of going. The third reason is expected. A portion of non-attendees have different beliefs than those of the Christian church. However, the fourth reason returns to the theme seen in the first two answers: They are indifferent to issues of faith.

Notice the lower percentages for previous bad church experiences (16%), being too busy (15%), or not feeling welcome (11%). What some may believe are hurdles are not that much of an issue. The unchurched don't think they are too busy, and they are not antagonistic towards the church. Issues like divorce (5%) and poor health (4%) hardly register on the survey.

## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

***Finding 9: The catalyst for the unchurched to start attending church is both a spiritual and personal connection.***

What is the prompt? What causes someone to start attending church? The answer to indifference is intentionality. The unchurched start attending to grow spiritually and because someone invited them. It's the combination of spiritual and personal connections.

The survey asked the unchurched why they would start attending church regularly. They could select up to three answers.

**Unchurched: What would be a reason you would start going to a church regularly?  
Choose up to three answers.**

|                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| To grow spiritually               | 32% |
| Someone invited me                | 22% |
| God told me to go                 | 20% |
| Spouse wants me to go             | 17% |
| Other (please specify)            | 16% |
| Life crisis                       | 16% |
| Family connection                 | 15% |
| To meet new friends               | 13% |
| Preaching quality                 | 10% |
| Good music I like                 | 10% |
| Programming for children or youth | 7%  |

The themes in the data are clear. The unchurched start attending regularly because of spiritual prompts: growing spiritually (32%) and God told me to go (20%). The spiritual prompt is coupled with the personal prompt. The unchurched also start attending regularly because someone invited them (22%) and a spouse wants them to go (17%).

As we have seen throughout several decades of research, it's not good music or charismatic preaching that draws the unchurched. Those factors tend to enhance transfer growth (as seen in the subsequent finding). What the unchurched need is guidance by the Holy Spirit and a personal invitation. While the former is only a work of God, the latter is easily accomplished by any size church in any location in the United States.

## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

***Finding 10: Churched people tend to care more about worship style, programming, and denominational preferences than the unchurched, but the top reason churched people attend a particular church is because someone invited them.***

The church and unchurched alike attend a particular congregation primarily because someone invited them.

**Churched: What prompted you to start attending your current church?**  
Choose up to three answers.

|                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Someone invited me                | 41% |
| Location to me                    | 39% |
| Worship style                     | 28% |
| Programming for children or youth | 28% |
| Denominational preference         | 26% |
| Preaching quality                 | 23% |
| Family connection                 | 22% |
| Doctrine of the church            | 19% |
| Size of church                    | 6%  |
| Found the church online           | 4%  |
| Other (please specify)            | 3%  |

While worship style, location, programming, denominational preferences, and preaching quality have great impact on a churched person's decision to select a congregation, the top of the list is a personal invitation.

## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

***Finding 11: The unchurched have a slightly stronger preference for non-denominational churches when selecting a congregation.***

When the unchurched begin the process of selecting a congregation to attend, there is a slight preference for non-denominational churches, along with Baptist, Catholic, and Christian churches. The “none of the above” answer in the below figure likely represents those who believe they would never attend a church.

**Unchurched: If you were to attend a church, which church would you consider?  
Check all that apply.**

|                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Non-Denominational                | 26% |
| None of the above                 | 25% |
| Baptist                           | 20% |
| Catholic                          | 20% |
| Christian Church                  | 19% |
| Other (please specify)            | 16% |
| Methodist                         | 15% |
| Lutheran                          | 12% |
| Episcopal                         | 11% |
| Presbyterian                      | 10% |
| Assembly of God                   | 8%  |
| Church of God                     | 8%  |
| Greek Orthodox                    | 8%  |
| Pentecostal                       | 7%  |
| AME (African Methodist Episcopal) | 7%  |

## NEW SURPRISING INSIGHTS FROM THE UNCHURCHED

When churched people select a congregation, Baptists, Catholics, and Methodists top the list. As such, those who are currently active in a church tend to have a slight preference for certain denominations. These preferences are expected because Baptists, Catholics, and Methodists are among the largest religious bodies in the United States.

**Churched: If you were to attend another church, which church would you consider?  
Check all that apply.**

|                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Baptist                           | 34% |
| Catholic                          | 26% |
| Methodist                         | 23% |
| Non-Denominational                | 23% |
| Christian Church                  | 21% |
| Assembly of God                   | 18% |
| Presbyterian                      | 16% |
| Lutheran                          | 15% |
| Church of God                     | 15% |
| Pentecostal                       | 12% |
| Greek Orthodox                    | 7%  |
| Episcopal                         | 6%  |
| AME (African Methodist Episcopal) | 6%  |
| Other (please specify)            | 6%  |
| None of the above                 | 4%  |



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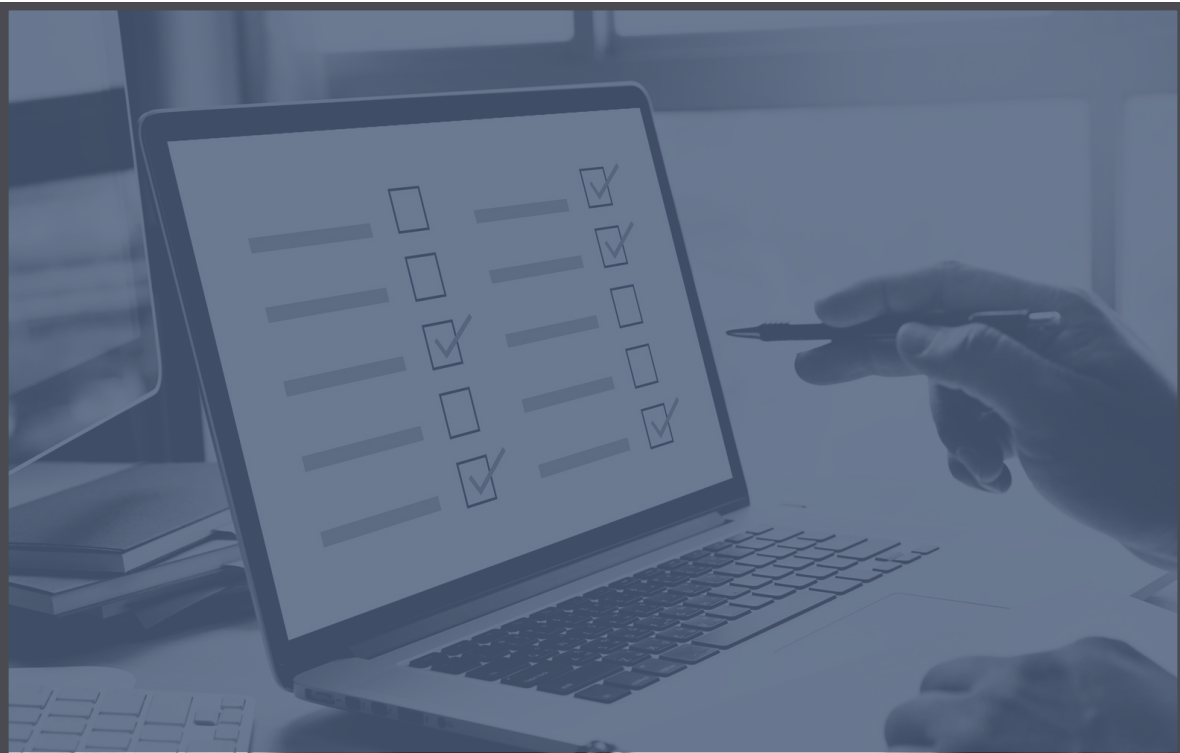
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## CHURCH ANSWERS RESEARCH

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### **ABOUT CHURCH ANSWERS RESEARCH**

Since 1989, we have been answering critical questions about church health and providing practical answers for pastors and church leaders. Our original research has been used by churches, publishers, businesses, and religious organizations worldwide.