

RISE OF THE “NONES”

Dave Page

Abstract

The number of Americans (“nones”) who do not identify with any religion continues to grow at a rapid pace with Millennials leading the way. Is this growing trend a cause for concern? This article argues that it is cause for great concern and that churches cannot keep doing what they’ve always done if they expect to reach this unique cultural group. Nones are spiritual but not religious and are very different than seekers. In order to reach nones for Christ, churches must 1) Become mission minded; 2) Focus on conversion growth; 3) Educate themselves on this new group 4) Utilize the front door of the church; 5) Build loving relationships; and 6) Learn from churches that are successfully reaching nones – namely The Church of Eleven22, Mosaic Church and Mecklenburg Community Church.

INTRODUCTION

The “nones” are a specific cultural group and are currently the fastest growing group among religions in America. Nones are unchurched people who say they do not identify with any religion. They classify their affiliation as atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular. Demographers gave them this name because when asked to identify their religion, their answer is, “None.”¹ My goal is to analyze the nones and suggest ways to reach them for Christ.

¹ Heidi Glen, “Losing Our Religion: The Growth Of The ‘Nones.’” NPR, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/01/14/169164840/losing-our-religion-the-growth-of-the-nones>, January 13, 2013.

Every cultural group has subgroups, and the nones are no exception. The focus of this paper will be on the nones in America, especially millennial nones. Millennials, those born between 1980–2000, are the largest generation in history, about eighty-two million strong in the United States, compared with seventy-seven million baby boomers.

These days, one-fifth of Americans do not identify with any religion. Millennials comprise the largest percentage of the nones. In fact, one-third of Americans under age thirty say they have no religious affiliation at all. This is mostly due to generational replacement, as this younger generation assumes the place of an older one, namely the baby boomers, who are now approaching sixty and who are decidedly more religious than Millennials.

The median church size in America is now at 108, down from 130. Congregations with an average worship attendance of 100 or fewer recently moved from 42 percent to 49 percent, and more than a quarter of all churches have 50 or fewer people in attendance. The bottom line is that churches are shrinking, and the nones are rising.² The nones are trending on the American religious landscape.

It's Personal

I identify with the nones for three reasons. Firstly, I identify with them because I once was a none, not a nun—that would be strange wouldn't it? I was raised in a Christian home, yet rejected my parents' religion and denominational affiliation. If you asked my parents to state their religion, they would have said Southern Baptist. I never identified with Southern Baptists. They were from the South, and I lived in California. To me, Southern Baptists were the people who boycotted Disneyland, held legalistic views regarding Scripture, were judgmental, had tendencies toward racism, preached loud sermons, and looked like they had just swallowed prune juice, in other words, not joyful. I came to faith in Christ in college but even then attended a college Bible study instead of church, identifying with Jesus but skeptical of organized religion.

Secondly, I identify with them because they are the group of people I started churches in order to reach. Some refer to them as the *least*, the *last*, and the *lost*. The three churches I started all focused on conversion growth. I now coach church planters and pastors who focus on reaching unchurched people, especially nones.

Thirdly, I recently started a wedding ministry/business that targets nones. Eighty percent of the weddings I do are for unchurched couples; the majority of those are nones. They do not identify with any particular denomination, are not a part of any organized religion, and do not attend any particular church.

² James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 73.

THE GROWTH OF THE NONES

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released a recent study titled, “Nones on the Rise.” It claims that 19.3 percent of Americans (1 in 5 or 46 million people) claim no religious identity, a trend that has for years been on the rise.³

The nones are now the nation’s second largest category only to Catholics. As people continue to leave the Catholic church and as the nones continue to rise, they should soon surpass Catholics to become the number one religious group in America. Nones currently outnumber the top Protestant denomination (Southern Baptists). This shift is a significant cultural, religious, and even political change.

For example, consider former Southern Baptist Chris Dees, 26, in this culture shift. He grew up Baptist in the most religious state in the United States—Mississippi. By the time he went off to college for mechanical engineering, he shared, “I just couldn’t make sense of it any more.” Now, he is a leader of the Secular Student Alliance chapter at Mississippi State and calls himself an atheist.⁴

Today, fueled by young adults like Dees, the Nones have leapt from 15.3 percent of U.S. adults since Pew’s first study in 2008 to 19.3 percent in their 2012 study. “One in three (32 percent) are under age 30 and unlikely to age into claiming a religion,” says Pew Forum senior researcher Greg Smith.⁵ The Pew study points out that today’s Millennials are more unaffiliated than any young generation ever had been when they were younger.⁶

According to *USA Today* writer Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Protestant is no longer America’s top religious umbrella brand. It has been rained out by the soaring number of *Nones*— people who claim no faith affiliation.”⁷ In the 1960s, two in three Americans called themselves Protestant. Now the Protestants (both evangelical and mainline) have slid below the statistical waters, down to 48 percent.

Where did the Protestants go? Nowhere, really. It is not a shift from Protestant Christianity to another religious brand but rather an abandonment of a defined religion altogether. Those who previously were unchurched, or who attended infrequently, are now dropping religious attachments com-

³ Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project, “Nones’ on the Rise.” <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise>, October 9, 2012.

⁴ Cathy Lynn Grossman, “As Protestants Decline, Those with No Religion Gain.” *USA Today*, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/10/08/nones-protestant-religion-pew/1618445/>, October 9, 2012.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project.

⁷ Grossman.

pletely. Given the choice to label themselves *nothing* instead of *something*, they prefer to be called *nothing*.

“Young people today are not only more religiously unaffiliated than their elders, they are also more religiously unaffiliated than previous generations of young people ever have been as far back as we can tell,” says Greg Smith.⁸ This really is a new phenomenon.

IS THIS TREND A CAUSE FOR CONCERN?

Some, such as church growth consultant Charles Arn, say that this is nothing about which to be overly alarmed.⁹ He dismisses it as little more than a rejection of institutional affiliation, and that nearly every membership-based organization is losing numbers. Therefore, it is not a spiritual issue at all. I disagree. I view the rise of the nones as a seismic shift in our religious landscape, and if the trend continues, America is headed to become like Europe in terms of secularization and its lack of religion.

Ed Stetzer summarizes the overall impact of the rise of the nones when he says, “It is still a vast overstatement to see this as a collapse of the Christian faith in North America. The reality is that evangelicals have been relatively steady as a percent of the population over the last few years, however there is still great cause for concern here and for action.”¹⁰

Others, such as Clyde Wilcox, professor at Georgetown University, say, “This is a big story.” David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, states, “This is a major trend in American religion.”¹¹ Albert Mohler, president of Southern Theological Seminary, holds, “Today, there’s no shame in saying you’re an unbeliever, no cultural pressure to claim a religious affiliation, no matter how remote or loose. This is a wake-up call. We have an incredible challenge ahead for committed Christians.”¹² Dan Gilgoff, Religion Editor at CNN, says, “The explosion of people with no religion will be a huge story in this century, and the news media have only begun to explore its many implications.”¹³

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Charles Arn as quoted by Ruth Moon in the April 8, 2013 *Christianity Today* online article, “Is Concern Over the Rise of the ‘Nones’ Overblown?,” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/april/is-concern-over-rise-of-nones-overblown.html?saveto=newfolder&start=1>

¹⁰ Ed Stetzer, “The Rise of the Nones: Some Reflections on the New Pew Forum Data,” *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/october/rise-of-nones-some-reflections-on-new-pew-forum-data.html>, October 9, 2012.

¹¹ White, 18.

¹² Grossman.

¹³ Ibid.

MEET THE NONES

The first task of any good missionary is to go to school to learn about whom they are trying to reach. Much like Rick Warren did in the 1990s by identifying “Saddleback Sam,” the likely Mr. South Orange County, pastors and church leaders today need to create a target profile of the nones in their neighborhood.

Below is a portrait drawn from the Pew Forum’s new poll and the Religion News Service. Consider it your Cliffs Notes for understanding the nones.

A Snapshot of a None¹⁴

1. **He’s a he.** Though fewer than half of Americans are male, 56 percent of nones are. The gender divide among nones who are atheists or agnostics is even more pronounced; 64 percent of this group is male.
2. **He’s young.** The older the American, the more likely he or she is to be affiliated with a religion. One-third of Americans under age 30 say they have no religious affiliation, compared to 9 percent of those 65 and older. This is mostly due to “generational replacement” as a younger generation (Millennials) assumes the place of an older one that is decidedly more religious.
3. **He’s white.** Of all nones, 71 percent are white, 11 percent are Hispanic, 9 percent are black, and 4 percent are Asian. If the pool is narrowed to just agnostics and atheists, the group is even whiter at 82 percent.
4. **He’s not necessarily an atheist.** The largest group of nones (68 percent) says they believe in God or a universal spirit. Within that group, 30 percent of them are certain God exists. Another 27 percent of nones say there is no God.
5. **He’s not very religious.** This may sound obvious, but it makes the distinction between a person who has no religious affiliation and one who is not religious. Some nones do consider themselves religious; they are just outside the confines of a religious organization. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of nones seldom or never attend religious services.
6. **He’s a Democrat.** Nones are among the most reliably Democratic of voters. In 2008, three-quarters of them voted for Barack Obama and 23 percent for John McCain, making them as strongly Democratic as white evangelicals were Republican.
7. **He thinks abortion and same-gender marriage should be legal.** Big gaps separate nones and Americans in general on these issues. While 53 percent of the public says abortion should be legal in all or most circum-

¹⁴ White, 21–23.

stances, 72 percent of the unaffiliated do. Moreover, while 48 percent of the general public favors same-sex marriage, 73 percent of nones do.

8. **He's liberal or moderate** and not just on the issues above. More than three-quarters of the unaffiliated describe themselves generally liberal or moderate, compared to the one in five of them who call themselves conservative.
9. **He's not necessarily hostile toward religious institutions. He just doesn't want to belong to one.** More than half of the nones (52 percent) say religious institutions protect and strengthen morality, though an even greater proportion (70 percent) believes these institutions are too concerned with money and power.
10. **He's more likely a Westerner.** Nones are most concentrated in the West and least concentrated in the South. While 23 percent of Americans live in the West, 30 percent of nones do.

NONES ARE SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

It is important to grasp that the average none is not an atheist. Very few atheists live in the United States. Most nones believe in God; many pray and consider themselves spiritual but not religious. It is not so much they have rejected God as they have rejected religion.

Actress Jessica Alba is an example of someone who considers herself spiritual but not religious. Alba was raised Catholic but left the church in her twenties. She had objections to the church's condemnation of premarital sex and homosexuality and what she saw as a lack of strong female role models in the Bible, explaining, "I thought it was a nice guide, but it certainly wasn't how I was going to live my life." Alba stated that she lost her faith in the church but that she still holds her belief in God despite leaving the church.¹⁵

NONES ARE DIFFERENT THAN SEEKERS

The seeker movement started in the late seventies and continued until the late nineties. The term *seeker* referred to an unchurched person who was turned off to church but open to God, spirituality, and religion. America saw large numbers of baby boomers come back to God and to church. These people were seeking, open to exploring the Christian faith for their life. They had rejected the religion of their upbringing (often Catholicism) but not religion itself.

¹⁵ Jessica Alba's attitude toward and departure from the church is well documented. See: Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jessica_Alba or <http://www.contactmusic.com/jessica-alba/news/alba-turns-her-back-on-christian-pals-who-made-her-feel-ashamed> or <http://www.latina.com/entertainment/religion-backgrounds-latino-celebrities#6> for examples.

Nones, on the other hand, have no interest in religion. According to Life-Way Research study, 46 percent said they never wonder whether they will go to heaven. When it comes to matters of God, religion, or church, millions simply shrug their shoulders and say, “So what?”¹⁶

Eighty-eight percent of nones say they are not looking for a religion that would be right for them. Overwhelmingly, they think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules, and too involved in politics.¹⁷

How can we talk about the Jesus message to a world of people who are not currently listening? This is the million-dollar question for those of us who desire to reach nones. These days, it certainly is much harder to get nones to come to church than it was to get seekers to come to church.

WHY ARE THE NONES ON THE RISE?

Why are so many walking away from church and refusing to give religion a chance? According to Harvard professor Robert Putnam, “The single most important reason for the rise of the nones is that combination of the younger people moving to the left on social issues and the most visible religious leaders moving to the right on that same issue.”¹⁸

I agree with Putnam but also think there are two other dynamics at work. The first is the reality of the Millennials being the first generation to live in a truly post-Christian context. The currents of secularization, privatization, and pluralization have taken their toll. The second is the perception (some say perception trumps reality) that Christians and churches are filled with hateful intolerance and aggression, consumed with materialism and greed, and are overly entangled in politics.

HOW TO REACH THE NONES

Become mission minded

Consider the following two questions any organization (including churches) must ask itself, courtesy of management expert Peter Drucker: 1) What is our mission? 2.) Who is our customer? Jesus clearly gave us our marching orders concerning our mission with the *Great Commission*. Evangelism must take center stage. First make disciples and then teach them to obey

¹⁶ Cathy Lynn Grossman, “For Many, ‘Losing My Religion’ Isn’t Just a Song: It’s Life,” *USA Today*, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/story/2011-12-25/religion-god-atheism-so-what/52195274/1>, December 25, 2011.

¹⁷ Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project.

¹⁸ Grossman, “As Protestants Decline.”

Jesus. Who, then, is our primary customer? If our mission is to seek and to save the lost, then it makes sense that our customer is the lost. This is where most churches do not get it. They focus on reaching and serving the already convinced.

Focus on Conversion Growth vs. Transfer Growth

When it comes to church growth, the key is conversion growth. Too many churches consider transfer growth a kingdom win. When a church views growth like that, then it sees the church down the street as its competition. To become a church that focuses on conversion growth involves developing a servant attitude. A culture of spiritual narcissism seems to be pervading many churches today. People talk about going where they are “fed,” can be “ministered to,” and can get something “out” of the worship experience. This consumer mindset will inevitably resist doing what it takes to reach out to the nones.

In addition, too many churches operate as if they are speaking to the God-fearing Jews of Jerusalem (Acts 2) instead of to the agnostics on Mars Hill (Acts 17). Paul started his message by addressing the false beliefs of those gathered and then used those beliefs as a way of presenting the gospel message to them. We need to do the same with the nones. James Emery White says, “Whenever I speak, I have a keen awareness that we live in a post-Christian country. My teaching assumes no background knowledge, no known Christian ‘code’ words, and even less the assumption that they will agree with what I have to say. I view almost every talk as contending for the faith, just like Paul did at Mars Hill.”¹⁹ That is one reason I love speaking at Seven San Diego Church (Jeremy McGarity), because I know on any given Sunday, many unchurched people, including nones, will be in the crowd.

Seek to Understand the Nones

Educate yourself and your congregation on the culture of the nones. Develop a profile of the nones in your community (see “Portrait of a None” above). James Emery White prepared a series on the “spiritual, but not religious” mindset of the day. He titled the message, “The Spirituality Grid,” and it was the first installment from a series titled, “Ultimate Life Coaching.”²⁰ When was the last time you preached a sermon on reaching the fastest growing religious group in the country? It is time.

¹⁹ Jonathan Merritt, “Pastor: Christians Should Drop the ‘Us vs. Them’ Mentality.” Religion News Service. <http://jonathanmerritt.religionnews.com/2014/05/12/james-emery-white-captivate-unchurched/#sthash.DGjf0QcZ.dpuf> The%20approach%20of%20Mark%20Driscoll, May 12, 2014.

²⁰ Ibid.

I recently read, “What We Talk About When We Talk About God” by Rob Bell. Although I do not agree with much of Bell’s theology, he has a knack for talking about spiritual issues that connect with Millennials, including nones. In the book, Bell explains why both culture and the church resist talking about God and shows how we can reconnect with God. It is worth reading to get a better perspective on where the nones are coming from.

What are some of the felt needs of nones, even though they are not really looking for religion? First, nones want authentic community. Second, nones want to be part of a “cause” or “mission” that is larger than they are and helps them make a difference with their life. Third, nones want to believe in God but need help, interestingly enough, perhaps more with God’s character than his existence. They are asking, “Is God really good?” Fourth, when it comes to following Christ, nones want to know how it will intersect the deepest needs of their life. Finally, though nones are not often in touch with it on the surface, they crave the grace, forgiveness, and restoration of a relationship with God. This means the twin dynamics of truth and grace. People make the mistake of believing that in our culture’s rejection of truth, it has lost its hunger for it. In reality, truth and grace together, not separate, remain their deepest longing.²¹

Build relationships

Jesus was deeply relational, and it seems he liked building relationships with people outside the “church” more than he liked hanging around people inside the “church.” I am amazed at how comfortable non-religious people felt around Jesus. Encourage the Christians in your church to get involved in their kids’ schools, play sports in a community league, and get to know their neighbors. Salt only realizes its purpose if it gets out of the box and into the food it needs to season. You cannot influence people you do not know.

Many pastors and church members do not have many non-Christian friends. Some even view non-Christians as the enemy. They seemingly perceive the world to be in two camps, which creates an “us against them” mentality that does not lead to effective outreach. As a result, Christians fall back into their holy huddles and give into condemnatory attitudes.

Reaching out to the nones through new expressions of church such as missional communities and house churches may be helpful in building relationships with people that other churches are not reaching. However, I have not seen this model used in a significant way here in the United States.

Utilize the Side Door of the Church (Concentrate on Receptive People)

You may never have imagined yet other entries into your church. Outreach for most churches amounts to inviting friends to come to church and being

²¹ Ibid.

met by a smiling face and extended hand at the sanctuary's front door. The problem is most nones are not interested in coming in through the front door, so why not utilize the side door?

If you are willing to seek out the non-traditional doorways, God will reveal to you the most remarkable openings by way of the gifts he has given each person in your congregation. Outreach-oriented congregations are good at empowering their people to pursue their unique strengths. When a church discovers the passions of its individual insiders, it can creatively and effectively draw the outsiders into its fellowship and into Jesus.

I unintentionally started a wedding business in Los Angeles three years ago when a couple from my first church plant asked me to marry them. The wedding was filled with nones, thirty nones in the wedding party alone, including the bride and groom and the bridesmaids and groomsmen.

I discovered there was a niche for helping unchurched couples prepare for their wedding and performing their wedding ceremony. Too many churches have strict guidelines for marrying couples that are not part of their church, often charging more money to marry non-members than members. My premise was simple. Provide extraordinary service for unchurched couples without condemning them or judging them. Most of the couples that seek my services are living together when they come to me. My goal is to get them married and redeem their relationship. They value my friendly approach, theological training, and wedding experience. It is a business with a purpose. My purpose is to not only provide an excellent wedding service and make an honest wage, but to also influence each couple for Christ. I have to say I have had more meaningful spiritual conversations with unchurched couples in the last three years than I ever did as a full-time pastor. Approximately 80 percent of the couples I marry are unchurched and about 50 percent of those are nones. My website (WeddingPastorDave.com) reads, "Dave Page is Los Angeles Wedding Officiant who performs exceptional weddings for couples who are spiritual but not religious."

At some point, I always ask them, "Where are you at on your spiritual journey?" I believe everyone is on a spiritual journey, whether people recognize it or not. This question has led to some fascinating discussions. As a result, we have seen a number of people begin attending church and some come to a saving faith in Christ. I now have five other pastors, all church planters, who I have trained to do this ministry in their area.

A key church growth principle concerning outreach is focusing on receptive people. Jesus talked about taking the message to people who would listen (Matthew 10:4). Who are the most receptive people in your community? Rick Warren says it is people in *transition* and people in *tension*.²²

²² Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church*.

Transition includes a new job, a new home, a new baby, a new graduation, or a new marriage. I believe this is why my wedding business has been so successful and fruitful. *Tension* includes physical tension, emotional tension, financial tension, or relational tension. People experiencing tension are searching for answers, for hope, and for truth. I utilize weddings and funerals because they include people who are both in transition and in tension. I have found that weddings are a lot more fun! So, consider the passions and talents that God has given you, and think of a way to use them to reach receptive people.

Learn from Churches That Are Reaching Nones

Many of us can speculate on what works and does not work in reaching nones. My philosophy, however, has always been to find someone who is effective at what you want to do and learn from them. Consider the following three very different church models that are reaching nones:

The Church of Eleven 22—Be Authentic

When Joby Martin started The Church of Eleven 22 in Jacksonville, Florida, he aimed for authenticity, not a target audience. He believes that if you are real with people and it works, then you do not ever have to manufacture anything. Joby's philosophy is simple—build a church that you would want to go to. For Joby, this includes intense worship (singing) and “real” Bible talks (sermons) centered on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The church continues to add space to accommodate the new people God sends. As a result, they have seen five thousand people begin attending their services in the last eighteen months; a large number of these people are nones.

Below is an actual letter posted to Facebook, written to Pastor Joby by a woman named Crystal. It gives her experience of attending this church.

I'm twenty-eight, never been religious, actually an avid Atheist, would be a better way to describe me. I moved to Jacksonville with my boyfriend two months ago from Ocala and was trying to get a handle on my alcoholism with no luck. In fact, it got worse. I would pass by the church everyday and one Sunday morning, after already having a few, my boyfriend and I got in a fight, and I got that itch to go see what “this stuff” was all about. I left more motivated than I've been in years. I've had a bad taste in my mouth for church since I was a child and this church was completely different. Pastor Joby had “Real Talk” and didn't make me feel belittled that I didn't have any clue what this book was talking about (lol). I cried my eyes out that day and the next four days that I went. I found myself filled with something I've never felt before and wanting to be at every single service! I was so eager to learn and to hear the word and it had everything to do with how the Lord spoke through Pastor Joby.

I am so very thankful for how passionate he is about the gospel; it made me want to learn so much. I've been reading my Bible every day and I will be a week sober tomorrow! I know it doesn't seem like a long time, but to an alcoholic, IT'S AN ETERNITY!²³

Mosaic Church—Connect Spirituality with Art; Love and Entertain People

Erwin McManus is the founding pastor of Mosaic Church in Los Angeles. Mosaic is a Christian house of worship that focuses on ministering to the Millennial generation. These are men and women born in the 1980s and '90s and who came of age in the first years of the twenty-first century. It is a young crowd. The average age is about 26 years old. About 75 percent of them are single, so it is a hugely single community. The bulk of Mosaic is between the ages of 20–35.

McManus states, “You have a generation that is saying we are tapping out of religion in many ways. However, what they are not saying is that we are tapping out of a serious search for meaning in life. They are not tapping out of a deep spirituality. In fact, if anything there is an incredible and profound hunger in Millennials saying if there is something beyond this life I want to connect to it.”²⁴

Fabiana Braga, who grew up Catholic in Brazil, says, “I feel much more comfortable in this environment, both because of her fellow parishioners and the tone set by Pastor McManus. The pastor talks about freedom. There are many people who come here. The environment is amazing. You meet many interesting people. It is the first time I connected spirituality with art. I've never seen anything like that, and this is so cool.”²⁵

McManus acknowledges that Millennials have been shaped by materialism, pop culture, and technology like no other previous generation. He feels faith must increasingly compete with these distractions and thinks one of the best ways to do it is by making religion entertaining. The problem is that we have equated the sacred with the mundane and the spiritual with the monotonous. When people say, “Aren't you just entertaining them?” McManus points out that the dictionary's definition of the word “entertain” means to hold someone's attention. Mosaic wants a faith that is vibrant, alive, beautiful, and real.

²³ The Church of Eleven 22, Facebook Page, Quote from Crystal Owen, https://www.facebook.com/crystal.o.martin/activity/401444879977348?comment_id=517147725073729&offset=0&total_comments=8¬if_t=open_graph_action_comment_reply.

²⁴ “Millennials and Religion.” PBS: Religion & Ethics Newsweekly. Transcript from video. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2015/03/13/november-7-2014-millennials-religion/24527/>, March 13, 2015.

²⁵ Ibid.

Mecklenburg Community Church—Speak the Language of the Nones

This church was greatly influenced by Willow Creek's philosophy of reaching unchurched people (people far from God) and has kept that DNA intact over a couple of decades. Today, they reach nones at a high rate. They do it through using the front door of the church in an impressive way. Some will tell you that nones will not attend church, but apparently, they will in the greater Charlotte, North Carolina, area. In my opinion, they speak the language of the nones.

Below are six major areas James Emery White addresses among nones.²⁶

- He defends the character of God.
- He explains the Christian faith to those who have no memory of it.
- He shows how a life that follows Christ is actually marked by that following.
- He applies both old and new apologetics.
- He attempts to engage the most pressing barriers the nones have to all things religious.
- He works the “grace-truth” dynamic within the gospel itself.

When it comes to the nones, White has found,

- They want to believe in God; most nones are not atheists.
- They are genuinely interested in understanding the Christian faith.
- They want their lives to be different.
- They love hearing their questions engaged.
- They are genuinely disarmed to hear talks addressing the “elephant” in the room—such as homophobia or hypocrisy, thus earning their respect and listening ear.
- They hunger for grace and truth—they are much like the woman at the well—Jesus reached out to her with radical acceptance, and then delivered the truth in a loving manner and like the woman, nones cannot wait to run and tell everyone.²⁷

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that the religious story of our day is the rise of the nones, the religiously unaffiliated, in the United States. In an unprecedented way, they have become the fastest growing and second largest religious constituency in America, making up one out of every five adults. When you look simply at Millennials, they make up one out of every three. Should we be concerned? Absolutely. We have a new mission field right outside our doors.

²⁶ James Emery White, “Talking to the Nones.” Blog. <http://www.crosswalk.com/blogs/dr-james-emery-white/talking-to-the-nones.html>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

I do not think that Millennials are going to change and someday “get it.” I do not think they are going to end up looking like boomers. If churches are unwilling to meet Millennials where they are because they are anchored to tradition, then many of those congregations will cease to be congregations, and they will become museums.

We must take action. We cannot do church as usual and expect to reach this unique cultural group. Churches must adapt and change their methods and strategies to reach Millennials. We must become mission minded, focus on conversion growth, seek to understand them, build relationships with them, utilize the side door of the church, and learn from other churches that are successfully reaching them.

About the Author

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