

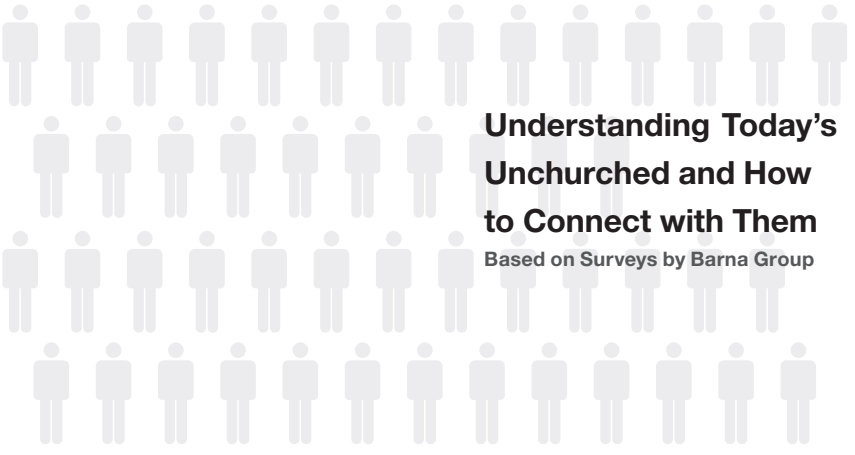
Understanding Today's
Unchurched and How
to Connect with Them

Churchless



Barna Group
George Barna &
David Kinnaman
General Editors

CHURCHLESS



**Understanding Today's
Unchurched and How
to Connect with Them**

Based on Surveys by Barna Group

Churchless



Barna Group
George Barna &
David Kinnaman
General Editors



TYNDALE[®]
MOMENTUM

An Imprint of

Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

BARNA 

AN IMPRINT OF TYNDALE MOMENTUM

Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

Visit Tyndale Momentum at www.tyndalemomentum.com.

Visit the Churchless website at www.barna.org/churchless.

TYNDALE, *Tyndale Momentum*, and the Tyndale Momentum logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Tyndale Momentum is an imprint of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Barna and the Barna logo are trademarks of George Barna. BarnaBooks is an imprint of Tyndale Momentum.

Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them

Copyright © 2014 by The Barna Group. All rights reserved.

Author photos copyright © 2014 by Breanne Thompson Photography. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Designed by Alberto C. Navata Jr. and Beth Sparkman

Published in association with the literary agency of Fedd and Company, Inc., doing business at PO Box 341973, Austin, TX, 78734.

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® *NIV*.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Churchless : understanding today's unchurched and how to connect with them : based on surveys by Barna Group / Barna Group ; George Barna and David Kinnaman, general editors.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4143-8709-3 (hc)

1. Non church-affiliated people. 2. Evangelistic work. I. Barna, George, editor.

II. Barna Group.

BV4921.3.C48 2014

277.3'083—dc23

2014018281

Printed in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Table of Contents

1. Is Churchlessness a Crisis?	I
<i>Why People Leaving Churches Matters to the Church</i>	
2. Our Cultural Moment	13
<i>What Is Different about Our Time</i>	
3. Profiling the Unchurched	33
<i>Demographics and Self-Descriptions of Churchless People</i>	
4. Perceptions of Faith, Christianity, and Churches. . .	47
<i>What Unchurched People Think and Feel about Religion</i>	
5. Doing Faith	57
<i>The Religious Behaviors of Churchless People</i>	
6. The Creed of the Creedless	65
<i>The Religious Beliefs that Define Unchurched People's Faith</i>	
7. Born Again and Unchurched	85
<i>The Paradox of Trusting Christ but Not the Local Church</i>	
8. Disengaged and Dropping Out.	91
<i>Understanding the Reasons People Choose to Leave Church Life</i>	
9. The Intersection of Family and Faith	109
<i>Family Life among Unchurched People</i>	

CHURCHLESS

10.	The Ideals that Propel the Unchurched Forward . . .	121
	<i>The Goals, Morals, and Values at the Heart of Churchless Adults</i>	
11.	This Is How They Roll	129
	<i>The Lifestyle Choices and Activities of the Unchurched</i>	
12.	Reaching the Skeptics	139
	<i>Atheists and Agnostics Are a Different Brand of Unchurched People</i>	
13.	Faith, Future Tense	155
	<i>The Faith Experience and Spiritual Journey Unchurched Adults Are Seeking</i>	
14.	Why Churches Matter	167
	<i>Advocating for Church in a Post-Christian Culture</i>	
APPENDIX 1:	About the Research	193
APPENDIX 2:	About Barna Group	197
APPENDIX 3:	Glossary of Terms	201
	Acknowledgments	203
	Endnotes	205

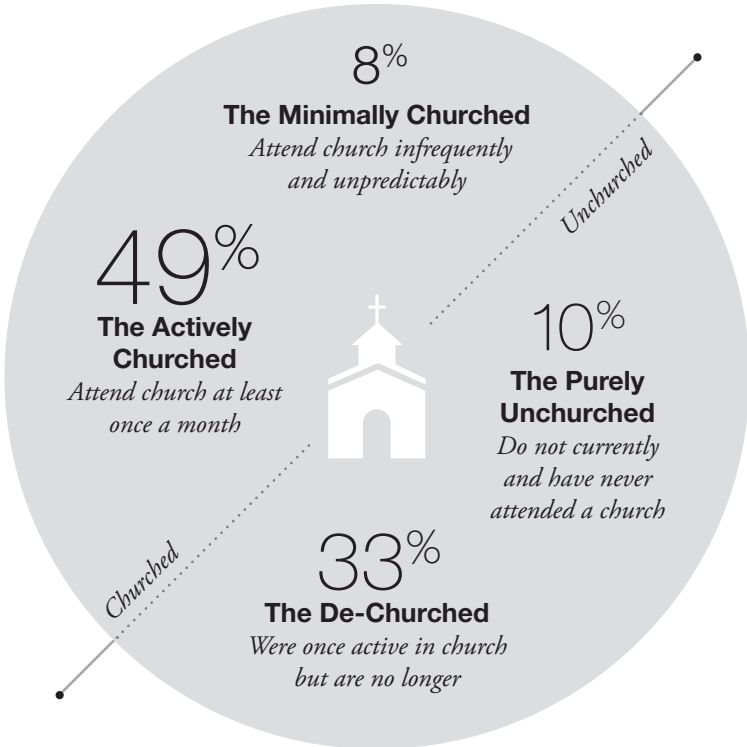
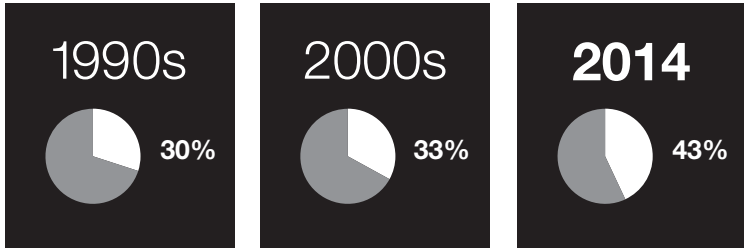


If we perceive the gap
between “us” and “them”
as W I D E and
essentially uncrossable,
we are less likely
to get close enough
to offer ourselves
in real relationships.



**GEORGE BARNA
AND DAVID KINNAMAN,
*Churchless***

The rise of churchlessness in America





1

IS CHURCHLESSNESS A CRISIS?

Why People Leaving Churches Matters to the Church

If you are like many churchgoers, you have mixed feelings about the unchurched in America.

You may often feel sorry for the churchless, knowing they are missing out on the special experiences and relationships accessible only through the community of people devoted to following Jesus Christ. At other times you may envy them, wishing to flee your church ties and be free, like the unchurched, from the petty jealousies, impractical teaching, second-rate events, and hypocritical behaviors you sometimes witness in congregational life.

You may feel frustrated and helpless in the face of many unchurched folks' self-imposed distance from the love and

forgiveness of Christ, and agonize over their inability to live a consistently moral and meaningful life without a deeper understanding of God's ways. Yet occasionally you may wonder if the only distinction between churchgoers and the unchurched is merely a Sunday attendance record.

You might focus on the challenge of reaching the churchless with the gospel and motivating them to attend religious events. Or perhaps, at least some of the time, you get on with your life without giving the spiritual condition of the unchurched much thought, realizing they are human beings with free will who do not want to be anyone's religious project.

Most churchgoers have a sense that involving outsiders in a vibrant community of faith would enhance and improve their lives, while at the same time help Christ's disciples to satisfy some element of the Great Commission. However, that sense—whether it's from duty or love for others—doesn't make the task any easier. Knowing how to connect with those who have chosen to ignore churches, how to successfully invite them to engage with a community of faith, is a challenge that eludes simple, step-by-step solutions.

It is our hope that this book will help you and your faith community feel more empowered to approach and connect with unchurched people. We've done a lot of homework on the churchless population and believe that what we have discovered will help you to be more confident and effective at building bridges between outsiders and your faith community. Our hope is that the information in these pages will give you insights that enable you to create deeper, more enduring

relationships with the unchurched people you encounter, leading to their positive introduction to and lasting relationship with Jesus.

Interpreting Culture

We have spent a significant chunk of our lives—nearly sixty years between the two of us—trying to understand culture. The ongoing work of Barna Group affords us the unique opportunity to speak both to our fellow believers about the broader culture and to church outsiders who want to understand the faith community. We take seriously our role as interpreters, and always seek to give as accurate an accounting of reality as possible.

One substantial reality is the growing sense among North American Christians that the culture is changing faster than we can keep up with or respond to—and we're not always sure how to live faithfully in a world that feels like it's headed off the rails. Not too many years ago, church attendance and basic Bible literacy were the cultural norm, and being a Christian didn't feel like swimming against the cultural current. But now?

Churchless confirms that the world has, indeed, altered in significant ways during the last few decades. It's not just your imagination. Real data confirm how drastically the moral, social, and spiritual lives of Americans have changed and are changing. We'll lay these data out for you as accessibly as we can, with plenty of charts and tables so you can see for yourself the trajectory of the changes over time.

But numbers only go so far—knowledge and wisdom are related, yet different, things—and so in these pages you will also find cultural analysis that can help you in your efforts to live a Christ-honoring life in the midst of these massive changes, especially in relation to your non-Christian peers, neighbors, coworkers, and family. One of the things we will suggest again and again is to embrace the churchless—whether they are following Jesus and disconnected from a local church, or not following Jesus at all—as people from whom we can (and must) learn.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and martyr at the hands of the Nazis, observed that “the church is the church only when it exists for others”—that is, for outsiders. This is an identity that will be difficult to live if we imagine the churchless to be aliens and strangers to our values and priorities. If we perceive the gap between “us” and “them” as wide and essentially uncrossable, we are less likely to get close enough to offer ourselves in real relationships. And that is a significant problem: We hear again and again, both from the unchurched and from local churches that are deeply engaged with the unchurched in their communities, that loving, genuine relationships are the only remaining currency readily exchanged between the church and the churchless.

For the sake of the life-changing message of Jesus, and of the Great Commission to share that message entrusted to us, the Christian community has an obligation to understand the unchurched. It is our prayer that *Churchless* will give you the knowledge and wisdom you and your faith community need to reach out with renewed joy to the unchurched in your

sphere of influence. We believe that now, more than ever, it is urgent for church leaders and all Christians to understand cultural dynamics, to understand the times (see 1 Chronicles 12:32), in order to respond as God's people.

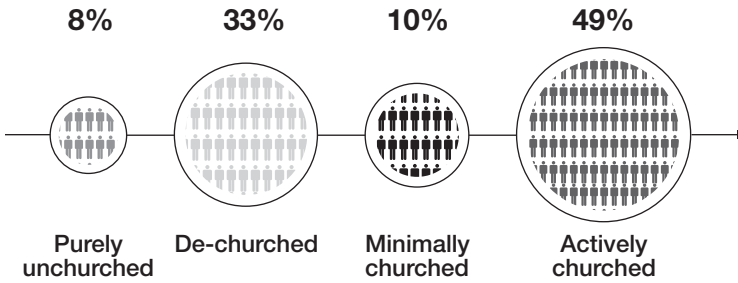
Who Are the Churchless?

Since its inception in 1984, Barna Group has collected data and provided insight about the intersection of faith and culture, including about American adults unconnected to traditional congregations or other faith communities. This book builds on our rich history by updating our tracking research. Through the data, you'll catch a crystal clear glimpse of our culture, today's congregations, and adults who are "outsiders." During the past three decades we have conducted tens of thousands of interviews with unchurched people to discover their hurts, needs, and hopes, with the aim of equipping the church to become more effective at connecting with them. While resources we have previously provided have explained many facets of life among the churchless,¹ the rapidly changing values and lifestyles of the nation's population demand a more current exploration of who unchurched people are today, and how Christians can more accurately understand them and build spiritually meaningful relationships with them.

This book is based on data drawn from a series of eighteen nationwide surveys we conducted with adults between 2008 and 2014.² Those studies encompassed interviews with 20,524 American adults, including 6,276 unchurched

adults. The insights and analysis we offer in the following pages are not based on the experience of a single church in a particular location, or on a series of anecdotes that support a preexisting hypothesis. The information here is borne from the perceptions, beliefs, behaviors, choices, experiences, expectations, and hopes of a nationally representative body of carefully qualified adults.

US Churched and Unchurched Adults



So who are the churchless? We define an unchurched person as someone who has not attended a Christian church service, other than a special event such as a wedding or funeral, at any time during the past six months. In the very simplest of terms, think of the *churched* as connected, even if only tangentially, to a church and the *unchurched* as disconnected from a church. The temptation is to think of these as discrete, dichotomous groups—you're either in or you're out. But the truth is that church involvement is more like a

continuum, from the most heavily engaged on one end to the most openly hostile on the other, with tens of millions falling somewhere in the middle. Our data show that American adults fall into four broad segments when it comes to their relationship to a church:

- The *actively churched* are those who attend church regularly, usually once a month or more often. Based on our 2014 tracking data, this group represents 49 percent of the adult population.
- The *minimally churched* are those who attend several times a year, but whose appearances in church buildings are infrequent and often unpredictable. The exception to the predictability factor is the group we affectionately label “CEOs,” a reference to their tendency to show up at Christmas and Easter Only. The minimally churched constitute about 8 percent of all adults.
- The *de-churched* are those who have been churched in the past but are currently on hiatus. Many of these people have a history of cyclical church attendance patterns, going through a phase when they are involved followed by a phase when they aren’t, and so forth. The de-churched are the fastest growing segment, presently one-third of the population.
- The *purely unchurched* are people who have never attended a Christian church service. Because the

United States is one of the most church-ed nations in the world, the purely unchurched are relatively rare in the US religious landscape—just 10 percent of the adult public. However, within the next decade or so, as Mosaics and the generation after them become adults in a culture increasingly hostile to Christian churches, it is likely this group will become the fastest growing of the four church-attendance segments.

Our research examines a broad range of life conditions: values, beliefs, lifestyle choices, religious behaviors, future hopes, experiences, and the like. Based on our data, *Churchless* compares the backgrounds, behaviors, and beliefs of the church-ed and the unchurched. Throughout the book, we combine the de-churched and the purely unchurched segments into the broader category of “unchurched” adults. When significant differences between these subgroups are noteworthy, such distinctions will be highlighted.

How Can Data Help?

To grasp the urgency facing churches in America, consider a few facts about church attendance and the unchurched population:

- The proportion of unchurched adults has risen (and continues to rise) since the Atheist Renaissance in America took hold at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The energetic anti-God evangelism of Sam

Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and others has emboldened millions of Americans, especially those under forty, to question the existence of God, the role of faith, the value of churches, and the genesis of moral standards. In the early 1990s, about three out of ten adults were churchless. In the next decade, the figure inched up to one-third of the population. During the current decade, the figure has jumped to 43 percent of all US adults.

- There is not a single demographic for which church attendance is on the increase. While a few segments have demonstrated relative stability in church attendance levels over the past two decades, most people groups in the United States show declines in attendance. And because young adults have the highest levels of church avoidance, their children are less likely to attend churches, increasing the likelihood that they, too, will avoid churches in adulthood.
- The raw number of unchurched people in the United States is staggering. Most of what gets counted as “church growth” is actually transfer growth rather than conversion growth—that is, people transferring their allegiance from one church to another, not transitioning from non-Christian to Christ-follower. If churches hope to grow their attendance numbers by discipling new believers, they must improve their ability to attract those who are intentionally avoiding a connection with a church.

How can our data help slow or reverse these trends? After all, there is no secret sauce, magic bullet, perfect panacea, or failure-proof formula that will help every church in every environment successfully reach out to the unchurched. In other words, you will not find in these pages the eight steps guaranteed to convert people from antichurch antagonists to pro-church advocates. Outreach that is effective in one setting often flops elsewhere; what works for a fundamentalist Baptist church reaching Boomers and Elders in rural Arkansas will likely fall flat for a postmodern nondenominational congregation reaching out to twentysomethings in San Francisco.

Yet both of those ministries—and yours—can benefit from a better understanding of adults who intentionally avoid Christian churches. God has called you and your faith community to expand his Kingdom in a particular place with unique features and cultural quirks. Translate the research insights you find here into practical, culturally appropriate action. Begin by thinking critically with your church family about how the churchless in your neighborhood, town, or city compare to the representative sample from which this research is drawn. (If you're not sure, brainstorm ways to get to know some unchurched folks!) Start a conversation about how your church engages with the unchurched and de-churched in your community, and about what needs to change to help you be more effective. Then, with a renewed sense of mission and a more focused vision for outreach, get to work.

Barna Group's vision is *to provide people with credible*

knowledge and clear thinking, enabling them to navigate a complex and changing culture. It is our prayer that the information and analysis you find in this book will enable you not only to navigate a complex culture . . . but also to transform it.