

Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and The Churches That Reach Them

Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley and Jason Hayes
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Lost and Found is a research-based volume to speak to the status of the younger unchurched and to give ideas and thoughts about how the church can provide ways to reach and transform them. This book needs to be read by anyone who wants current information on young adults in our nation and to receive ideas from churches that have had success in reaching these people. Developed by the Southern Baptists, the leader author is Ed Stetzer, Director of LifeWay Research and missiologist in residence at LifeWay Christian Resources, Nashville, TN. Stetzer is well-known and very popular in Southern Baptist and Evangelical church genre. He holds two Masters and two Doctoral degrees. His books include *Planting Missional Churches*, *Breaking the Missional Code*, *Comeback Churches* and *Compelled by Love*.

Richie Stanley is team leader at the North American Mission Boards Center for Missional Research in Alpharetta, GA (SBC). Jason Hayes is the young adult ministry specialist at LifeWay Christian Resources where he serves as a leading voice and face for Threads, the organization's young adult initiative.

The book is presented in three parts: younger adults, what do they look like? what do they think about God, Christianity and the church (labeled polling); a thorough analysis of the ministry needs of the younger unchurched (labeled listening); a look at selected churches that are reaching young adults successfully (labeled reaching).

The authors express a caveat about what the book is not. It is not a book about young church dropouts, not about the emerging contemporary or reformed movements and not a prescriptive book with magical answers.

They also claim a bias. It is about identifying the younger unchurched and reaching them. To do this, they ask one question (really two): Who are the young unchurched and how can they be reached with the good news of Jesus Christ?

Since the volume is based to a great extent on research, where does the data come from? Three different research projects were utilized for the “polling.” First, a series of polls were undertaken by the Center for Missional Research at the North American Mission Board and LifeWay Research From 2006 – 2008 (led by Richie Stanley). Second, LifeWay undertook a large study of young adults starting in 2005 as part of the Threads initiative (800 surveys – 254 ministry leaders, 271 church, 272 unchurched). Third, 149 churches who were reaching an extraordinary number of young adults.

In the reporting and analyzing of data from these surveys, four general types of younger unchurched evolved. Always unchurched (never been involved); de-churched (having attended as a child); friendly unchurched (not particularly angry at the church); hostile unchurched (angry at the church).

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Weaving through the narrative of the book is a section titled, “A Lost and Found Story.” This is a running story in the form of a serial (being continued by each chapter). Featured are several young adults representing the above categories and a comparison with all that is being presented. This was a nice touch in bringing the data and commentaries into a practical application.

Chapter Two begins the reporting of findings under the heading, “What They Believe.” This section is replete with excellent tables and figures much like the Presentation of Results Chapter in a typical D.Min. Project. The reporting here would be a good example for D.Min. students to emulate. The reporting summarizing and analysis coordinated with the narrative is superb.

The report categories are: Beliefs About God (3 categories – 20-29; 20-24, 25-29); Beliefs by the Variables by Ethnicity, Spiritual and Religious; by Education. Beliefs About Jesus are presented using the same variables. “What Can Churches Do? The variables are used to present data. The last section of this chapter takes a “deeper look” at spirituality, Heaven? And Hell?, Christianity, Searching for Guidance, Relating to Christians.

Chapter 3 takes the same categories and variables and compares thinking between ages 20-29 and 30+. This is data to make one really think about where the church is today! A strong feature of this book is the Wrap-Up provided at the end of each of the three parts of the book. An example of the results is found in a Bad News/Good News summary: Good – they believe the church is too critical about

lifestyle issues, full of hypocrites and not necessary for spiritual development; Good News – they clearly indicate they are willing to dialogue about Christianity and Jesus.

In the beginning of Part 2 (Listening) four markers were revealed based on the research: Community, Chapter 4; Depth (and Context), Chapter 5; Responsibility, Chapter 6; Cross Generational Connection, Chapter 7. These chapters are full of thoughts and ideas that can be used. The forward includes research (what did we learn?); analysis (what does it mean?); implications (what should we do?). Sounds like a plan similar to our use of quantitative data reporting of results! Again, a great review ends Part 2.

Part 3 is about Reaching (examples of selected churches). Nine common characteristics were selected and presented:

- Creating deeper comments
- Making a difference through service
- Experiencing worship
- Conversing the content
- Leveraging technology
- Building cross-generational relationships
- Moving toward authenticity
- Leading by transparency
- Leading by ten

These characteristics from the individual chapter provide coverage for the remainder of the book.

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The book has many strong points, but I see at least two weaknesses – there is so much covered that at times it appears that too much is being attempted and while illustrations came from varied churches, most are evangelical and emerging type churches. There are not many, if any, mainline, liturgical, sacramental churches and older mainline denominations. It still seems that the data reported on has diffusion for all three groups as well.

How can this book be used in a D.Min. program? First, it fits courses in current issues, age-level concerns, Christian Education, Evangelism, Missions, Preaching and Teaching. It does have textbook quality and can be used as such in many ways. I see great potential for use in a research course or as an example for D.Min. researchers. It has great value as a tool to keep a D.Min. Director aware of what is happening in the church today. While a bibliography is not presented, there are end notes for each chapter from good sources.

This book has great value to the church, the academy and contemporary research. More such books are needed for other age levels.