

Who Are We Trying to Reach?  
by Ken Behnken

*This article is from the December 2003 New Harvest newsletter from the Center for U.S. Missions. Permission is given to copy this article for distribution within your own congregation. Please credit the author and the Center for U.S. Missions in Irvine, California, [www.centerforusmissions.org](http://www.centerforusmissions.org). For more information, contact the Center at 949-854-8002 x1780.*

As George Barna, George Gallup, Thom Rainer and other researchers continue to generate statistics about what is happening in the church today, it makes all of us cringe and ask, “What is going on?” Has the church lost its zeal and determination to reach the lost? Are people so bombarded by materialism and post-modernism that the church and its message are pushed to the sidelines for something that looks a little more exciting?

The challenge of our Lord has not changed. The banner for our existence is still “Go into the entire world and make disciples.” The church still exists. However, statistics show that we are far from making headway in the challenge that Christ gave us in the Great Commission.

During the past ten years, all Protestant denominations in the United States have declined 9.5%, a loss of 4,498,242 people. During the same time, the population of the United States increased 11.4 %, a gain of 24,153,000 people. Chip Arn, a church researcher, tells us that in the past 50 years evangelicals have failed to gain an additional 2% of the American population. He goes on to remind us that not one county in America has a greater church population today than it did ten years ago. The result is that today the United States of America is the third largest mission field in the world next to China and India. There are 195 million unchurched Americans.

This mission field is being explored by religions other than Christianity. Today 5-6 million Muslims live in America. The number of mosques has doubled in the past 20 years, from 600 to 1,200. Each year 135,000 Americans become Muslim, including about 35,000 annually from the prison population.

Christian religious training in the American home is quickly diminishing. The number of adults who reported they had no religious training during childhood went from 6% in 1952 to 35% in 1993. Many children today have never heard of Adam and Eve, Abraham, David, Solomon, Isaiah or even Jesus Christ.

Researcher George Barna tells us that only 41% of Americans attend church services on a typical weekend. While 51% of the “Builder” generation (born before 1946) attend church, only 29% of the “Net” generation (born between 1978 and 1994) attend church on a given Sunday. An even more staggering piece of research by Thom Rainer (1997) showed that only 4% of teenagers understand the Gospel and recognize Christ as their Savior.

Dan Kimbal made this observation: “Europe has many great cathedrals which were once filled with people but now sit almost empty on Sunday morning and often serve as mere

tourist attractions. Could it be the destiny that the mega church buildings we've recently constructed will end up as tourist attractions in 20-30 years, sitting virtually empty on Sunday mornings?"

Today we find ourselves analogous to the first century Gentiles; millions of people who have almost no real knowledge of Christianity. A recent study by Chip Arn showed that 41% of the U.S. population (116.85 million) has no religious affiliation. He calls these the radically unchurched. These are people who have no clear personal understanding of the message of the Gospel, nor of standard Christian terminology.

In order to find out what this unchurched population was looking for in a church (if they were looking at all), Thom Rainer interviewed those people who recently became church members from the unchurched population and asked them, "What factors led you to choose a church?" The answers may surprise us a little. They were as follows:

- 90% - Pastor/preaching
- 88% - Doctrines (a church that had theological depth)
- 49% - Friendliness of members
- 41% - Someone from church witnessed to me
- 38% - Family members attended this church
- 37% - Sensed God's presence; atmosphere
- 25% - Relationships with people other than family members
- 11% - Worship style/music

George Barna recently released another study that makes us sit up and take notice. His study showed that half the people who attend Protestant churches on a typical Sunday morning are not Christians. Most of them call themselves Christians but they do not believe that their hope for eternal life is based on a personal relationship with Jesus and the belief that He died and rose again from the dead. Barna notes that most of these notional Christians have been members of the church all their lives. They make up half of all the people who sit in our churches every Sunday.

Bill Bright, in a similar study, suggests that one half of the people in church every Sunday are not sure of their salvation. Christian researchers have begun to call this the 7:21 window, referring to Matthew 7:21 which states "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven." Dr. Phil Fernandes, president of the Institute of Biblical Defense, challenged, "The primary emphasis of the church should be leading the lost to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, but first we must lead our own congregations to Christ."

In his book *Welcoming People the Church Rejects*, Rich Nathan claims the conservative church in America has misidentified the enemy.

"In the first century, the Romans were marching through the streets of Judea. They had their pagan standards. They were involuntarily conscripting Jewish young men into their armies, taking Jewish daughters into wealthy Roman homes to serve as servants and cooks, taking the best of the crops of Judea and they were taking taxes. Jesus never said

the problem of first century life was the Romans. He never said that the problem of first century life in Judea was the amoral people ruining the culture. He continually said the problem was that the people of God have failed to act like the people of God. The salt has lost its saltiness. Today we sincerely believe that the problem of the world is those immoral people out there, or those folks who don't share our political views, or those folks who are ruining our schools, rather than that the people of God are not acting like the people of God."

Mike Regele, in his book *Robust Church Development*, says, "The 21st century church must displace a traditional Christendom chaplaincy with a church that will become a missionary enterprise."

Pastors today need first of all to be missionaries. We need to equip and lead our congregations in their engagement of the community. Tom Clegg, in *Lost In America*, warns, "Any church that doesn't shift from 'ministry as status quo' to 'ministry as mission outpost' will die or become hopelessly irrelevant."

There is no simple answer or solution — the challenge belongs to each of us as we minister to the people and communities in which God has placed us. We need to challenge ourselves, our congregation leaders, and our congregation members to ask, "How do we become a Great Commission Church? How do we get back on track to become what God called us to be?"

What is your congregation's vision? Mike Regele says his vision for a church in the 21st century is a church that proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ and:

- is a vital center of life and hope
- is a place where people want to be
- is a place that generates a feeling of life and healing and acceptance
- knows who you are and why you exist
- is a redemptive island of hope for all people in Jesus Christ
- loves their communities and loses themselves in service to the community
- is a place where I can go and feel welcome, safe, and accepted
- is a place for myself, my children and for others.

Who are we trying to reach? The answer is clear. We are trying to reach God's people: the people in our community, our neighbor next door, our family members, the people in our congregation, the people in our small group, anyone God connects us with in our journey through life. Many people do not know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. This is our challenge! ■