

**Millions of Unchurched Adults Are Christians with Hurtful Church Experiences and Need to Find Healing and Restoration:  
A Barna Report and a new book, *ReChurch*, by Stephen Mansfield**

Summarized and posted with additional reflections, by Bob Young

In recent years, many churches have become more intentional about attracting people who do not currently participate in the life of a church. This effort to reach outside the walls of the church building to touch unchurched people is often described as an intentionally missional approach to church. A recent Barna research project report suggests that the unchurched in the US may be different than what the average church leader thinks. (More details of the report are available at [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org).)

**The Unchurched Are Almost 1/3 of the Population**

The Barna report data indicates that 28% of the adult population has not attended any church activities, including services, in the past six months. That translates to nearly 65 million adults. When their children under the age of 18 who live with them are added to the picture, the number swells to more than 100 million people. While the proportion of unchurched adults is down slightly from its 25-year high of 32%, the change (only about 10%) may not be significant. Nonetheless, with the continued growth of the US population, the large number of unchurched people continues to be a challenge for the church.

**The Unchurched Are Mostly Self-Identified Christians**

A surprising fact that came from the research is that a large majority of the nation's unchurched population are people who consider themselves to be Christians. In the US, 83% of all adults label themselves "Christian." Among the unchurched, almost two-thirds (61%) identify themselves as Christians.

Who are these unchurched adults who identify themselves as Christians? A majority of them (53%) have distanced themselves from either Protestant (30%) or Catholic (17%) groups, and almost all of them have at one time been associated with one of those groups.

The beliefs of the self-identified Christians who have distanced themselves from a conventional church may be significant. According to the report, "Two-thirds (68%) hold a biblical view of God—that is, He is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the universe and He still rules that universe today. However, only one-third (35%) agree to any extent that the Bible is totally accurate in all the principles it teaches. Only one in seven (15%) claim that their religious faith is very important in their life. One out of five (22%) contends that the ultimate purpose of life is to love God with all their heart, mind, strength and soul. A mere one in seven (14%) claims to have a clear sense of the meaning and purpose of their life."

The demographics of the self-identified Christians among the unchurched are also surprising. Women outnumber men; Boomers and their elders outnumber the young; and conservatives are more common than liberals.

### **The Unchurched Identify Past Negative Experiences as a Reason for Avoiding Church**

One of the driving forces for those who leave the church is the painful experiences endured within the local church context. One Barna study of unchurched adults showed that nearly four out of every ten non-churchgoing Americans (37%) said they avoid churches because of negative past experiences in churches or with church people.

Stephen Mansfield has written a new book (***ReChurch***) that explores this dynamic. The title reflects the research that shows that most unchurched people (more than 80%) were formerly regular participants in church life, many of whom left after an incident that hurt them deeply. A former megachurch pastor who personally experienced the pain of a church disruption, Mansfield writes about his own experience of leaving and then returning to congregational life, explores the stories of others who have walked that road, and suggests the biblical support for restoration. Writing as one who has also been wounded by past church experiences, Mansfield encourages those who have been hurt by a local church to overcome that pain and suffering—if not in response to a biblical command, then for their own healing and maturation.

Mansfield notes that God uses pain and our own immaturity to reshape us. Certainly, many churchgoers are wounded by the insensitive or ignorant actions of other church members. These are opportunities for us to love others who are “flawed sinners”, as are we all. Fleeing from pain and suffering rather than addressing and overcoming it leaves us wounded and bitter, and does nothing to enhance our lives or relationships. The solution is forgiveness—the forgiveness that Jesus offers to each of us who have wounded Him. After all, Christianity is about receiving freedom through God’s forgiveness extended to us. Offering that same forgiveness to others is the only means to us becoming healthy and whole again.