

## Book Review

### *You Found Me*

By Rick Richardson

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019

279 pages

USD \$24.99

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*You Found Me* by Rick Richardson represents a genre of books meant to bring a positive, hopeful message of balance to the wide range of somewhat discouraging monographs regarding the state of the church and of Christianity that are on the market today. Based on extensive research, the author contends that there is good reason to be optimistic regarding the opportunity to reach the unchurched. The hopeful title is followed by a lengthy subtitle that summarizes the contents of the book: “New Research on How Unchurched Nones, Millennials, and Irreligious are Surprisingly Open to Christian Faith.” The author’s stated goal is to provide “a strong biblical foundation and best practices from congregations that are effectively reaching people and having an impact in their communities” (18).

Richardson is the director of the Billy Graham Center Institute and a professor at Wheaton College. He has extensive experience as a researcher, and this book draws on a number of studies done in partnership with Lifeway Research. Two thousand unchurched people were surveyed to find out their views on American churches and their responsiveness to various forms of Christian outreach. In addition, 3,000 congregations across the country were surveyed to discover their rate of conversion growth. The most effective of these churches, defined as “top-ten-percent churches” (16) were subject to

more in-depth research, including interviews of their pastors and formerly unchurched members. Finally, the results of a “small church evangelism” study representing 1,500 churches with under 250 attenders were included in the research findings (16).

*You Found Me* is divided into three sections. In part one, “Recovering a Missional Imagination”, popular myths regarding the current state of the church and the receptivity of unchurched individuals are examined. The four major myths are: 1) America is becoming non- or anti-Christian; 2) Millennials are leaving the church at an alarmingly high rate; 3) the church in America will disappear in a generation; and 4) trust in the church is at an all-time low (34). What the data actually shows is that the overall percentage of self-identified Christians is declining by one percent annually while those specifically self-identifying as evangelicals have added 2.4 million to their ranks since 2007 (41). Among Millennials that leave the church, many still identify as Christian and expect that they will return to the church in future. Approximately one third of those who have left the church identify the issue of “lost trust,” but a majority cite other reasons including a change in circumstances and loss of relevance (46).

Having offered some helpful corrections to these prevalent myths, the author then presents positive news that half of the unchurched people surveyed in his research indicated that they would be open to an invitation to attend a church service or church-related activity. Furthermore, fully one third of those who do not currently attend church expect that they will attend church in the future. This increases to fully 40 percent for unchurched Millennials (71). In light of these statistics, the author contends that “the greatest challenge to congregations is not the shifting or secularizing culture but a discouraged, pessimistic, secularizing, or silent church” (85). As churches embrace a new, positive narrative regarding the receptivity of the unreached, they begin to rekindle a missional imagination. To further this change the author proposes the encouragement of “conversion communities.” They are defined as churches that are growing by at least five percent per year, have at least ten percent of their attendance made up of people who have committed to Christ in that year, and have outreach and witness integrated into every ministry of the church (109).

In part two of *You Found Me* the first major ingredient for a conversion community, missional leadership, is explained. Missional leaders are identified as those who lead by example, prioritizing the cultivation of friendships with the unchurched and making the most of their unique opportunities as pastors at weddings, funerals and other public and private events (123). They also promote the multiplication of missional leaders by celebrating outreach, telling stories of mission, and keeping their direct disciples accountable for their own missional activities. This section is short, offering only two chapters; but it can be easily supplemented by many other books that focus solely on the development of missional leaders.

In part three the second ingredient of a conversion community -- the missional congregation -- is explored. Almost 100 pages of the book are given to the practical development of such churches with a focus on the importance of service, invitation and hospitality. The good news regarding the receptivity of the unchurched presented in part one is applied to the local church with the goal of creating a culture of invitation. Richardson asserts that, "The key to reaching lost people is through the relational networks they have with people they trust," and he acknowledges the foundational contribution of Donald McGavran, noting that, "Relationship are the bridges of God" (193). Various types of invitations are suggested including invitations to spiritual conversation, worship services, small groups, service opportunities and ultimately, commitment to Christ (204).

The chief strength of this book is its foundation of extensive research. Based on information from some 4,500 churches surveyed for various research projects, it represents an unusually comprehensive survey. The findings are presented in clear graphs and pie charts, the conclusions are persuasive, and the replacement of doomsday myths with cautiously optimistic realism is a much-needed corrective in the evangelical world. It is unfortunate that crisis headlines sell, but facts and truth are the best antidote and this book provides an ample supply.

Perhaps the most striking insight from the data presented is the relative openness of unchurched people to an invitation to attend church or a church-related activity. This good news is paired with the invitational culture that the author observes in the top-ten-percent churches that he interviews. Of the ten most predictive factors for so-called conversion communities the top factor was a culture of invitation and three of the remaining nine factors were related to the practice of extending regular, personal invitations to the unchurched (110). Because the prevalent myths regarding receptivity have suggested that people are no longer open to invitations to church, this counter-narrative has the potential to reinvigorate Christians, enabling them to see their circle of influence as being relatively receptive to Christianity and to the local church.

Another strength of this book is its collection of illustrative stories showing how conversion communities effectively reach out to the unchurched, largely through individual relationships, one-on-one spiritual conversations, and multiple individual invitations. The stories show how simply relational evangelism works in real life, and how a personal invitation offered at the right time in a person's life can lead to miraculous life-change in Christ. Refreshingly, most of the stories conclude with a credible, evangelical conversion story with the gospel of Jesus Christ being clearly explained, understood and received. It is also remarkable to note that in at least three of the outreach stories shared, children were inviting their parents to church!

Finally, the highlighting of building a hospitable culture makes this book a valuable resource. It points out that congregations make a mistake by,

“expecting unchurched visitors to feel welcome through the same experience that draws church insiders to their services and ministries” (213). The author points out how churchy language and unexplained biblical references that seem perfectly normal to Christians can appear bewildering to the unchurched. He believes that taking the time to think through all that we do publicly in worship services can go a long way to helping guests feel more welcome at our churches.

One of the problems with Richardson’s premise is the qualifying requirements for his conversion communities. While research often requires some arbitrary guidelines, this one seems an extraordinarily high bar to clear, especially his expectation that at least ten percent of the church’s attendance be made up of new converts from the prior calendar year. There are very few churches in America that would qualify, especially post-Covid.

There are also some potential challenges embedded in the culture of the unchurched world and in the local church that may make some of the author’s strategies difficult to implement. For example, community engagement is recommended as a key activity for missional congregations but outside of local schools and a very select number of remaining community institutions, the increasing individualism and disconnectedness of our culture may make community engagement difficult. Books like Putman’s (2001) *Bowling Alone* have documented this decline and the local church may find itself pushing uphill in an effort to reverse the decline.

A final critique is that, given the apparent declining priority of a culture of corporate prayer in the local church today, the author’s discussion of prayer for the lost may reflect this trend more than challenge it. In the one-page discussion of the role of prayer in missional congregations, it appears that prayer is viewed as a tool to increase missional awareness rather than as an actual means of outreach. While it is true that praying for opportunities to engage the unchurched will typically increase our awareness of Spirit-produced opportunities, this should be seen only as a helpful byproduct of prayer rather than its main purpose.

Aside from these mild concerns, *You Found Me* is an excellent contribution to the study of church growth today. This book is an excellent resource for pastors, church staff and church leadership teams. Helpful discussion questions are offered at the end of each chapter and practical application steps make this a resource that local churches can put to use immediately. The author has done a great service to the church, giving fact-based reasons for evangelistic hope and genuine optimism in an increasingly secular culture.

## Reference

Putnam, R. (2001). *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American Community*. New York: Touchtone.