

Reflections on  
The Unchurched Next Door:  
Understanding Faith Stages as Keys to Sharing Your Faith.  
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## **I. Summary**

Dr. Thom Rainer's book, The Unchurched Next Door, provides a team based research project that delves into the minds and hearts of the unchurched in our country, our towns and cities and even into our lives and the lives of our families. His purpose is clearly to "provide information to educate, inspire and motivate Christians to reach out to lost men and women with whom they have contact" (Rainer, 214). He assists the reader in this endeavor by encouraging Christians to "identify characteristics of each group on the Rainer scale so you can know how to respond" (Rainer, 175). This scale which begins with the U5 or "Highly resistant to the Gospel" and moves to the U1 "Highly receptive to the Gospel" (Rainer, 61) is provided with the intention of assisting the believer in understanding "unchurched people as much as possible so that you and I could be more effective witnesses to them" (Rainer, 247).

Throughout this book a reader hears directly from the unchurched and finds that "there is no such thing as a typical unchurched person" (Rainer, 179) and that the "unchurched are not always the profane, antagonistic people portrayed by stereotypes" (Rainer, 214). As pages are turned, the normative expectations that may deter Christians from sharing their faith are solidly dispelled and one simple message is repeated with clarity throughout; invite them to Church.

## **II. Insights**

There are three significant insights that stood out to this writer while reading this text. First, the sheer number of interviews that Dr. Rainer's team conducted with the unchurched was staggering. Unlike the more general characterizations of the unchurched found in Lee Strobel's well known work, Inside The Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary, this book seeks to fully invest itself in applying what Lee Strobel calls "one of the most evangelistic approaches I've learned" (Strobel, 53). This is to ask people to describe what they believe about God and then let

them talk. Dr. Rainer takes this a step further and also asks what the unchurched think about the church, Christians and even the clergy. As these interviews are presented, a reader will clearly see that “evangelism is most often a process, not a sudden event” (Strobel, 42). The glimpses provided into actual conversations with the unchurched can supply much in the way of practical guidance to anyone who intends to engage the unchurched in a variety of settings and this perspective alone sets this book apart from any other that this writer has read regarding evangelism.

A second noticeable aspect was the passionate pastor’s heart that Dr. Rainer displayed throughout this work. This can be seen plainly in statements such as “One of my primary passions in pastoral ministry has always been to communicate God’s vision for reaching the lost. Such is the heartbeat of this book” (Rainer, 37). It can also be seen in the many reassurances to pastors throughout this text.

“Conventional wisdom says that ministers are viewed with skepticism and disdain by the unchurched world...Our research found that conventional wisdom could not be farther from the truth. The unchurched as a whole have a very positive view of the clergy” (Rainer, 144).

Throughout each chapter, pastors are included in the discussion of evangelism as teachers, leaders and participants in the process of evangelism. With regard to church leaders past and present who have fallen publicly, this reassurance to the clergy is needed and a refreshing inclusion to anyone who hears the pastor’s call.

A third aspect of this work that was unmistakable for any reader to overlook was the clear call “for the unleashing of the laity to do the work of ministry...to encourage church members that the bulk of ministry is theirs and not the sole domain of hired hands” (Rainer, 230). Dr. George Hunter’s book, Radical Outreach, contains an entire chapter titled *Apostolic Ministry*

*through an Empowered Laity.* In this chapter he states the following, “most Christians who regularly share their faith are Christians involved in some ministry, and who experience God working through their ministry” (Hunter, 108). While the perspectives of these two books differ, each has reached the same conclusion that multiplying the ministry potential of the church means empowering the laity for the purposes of evangelism.

### **III. Applications**

Dr. Rainer states that relatively few churches have a regular plan of direct evangelism (Rainer, 185). While true, this simply should not be the case. One solution would be to seek the assistance of the unchurched in our area to let us know through a survey or personal interview how we can be a better church in the community. Also, we can collect prayer requests from the unchurched in our community and begin praying for these petitions. This begins to build bridges of the heart to the people around us and lets them know that we truly care about their lives and needs (Rainer, 182).

Regularly inviting the unchurched to survey the effectiveness of the church in its provision of such things as sufficient parking, adequate signage, impressions of the grounds and buildings and helpfulness and friendliness of our greeters can be ways for the local church to improve its readiness as the laity invites the unchurched (Rainer, 212). These applications as mentioned by Rainer seem to suggest a culture of lay evangelism that is cultivated by the leadership of the church. As leaders encourage the church to take on a common sense approach to making visitors feel comfortable (Rainer, 211), the laity are receiving even more encouragement to follow the most used phrase of this book “invite them to church.”

#### **IV. Question or Concern**

The Unchurched Next Door does three things well; it encourages Christians to share their faith, it presents the unchurched as a diverse group who can be impacted by the Christian and it provides confidence to the believer in speaking about their faith. This book does not seek to deepen the spiritual life of the believer in the way that Joseph Aldrich does in his book, Life-Style Evangelism. One similarity between these two books is the use of provided inventories to test readiness for evangelism. In the case of Aldrich's work, the inventory rates the readiness of the individual who intends to evangelize (Aldrich, 41), while in Rainer's work the inventory is used to rate the receptiveness of the individual who is to be evangelized (Rainer, 249). For this reason this writer would suggest balancing these two approaches to gain the deepest level of insight.

The Unchurched Next Door is a solid encouragement to evangelize our world. Through reading this book one will grow from experiencing hundreds of conversations with the unchurched and come away passionate regarding the need to ready our churches for the coming masses. This book will be on my shelf next to Life-Style Evangelism and Becoming a Contagious Christian as one of my favorites in this category for years to come. It fills a void that is left from other great works on the importance of evangelism and that is one of sheer experiential quality and statistical strength. There are many ways to communicate the same message and I am glad to have added this new perspective to my personal library. I am glad that it took a research team who conducted evangelism to place it there.

## Works Cited

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