

STOP CALLING THEM “*UNCHURCHED*”

What one word reveals about where we have placed the center of the map.

I have never met an *unchurched* person.

I am good friends with people from France, Germany, Mexico, Norway, Japan, Morocco, and beyond. I spend considerable amounts of time with Muslims, atheists, agnostics, skeptics, seekers, and those with different sexual orientations. I have met people wounded by religion and people who have barely thought about it. I have met people fascinated by Jesus and people confused by Christians. I have met people carrying questions, loneliness, grief, dreams, disappointment, curiosity, and hope.



But I have never met someone who introduced themselves to me as “*unchurched*.”

WE gave them that name. And the name may reveal more about us than it does about them.

THE CHURCH BECAME THE REFERENCE POINT

Think about what the word *unchurched* actually communicates. We have defined a human being according to their relationship to church. They attend church or they do not. They are church-ed or they are unchurch-ed. The Church has become the center of the map, and everyone else is described according to their proximity to it.

That might sound harmless until we follow the language to its logical conclusion. If the problem is that people are *unchurched*, the solution is to get them *church-ed*.

Suddenly an entire approach to ministry begins forming around one word.

How do we get unchurch-ed people to attend?

How do we make church more attractive to them?

What kind of music would they like?

What topics would interest them?

What would make them comfortable enough to return?

How do we get our people to invite their unchurch-ed friends?

The goal quietly becomes movement from outside the Church to inside the Church.

But is that the movement Jesus described?

JESUS NEVER CALLED THEM “UNCHURCHED”

When Jesus looked at the crowds, He did not describe people according to their relationship with a religious gathering. He saw people.

Matthew tells us that Jesus saw crowds who were “*harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*” Then Jesus gave His disciples another way to see them: “*The harvest is plentiful.*”

That is an entirely different starting point. Jesus did not see a population that needed to be brought into something. He saw a harvest His followers needed to be sent into.

That’s a major shift.

Unchurched begins with the Church and *looks* outward. Harvest begins with Jesus and *sends* us outward.

One asks how we can bring people closer to what we have built. The other asks us to leave what is familiar and enter the lives of people Jesus already sees.

Those are not two different outreach strategies. They are two different starting points.

THE WORD TELLS US ALMOST NOTHING

There is another problem with *unchurched*. It tells us almost nothing about the person.

Consider the people who can disappear beneath that single label.

A twenty-two-year-old French woman who has never opened a Bible.

A forty-five-year-old American who spent twenty years in church and walked away wounded.

A Muslim international student.

An atheist fascinated by the person of Jesus.

Someone who believes in God but distrusts organized religion.

Someone who stopped attending church six months ago.

Someone who has never thought seriously about faith at all.

Every one of them can be called unchurched, but their stories could hardly be more different.

Once I call someone *unchurched*, I know almost nothing about them. Once I become curious about them, an entire world opens.

Who they are.

What they hope for.

What has hurt them.

What matters to them.

What has shaped them.

What they think about Jesus.

The experiences that have shaped their beliefs.

The questions they have never asked out loud.

Those questions do not begin with the Church. They begin with the person.

LANGUAGE CREATES A STARTING POINT

Words shape the way we see, and the way we see determines where we start.

If I see an “*unchurched person*,” I am already seeing someone through the lens of what they lack in relation to my religious world. My imagination immediately begins moving toward a solution:

How can I get this person connected to church?

But if I see someone standing in the plentiful harvest Jesus described, the starting point changes.

I become curious.

I listen.

I learn their language.

I discover their story.

I notice where Jesus might already be moving in their life.

I stop thinking about how to get them somewhere and begin paying attention to where they already are.

That is the difference between beginning with the Church and beginning with the harvest.

And that is where Harvest Forward begins.

HARVEST FORWARD STARTS SOMEWHERE ELSE

Harvest Forward begins with a different starting point. We do not begin with what the Church has built and ask how to get people into it. We begin with Jesus in the plentiful harvest and ask how we can follow Him there.

That changes our posture toward people.

We **EXPLORE**. Instead of beginning with a label, we begin with *curiosity*.

We listen before we design. We learn stories before we create strategies. We pay attention to people, places, questions, tensions, hopes, pain, relationships, and the quiet places where Jesus may already be moving. We become students of the harvest before becoming architects of ministry. Curiosity before creativity. Reality before vocabulary.

Then we **EXPRESS**. What we discover through curiosity moves us toward *relationship*.

We express value. We form trust. We plant Jesus. We stop treating friendship as a strategy for eventually getting someone into our world and become genuinely present in theirs. We do not build relationships so people will attend something. Relationship itself becomes sacred ground where Jesus can become visible. The expression follows the relationship.

Then we **EXPERIMENT**. This is where curiosity and relationship become *adventure*.

We do not enter the harvest already knowing what needs to be built or where following Jesus will take us. We take small steps in response to what Jesus is doing and what we are discovering among actual people. We assess, adjust, and advance. A dinner table might emerge. A conversation might become a community. One relationship might become something nobody could have planned beforehand. Adventure means surrendering the need to know the outcome before we take the next step. We remain responsive to Jesus because the harvest, not an inherited model, helps reveal what the Kingdom Expression should become.

Explore. Express. Experiment.

Curiosity. Relationship. Adventure.

This is why Harvest Forward is not another outreach strategy designed to reach “the unchurched.” It changes the starting point altogether. We don’t enter the harvest knowing what we are going to build. We enter attentive to Jesus, curious about people, and willing to discover what expression of His Kingdom might emerge among them.

MAYBE THEY DON'T NEED TO BECOME *CHURCHED*

This is where the language gets especially revealing. If unchurched describes the problem, becoming churchd sounds remarkably close to the solution.

But Jesus did not come to make people churchd. He came announcing, “*The Kingdom of God has come near.*” He invited people to repent, believe, follow Him, lose their lives, discover life, love God, love their neighbors, become His disciples, and participate in His Kingdom.

Church attendance and following Jesus are not interchangeable ideas.

The Church matters profoundly, but the Church is not the destination. Jesus is. And His Church is a people sent into His plentiful harvest to reveal His Kingdom there.

That means the question changes.

Instead of asking, “*How do we reach the unchurched?*” we begin asking, “*How do we follow Jesus into the plentiful harvest?*”

Those questions sound similar, but they lead in different directions. One begins with a destination we have already chosen and asks how to get people there. The other begins with Jesus and asks where He is leading us.

One assumes we know what needs to happen next.

The other is an unexplored adventure.

CHANGE THE CENTER OF THE MAP

This is why the word unchurched matters. It quietly places the Church at the center of the map and defines everyone else according to their distance from it.

Maybe it is time to retire the word. Not because someone declared it offensive, but because it is too small. It begins in the wrong place. It tells us almost nothing about the people we are trying to understand while revealing quite a lot about the paradigm through which we see them.

More than that, it becomes the foundation for an entire paradigm built around the wrong starting point.

The harvest is not a collection of people who have failed to come to us. It is where Jesus sends us.

So the next time we are tempted to talk about reaching “*the unchurched,*” remember that there is no such person sitting across the table.

There is a name and a narrative.

There are hopes and heartaches.

There are questions and contradictions.

There are wounds and wonder.

There is someone Jesus already sees.

Harvest Forward begins there. We do not start with getting them somewhere. We do not start by deciding what to build for them. We start by seeing them, listening to them, knowing them, and following Jesus into their world.

The first step isn't doing more. It's seeing differently.