

Reaching out to Children of Unchurched Parents

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PRC –
Practical Resources for Churches

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Note: Also, although the term “parents” is used in this booklet, please understand this to mean parents, guardians, or whoever is the main caregiver for a child.

The Unchurched

Let’s begin with defining the term “unchurched.” Wikipedia defines it this way:

Unchurched means, in the broad sense, people who are not connected with a church. In research on religious participation, it refers more specifically to people who do not attend worship services. The Barna Group defines the term to mean “an adult (18 or older) who has not attended a Christian church service within the past six months excluding special services such as Easter, Christmas, weddings or funerals. Barna reports that there were 75 million “unchurched people” in the United States as of 2004.

Some other terms for the unchurched include nones, religiously unaffiliated, nonreligious, and the familiar spiritual but not religious. Churchfree is sometimes used by people who see the term “unchurched” as having negative connotations.

The Pew Research website, in an article from 2012 called “[‘Nones’ on the Rise](#),” notes that this group of people is growing at a rapid pace. The article states that:

One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today...In the last five years alone, the unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults...However, a new survey by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, conducted jointly with the PBS television program Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, finds that many of the country’s 46 million unaffiliated adults are religious or spiritual in some way. Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious” (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day. In addition, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor.

With few exceptions, though, the unaffiliated say they are not looking for a religion that would be right for them. Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics.

So the unchurched are a diverse group. They include those who have very little church background as well as those who may have been raised in the church but have since turned away. They may also include those who are technically members of a church but who rarely attend services.

Circles of Connection



Now let's look at the children of unchurched parents that we want to connect with. I see them as though they were different circles in a water ripple. In the very center of the circle we have the children of parents who come to church on a regular basis. The next circle includes children who already have some kind of connection with your church. Then we have the children who are not directly connected to your church but have a connection to people in your church. There are those children who aren't connected with your church but come for a visit with their family. Finally there are those children who have no connection to your church.

Most churches have some children who have a connection to them but whose parents rarely or never attend church. These children may be regular attendees or only visit a few times a year. They are brought to church by a relative or friend or they may be dropped off by their parents.

In speaking with those in children's ministry, I often find that they are very critical of drop off parents. I have heard resentful teachers and leaders complain about how they are used for "free babysitting." I would ask those who do this to take a different attitude. We don't know a parent's reason for dropping off a child and then not attending services themselves. They may have other responsibilities, may have been hurt by the church, or may just prefer to go home and read the paper. But they have made the effort to bring their child to church and therefore see value in their child's faith formation or, at least, don't see it as a negative thing. And they've entrusted their child to our care which is a great compliment. I remember once sharing the Parable of the Prodigal Son with a class which included several drop-off kids; I was suddenly aware of what a great privilege it was to let these children know how much God loved them and to be the one to share this Bible story with them for the first time.

I remember once seeing two teachers speaking derogatively of one mother who was dropping her children off in the parking lot before Sunday school began. I shared with them some background about the mom, who I knew. Her husband was a policeman and often worked on Sunday mornings. Besides the two elementary age children she was dropping off, she had an infant at home and a teenage daughter with emotional problems. I found this woman to be admirable; I'm not sure in her circumstances if I would get up early on a Sunday morning, get my children dressed and ready and then drive with my infant and older children to a church.

Make Them Feel at Home

It's important when kids attend your Sunday school or children's ministry programs to make them feel at home; this is true of all children but especially those whose parents aren't connected to the church.

You'll want to create a sense of community in the classroom. This can be done with community building activities as well as the attitudes of the teachers and leaders. Keep an eye out for children who don't seem to be connecting with others; perhaps you could pair them up with an outgoing regular attendee.

Another way to create community is to match up children who've been dropped off with a sponsor or buddy family. This means the child won't be sitting alone in worship or during a meal. The buddy family should also attempt to reach out to the child's parents if possible and, if they do decide to attend a church service or activity, the buddy family will be there with the child **and** parents. Of course, the buddy family will follow your church's safe church and screening policies.

Attendance charts or rewards can often make a child of unchurched parents who attends irregularly feel even more isolated, so I would avoid them.

Be careful when speaking to children and don't assume their home life is Christian. Don't put children on the spot about things like prayer before meals or at bedtime.

Don't forget what we have to offer that is unique to churches: a relationship with Jesus. Like adults, children have deep spiritual needs and introducing them to Jesus, prayer, and other spiritual practices fills a need that can't be filled by other organizations.



Parents and Faith Formation

Parents have a tremendous amount of influence on their children's faith formation, so we have a better chance of helping children with their relationship with God when their parents are onboard.

The [Effective Christian Education Study](#) by the Search Institute found that "family religiousness was the most important factor in faith maturity." Other studies confirm that the family has the greatest influence on a child's faith formation. So in this webinar, as we talk about ways to reach out to children of unchurched parents, we will be talking about ways to reach out to their parents as well.

For those children who already have some involvement in your church, sending home family activities is a good idea. A child who is excited about selecting a table prayer from a container made in Sunday school can get the whole family praying before meals. Advent wreaths or chains and family devotional booklets are other possibilities.

There are also many online resources for children and families that you can share with families, either with a written list to take home or an e-mail attachment if you have the parents' e-mail addresses. Occasional e-mail contact with parents can be an unobtrusive way to start to connect with them.

Reaching Out to Unchurched Parents

In order to connect with unchurched parents, try to find out more about them. Talk to the person who brings the child if possible. For parents who drop off their kids, hang around the front door or even the parking lot and make yourself available should an opportunity for a conversation arises I'm not talking about stalking here, so make sure that you don't come off as intrusive and make sure that you do more listening than talking in order to get to know the parents.

It's about relationships and if parents realize that you are genuinely concerned about their child and family, they'll be more open to communicating with you. Sending a letter or an e-mail about how well the child is doing in Sunday school and how happy you are to have the child as part of your class is something a parent will be happy about. Consider sending home a photo of the child happily involved in a church activity.

Having children involved in the worship service or other programs can be the reason a parent will come to church. Besides the Christmas or Easter pageants, children can participate in worship by being acolytes, serving in a junior choir, acting in a skit, or being a greeter. A show for the parents on the last day of VBS is a nice idea, and the Sunday after VBS is great times to have the children sing some VBS songs in worship. Bible presentations to students are another time when parents might want to attend services.

Parents can be encouraged to come to Sunday school with their child through programs that get parents involved such as being the parent of the month, being responsible to bring a special snack (perhaps for a birthday), or reading a story to the class or doing another activity.

Intergenerational programs such as an Advent fair or Walk through Holy Week are a good idea. Sometimes parents without a church background can feel inadequate to teach their children about the faith, and intergenerational events are a great way for parents to learn along with their children without having to admit their lack of knowledge.

Parents that aren't interested in attending a worship service may feel that their time is well spent getting involved in a service or mission project.

Don't assume that parents are unspiritual or look down on them because they don't attend church. The fact that they drop off their child or allow someone else to bring their child to church means that they recognize that going to church can be a good thing for their child.

The Next Level



Besides reaching out to the unchurched parents of children who already have a connection to your Sunday school or other children's ministries, you can also encourage people in your church to invite children and families they know to get involved in those ministries.

In his book [*The Unchurched Next Door*](#), Thom Rainer says that only "2% of church people ever invite someone to church...And it's not clear what we're afraid of: 82% of the unchurched are somewhat likely to go if someone would just ask them."

Be aware though that one of the biggest reasons people don't invite others to church is because they're afraid the person won't have a good experience, and they may be right if your worship service doesn't connect with people or your church has conflict or other problems.

You can make sure your church is ready for visitors and encourage church members to invite friends but those are topics that are too extensive to cover in this webinar. The PRC does have resources to suggest as well as recorded and upcoming webinars and workshops that deal with these topics.

Some things you can do to encourage people to invite friends to church on Sunday include having special Bring-A-Friend Sundays, having the children make invitations ,

or handing out preprinted invitations for children and adults to give to friends. Let the parents of children already in your Sunday school know that friends are welcome and suggest if their child has a sleepover on a Saturday night, they also invite their friend to Sunday school the next day.

Encourage people to invite friends to other church events as well; people who don't regularly come to church may feel more comfortable attending dinners, movies, game nights, or getting involved in a service project rather than attending a worship service. Encourage your congregation to not just invite but to accompany friends to church. Walking into an unfamiliar environment filled with strangers is a lot easier with someone by your side.

A New Family Visits

You may also have a family with children come for a first time visit to your church. This is likely to happen at certain times of the year such as when school starts in September or for special holidays such as Christmas and Easter. A Blessing of the Animals service is something that families like to attend. Make sure you have information available about your children's programs to give to visiting families. If you don't have Sunday school on holidays like Christmas and Easter, encourage your pastor or Worship Committee to make sure there is something for the children during the worship service. Many churches hold special kid-friendly Christmas Eve services and an Easter service with activities like Flowering the Cross and Releasing the Halleluiahs will appeal to children as well as adults. An Easter egg hunt after the service is also something to consider.

Make sure you're ready for visitors. Again, this topic is too extensive to cover in this webinar but we have many resources we can suggest to you. One of the most important things you can do to be ready is to have a website which includes information about your church, especially a page with "what to know before you visit" which talks about your Sunday school and even what most people wear to church. 80% of all newcomers visit a church's website before their first visit. Signage is very important. Can visitors easily see where to park and which door to use? Consider having greeters in parking lots or outside the church doors to assist visitors. A hospitality table should be available to tell newcomers about Sunday school and other programs. You should have someone to direct or even escort families to Sunday school classrooms or the church nursery. And make sure that your children's ministry space is clean, cheerful, and safe.

Have written information available, such as a brochure, which gives details about your children's ministry.

Include information about your Safe Church policy and nursery. Have registration forms available so parent can communicate important information about their child such as special needs or allergies.

Train ushers and greeters so they know what to do when a new family with children comes to your church. Consider seating the new family near a family which attends regularly. When making announcements don't use just first names of people or abbreviations which may leave visitors wondering what you're referring to. Make sure your service is visitor friendly by imagining yourself coming to your church for the first time; does your bulletin contains words to all prayers, even very familiar one? Finally, don't embarrass visitors by giving them nametags or making them stand up or speak.

If parents are reluctant to leave their child, let them know that they are welcome to come to Sunday school too.

Don't forget to follow up with new families with a postcard or e-mail and ask your pastor to follow up as well.

Beyond the Church Doors

Now we come to the children of unchurched parents who have no connection at all to your church. How do we reach out and share the love of God with them? One thing to consider is having outreach events, although the success of these varies depending on where your church is located. If you do decide to plan an event like this, there are many different ways you can go, from focusing on seasonal activities, games, movies, or something else you think may be of interest to the community.

A community survey can help you to discover the needs of children in your community. This doesn't have to be a formal survey but can be as simple as just asking people in your church or in local schools and other agencies that work with children what they see as the needs of children and families in your area. The information you obtain may lead you to consider starting an afterschool program, collecting school supplies, or offering parenting classes.

Having service projects that benefit the local or greater community also offers an chance for families looking for volunteer opportunities to work together to serve others.

You may also find that there are programs already in place which you can volunteer for or offer to hold in your church building. Be aware, though, that if you are in a public school or participating in a program sponsored by another organization, you'll be limited in how much information about your faith and church that you can share. However, you will be showing Christ's love by your example and serving the children in your community, even if they never get involved in your church.



Think Outside the Box



The world is constantly changing but sometimes we in the church are slow to realize this. Here at the center we are seeing more and more churches moving their primary time for children's ministry to one other than Sunday morning. There is no one size that fits all, so this may or may not work in your church, but it's something to think about. Busy families may opt to stay home on Sunday mornings instead of going to church so an alternate time for children's ministry may be well received.

The way we do children's ministry is also changing as we become more aware that we need to minister to the entire family. Sometimes this means separate programming for children and adults and sometimes this means intergenerational programming.

How about starting a family resource center at your church with books, CDs, and DVDs that your families can borrow?

We also need to make full use of the many technological tools we have available now. Social media sites like Facebook or Pinterest can create interest and grow community. (Make sure your church has a social media policy before using these tools though.)

Overscheduled families may respond to online resources that they can access at home on their own time schedule. Online faith formation is something any church can do; there are many tools available for little or no cost and you don't need to be a computer geek to use them. St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Arlington, Virginia, recently shut down its Sunday school. They set up a website which offers weekly resources for families, including a Gospel, story, family discussion topic, and a prayer starter. People can share their experiences on the site each week. Every four to six weeks, families gather after worship for a potluck lunch, teaching, activities, and fun.



A Word of Caution

Remember that article I mentioned at the beginning of the webinar called “‘Nones’ on the Rise”? It noted that the number of religiously affiliated people is growing, especially those under 30. It also said that most of those people are not looking for a religion that would be right for them. They see religious organizations as “too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules, and too involved in politics.” They’re just not interested. A recent blog on the Church and Culture website compared the unchurched’s reaction to the church’s reaching out to them to the way people react to ads for cars. It says:

In today’s paper, there were probably dozens of ads for new cars. If you read the paper, did you notice them? It’s doubtful – unless you are in the market for a car...If you’re not in the market for a car, it doesn’t matter to you if a dealer is having a sale, promises a rebate, has a radio on-site broadcast, hangs out balloons, says they’re better than everyone else, promises that they will be different and not harass you or make you bargain over the price, or sends you a brochure or push email.

Why? You’re not in the market for a car.

It’s no different with a church. People today are divorced from seeing it as a need in their life, even when they are open to and interested in spiritual things. They no longer tie that to the need to find a particular faith, much less a particular church.

That’s the bad news. Here’s the good news. The unchurched **are** interested in God and many of them pray and consider themselves spiritual. Most of them think that religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor. So while unchurched parents may not be interested in church, they are interested in what the church can offer them, if the church can get rid of its baggage of focusing on money, power, rules, and politics.

The Church and Culture blog goes on to say that there are churches who are growing from the unchurched and that “the number one reason newcomers attend is because they were invited by a friend.”

I once did an exercise with a confirmation class where I asked the kids to invent an advertising slogan for the church. This is what they come up: “We have Jesus.” This is what makes us different from the rest of the world and that is the good news that we should share with our friends.



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