

DETAILS



You Found Me

New Research on How Unchurched Nones, Millennials, and Irreligious Are Surprisingly Open to Christian Faith

June 18, 2019 | \$24, 256 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4154-7

Groundbreaking Studies on the Unchurched

Many bemoan the decline of the church. We hear a steady stream of reports about how droves of people, especially younger generations, are abandoning Christianity. But new research shows that unchurched Americans are surprisingly more receptive and open to the Christian faith than is commonly assumed.

Researcher and practitioner Rick Richardson unveils the findings of the Billy Graham Center Institute's groundbreaking studies on the unchurched. A study of two thousand unchurched people across the country reveals that the unchurched are still remarkably open to faith conversations and the church. Even unchurched "nones" and millennials are quite receptive if they are approached in particular ways.

In this book you will also find best practices from further research into the top ten percent of churches that most effectively reach the unchurched. People who were previously unchurched share what actually moved them to faith and Christian commitment. And the research shows that churches and organizations can be transformed to become places where conversion growth becomes the new normal.

If people tell you "the sky is falling," don't believe them. In today's troubled world, unchurched and unbelieving people are newly receptive to hearing good news. You can lead the change that will help your church reach people—who then reach others.

Richardson says, "I believe—and have seen—that if you change your church, you can reach people and change your community. After all, this is what we as people and congregations are meant for."

"Rick Richardson has helped us crack the cultural code to unlock the receptivity of millennials, nones, and irreligious people today. He's given us hope based on solid data and research that can truly help many people find their way back to God through our churches!"

—Dave Ferguson, lead pastor of Community Christian Church, author of *Hero Maker*

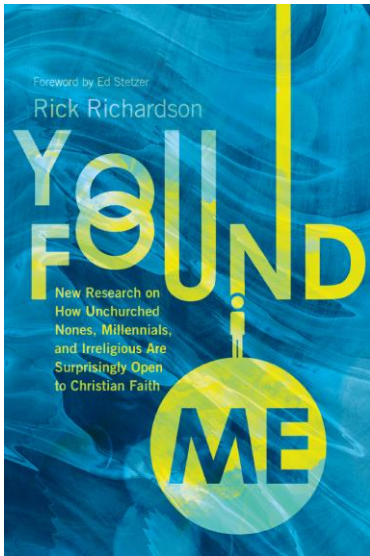


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"You Found Me is a breath of fresh air. Armed with research on the state of church outreach and the attitudes of the unchurched toward faith, Richardson charts a compelling vision for church outreach and evangelism in our new post-Christian world."

From the foreword by **Ed Stetzer**

Chicken Little Syndrome and the Church

In the story of Chicken Little, an acorn falls on the head of a young chicken, causing him to panic, feeling that the sky itself is falling. Armed with this myth, Chicken Little sets off to systematically convince his friends that the world is ending. Each friend agrees to join the mission until eventually they meet Foxy Loxy. The fox promises Chicken Little and his friends that they can be safe in his den. Foolishly, the group enters the fox's den, never to be seen again. The fable ends with the point that all went wrong because of the foolish fright of Chicken Little.

Today few people have never heard of the story of Chicken Little or its moral about unjustified fear. In fact, *Merriam-Webster* defines Chicken Little as "one who warns of or predicts calamity, especially without justification" and tracks its first recorded usage to 1895. It has become so ingrained in our lives that the phrase "the sky is falling" has become a common way to describe people who imagine or exaggerate an impending catastrophe. Scholars describe this form of fear mongering as *Chicken Little Syndrome*, in which near-apocalyptic warnings drive people to either crippling fear or disastrous action. One scholar provides a helpful definition as "a sense of despair or passivity which blocks the audience from actions." The term began appearing in the 1950s.

In other words, disproportionate alarm can cause panic, misguided actions, passivity, withdrawal, a sense of powerlessness, and even disaster. When we misread reality, we can apply inappropriate solutions to problems we have inflated, or we can withdraw from the field of action entirely. Great leadership starts with a good description of the reality we are trying to address and change, and alarmist and misleading statistics are therefore not good leadership.

When it comes to researching and reporting on the present state of faith in America and the attitude of most Americans toward the church, too many have fallen victim to Chicken Little Syndrome. We are too quick to listen to the voices proclaiming, "The sky is falling!" by overstating the decline and even near-term disappearance of the church in America. Just like Chicken Little's friends, we hear the alarm and apocalyptic language, buoyed by suspect statistics, and in our fear we buy their books and attend their conferences. In doing so, we inadvertently reinforce alarm instead of action, passivity instead of proclamation, and defeatism instead of hope.

In light of these dire warnings, many Christians have stopped sharing our faith, inviting people to church, and expecting God to convert many and renew the church in our time. A recent Barna study reports that three-fourths of self-identified Christians have fewer than ten spiritual conversations a year. That's less than one spiritual conversation per month! On top of that—or perhaps at the heart of it—48 percent of Christians say that most non-Christians have no interest in hearing about Jesus. No wonder there aren't more Christians sharing their faith. It's difficult to offer good news to people if we're already convinced that they won't think it's good and that we will offend people and push them even further away if we are bold and direct about our faith.

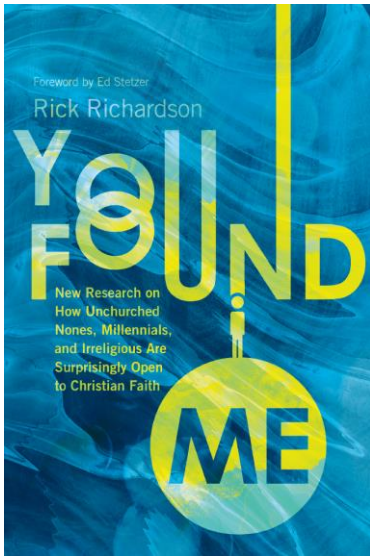


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The sad truth is that the American church has fostered Chicken Little Syndrome for several decades, and we are now confronting the negative consequences. Some have withdrawn into separate enclaves, suspicious of outsiders. Our narrative has led to many people in churches becoming pessimistic about their witness and their future, and has given direction and legitimacy to their passivity. If this is going to change, we need to root out the myths that Christians tell ourselves about the state of the church, replacing them with truth that gets us on mission for the gospel in our communities.

So what are the false statistics that have created myths in the church? What half-truths and alarming statistics do we regularly cite that reinforce a misleading cultural narrative about faith and the church in America?

Warning: difficult content ahead. Many of the statistics I list you may have had shared with you or—gasp!—you may have passed on. This is not an attempt to point the finger but rather to right the ship. All of us have contributed to the problem at one time or another. In the spirit of charity and knowing that our united goal is the advancement of Christ's kingdom, we need to rightly engage the serious issues we face in the church, and this begins with truth.

In the rest of this chapter, I will explore four central myths about the American church and the misleading statistics that continue to breathe life into them.

- *Myth 1: America is becoming non- or anti-Christian, "a nation of nones," those who have no allegiance to any particular religion or religious body.*
- *Myth 2: Millennials are leaving the church at an alarmingly high rate and rarely, if ever, returning. Church has become irrelevant to the emerging generation.*
- *Myth 3: The golden age of the American Protestant Church was the 1950s, when it was culturally dominant, enjoying support and legitimacy from political, economic, and educational leaders and systems. Since then, the church has been in free fall to the point of near extinction today.*
- *Myth 4: Trust in the church is at an all-time low, as fewer Americans have a history of church involvement, and those who do often define their experience as negative. The result is a public inoculated against the church, Jesus, and faith.*

Together these four myths create a narrative of church failure and decline. Yet when we peel back the layers we discover that they are misleading or flat-out wrong. As we survey each myth, we will consider not only how it dominates common views of the church but how putting the truth into perspective can empower Christians to once again serve in their churches and engage society with boldness.

—Adapted from the introduction



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Rick Richardson is director of the Billy Graham Center Institute and its Church Evangelism Initiative, and professor of evangelism and leadership at Wheaton College Graduate School. He previously served as evangelism and discipleship pastor at Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois, and was the evangelism champion who helped launch Willow Creek Community Church's first multisite campus. His books include *Reimagining Evangelism* and *Evangelism Outside the Box*.

Surprising Truths About Unchurched People in the United States

How has the current cultural climate lead to the writing of *You Found Me*?

Rick Richardson: Our current narrative of how resistant and distrustful people in the US are to Christian faith is shutting down our witness and paralyzing our churches. The narrative is one sided and, in many cases, misguided. Many churches are effectively reaching people and growing through conversion. I want to empower greater faith and boldness for witness based on data, a truer narrative of the receptivity of people in our culture, and what churches that are reaching people are doing to be effective.

How do you hope *You Found Me* changes the way we reach unchurched people today?

Rick: Unchurched people in the US today are far more receptive to Christian faith and to congregations than we realize, and the people and churches that are capitalizing on that receptivity are growing through reaching them. However, many churches and Christians are shutting down conversations and receptivity unnecessarily and growing in pessimism toward the reachability of people in our culture.

This book has an empowering message that reframes the many negative messages we are getting about the hostility of people in our culture toward the church.

What key points do you hope to convey to the church today?

Rick:

- Unchurched people today are very receptive to spiritual conversation, invitations to a congregation by friends and family members, and to the influence and witness of loving friends and family members.
- If we could learn to capitalize on receptivity, rather than shutting it down, we could have many more meaningful spiritual conversations and reach many more unchurched people.
- Churches that are growing through reaching the unchurched and irreligious know how to activate their people into effective relational and conversational witness.
- Churches that are reaching people have also developed a culture of winsome biblical invitation and hospitality where people are blessed, brought, and become the beloved.
- Such churches become conversion communities where changed lives multiply; where we find receptive unchurched people including millennials, nones, and irreligious; and where those people find God in our congregation.



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