

CHAPTER 2

BECOMING RELEVANT TO THE UNCHURCHED

Dear Christian,

I've been wanting to write this letter for a long time, but I wasn't sure talking to you would do any good. Like you, I'm on my own journey.

I've been very frustrated because it feels like you don't even listen to me. Do you really care what I think or feel? I know there has to be more to life, but everywhere I turn, I face another roadblock. I'm struggling at work. The bills keep piling up. My kids are hanging with the wrong crowd, and my mom just got diagnosed with cancer. I really just want to find peace.

I'm looking for genuine love and acceptance, not spiritual answers.

You talk about truth and scripture in such a way that seems like you're shoving your opinion down my throat. I often feel judged by you because I don't understand your thinking. If you knew the things I've done, would you accept me? Will I ever measure up to your standard? You have a different perspective that sounds so foreign. When I'm around you, will you make me feel valued and loved anyway?

I just want to be happy. I'm not searching for some lofty hope or someone's view of truth.

To be honest, your religion seems to make you angry all the time. It's a real downer when you point out everything you find to be wrong in this world. You seem so against everything, it's hard to believe you could really have my best interest in mind. Your complaints don't exactly inspire me to become a Christian like you. If you could just smile and laugh, your joy would attract me.

Before you talk to me about my spiritual needs, I want to know you care for me.

Life is tough. Many times, I feel empty and lonely. I've been put down and excluded. When I'm struggling, and you say, "Jesus is the answer," your simple statements ring hollow. I don't want to be around people who are always judging me or trying to set me straight. What I really want to know is if you care about me as a friend. I need real friends. Friends who

stand by me when I'm alone, afraid, or hurt. If you want to influence me, just be my friend.

Sincerely,

Your non-Christian neighbor

BROKENNESS LEADS TO URGENCY

This letter breaks my heart because, in many ways, I was that Christian.

Too consumed with my church family, I didn't spend much time with those outside the church. As a result, I stood on the sidelines pointing out the problems in our world. I had plenty of answers, but very little empathy.

Most days, non-Christians weren't even on my radar. At best, my conversations with them were awkward. I knew I should share Jesus with others, but I had lost touch with anyone not in the church. I had built a cocoon around me that sealed me off from non-Christians.

Never was this more evident than when I left the safety of the suburbs to live in the inner city over 30 years ago. Until I stared into the faces of brokenness and hopelessness, the deepest cries of my city left me unmoved and unresponsive.

The inner-city statistics were alarming. High crime, violence and murder seemed normal. Poor education, high unemployment, dilapidated houses and unkept lawns left little to be desired.

The first time I saw my neighbors across the street, a man ran out of the house yelling and carrying a machete while another man chased him with a pitchfork. The police visited my new neighbors more times in one week than I'd seen their presence in all my years living in the suburbs. In a strange combination, an abundance of drug addicts, prostitutes and gang members lived alongside laborers, daycare providers and teachers who made up my block.

The dysfunction was like nothing I'd ever experienced. The constant gunfire, crime, violence and poverty took on new meaning when I began to meet my neighbors.

One particularly sobering newspaper article reported that 31 shootings happened within the time span of a single summer month. As I stared at the pictured faces and saw the listed addresses—houses to my left and to my right—God's heart for the brokenness around me swelled inside of me. My neighbors were dying around me despite all my years living and working in the inner city.

The inner city was no longer a distant, faceless community. The daily trauma awakened me to the pain God felt and increased my empathy. God moved beyond getting my attention to grabbing my affection for my hurting neighbors.

FIRST ATTEMPT AT OUTREACH

Before connecting with Diamond and others in my new community, I attempted to engage the unchurched through outreaches. But I didn't understand love-hope-faith, so I missed a crucial element.

Love.

My outreaches were *faith-based*. Not *love-based*. As a result, my outreaches fell short.

Pathetically short.

A group of friends volunteered to help me invite my new neighbors to an afternoon of games and free food at my first block party. Three hundred people showed up as the smell of hot dogs and hamburgers on the grill filled the air, and a Christian worship band played music in the background. Toward the end, I took a stand on a makeshift pulpit and shared the gospel message of how my neighbors could have everlasting life. Believing the day a success, my friends and I made plans to host another block party.

A few weeks later, only 200 people showed up to the same event. Sadly, the head count dwindled to 100 people the following month. Discouraged,

I asked pastor friends for advice. None of them questioned my tactics; in fact, they applauded my courageous and bold approach. They blamed my audience. People were the problem. Today's culture didn't care about the things of Christ.

Despite my admirable intentions, my approach backfired. I tried to persuade my audience to change, but they were far from convinced.

I tried to *faith* people to Jesus rather than simply *love* them and trust Jesus to do the rest. My lack of success came from attempting to *convince* people with the truth rather than *compel* them with Christ's love.

I resigned myself to failure and gave up doing outreaches until years later.

INCREASING OUR CULTURAL IQ

American culture once closely mirrored the values of the Christian church. Church was central to life. Prayer in schools was common, and courthouses around the country featured the Ten Commandments. Because the surrounding culture had a *God consciousness*, churches could more easily open their doors and attract people. While this may have been effective years ago, churches no longer experience the benefit of a Christian-friendly culture.

Our 21st century culture no longer prioritizes the Sabbath, Christian holidays and traditions. Americans overall don't connect with the things of God as they once did.

The Pew Research Center notes the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion has grown to more than 13 million self-identified atheists and agnostics, as well as nearly 33 million more who claim no particular religion. Unaffiliated is now the second largest religious demographic in America.⁴

That bears out in what my friends at Exponential have discovered. When they set out to identify what they call Level 5 rapidly multiplying churches here in the States, they found less than .005%. In fact, less than 4% are reproducing (Level 4). The majority (80% to 90%) of U.S. churches are not reproducing and are either in attendance decline or plateaued (Levels 1 and 2).

Further, the average age of a Christian in America is 49 years old. Twenty-one percent are 65 or older.⁵ In 1958, according to Gallup, [92% of Americans identified as Christians](#) while only 2% said they had no religion. In 2017, almost 60 years later, 59% of Americans identified as Christians while 20% said they had no religion. Where 59% of Baby Boomers (born 1946-64) [say religion is “very important”](#) in their lives, only 38% of younger Millennials (born 1990-96) agree.⁶ Without an influx of new believers, the church will eventually grow old and die.

As pastors and leaders, we can be like the men of Issachar “who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.” (1 Chronicles 12:32 NIV) Increasing our cultural IQ is critical to understanding how best to engage and impact our surrounding community. Knowing the mind, spirit and essence of our culture is essential if we’re going to communicate the gospel effectively. Just like a mechanic must first diagnose the problem before he can repair a car, so we also must first diagnose our surrounding culture so that we can wisely know what we should do to engage and impact unchurched people with the good news of Jesus Christ.

We must become community experts to reach unchurched people. Surveys and interviews are a great start. Years ago, the police surveyed inner city residents in Omaha to discover the most pressing concerns. Rather than gangs, drugs, and violence—the expected answers, stray dogs, abandoned cars, and backed-up sewer problems bothered the community. Police thought they understood the concerns UNTIL they actually spoke with the residents. We need face-to-face conversations in our quest to become proficient in understanding the unchurched. Then we can use the information we learn to meaningfully connect with unbelievers.

Because our surrounding American culture is shifting in dramatic ways, we must act sensitively and genuinely in the way we connect with people and introduce them to the good news of Jesus. Therefore, as leaders, we not only need to increase our cultural IQ, we need to love the unchurched in new ways to encourage them to take steps of faith toward Christ.

THE RIVER HAS MOVED

The following photo illustrates the shift in American culture from *God consciousness* to having *less of a God consciousness*.



Photo by Sanjeewa Wickramasekera⁷

The bridge in the picture once spanned the Choluteca River, a gift from the nation of Japan to the people of Honduras. Built with steel and concrete, the bridge stood as an engineering marvel which survived the devastating destruction of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 when 150 other bridges were destroyed.

Though built to last, the structure no longer transports people across the river. The bridge is useless.

Why?

The river has moved!

A torrent of rain and flooding redirected the river, causing the water to jump its banks.

Teams of brilliant engineers can do nothing about the present route. No matter how much they wish the river would return to its former course, the channel is set.

The only choice: build a new bridge.

In much the same way, our culture has shifted from its former course. A deluge of media and changing values have redirected the cultural river in America.

Knowing this, the church risks losing its usefulness if we don't revisit the structure. Our church model needs to be reexamined in light of the timeless principles of love-hope-faith which span the widening cultural chasm. We can't expect American values to return to the days where people had more of a God consciousness. As disheartening as it may seem, the culture is moving further and further from God.

Reality today is not the same as the days of our grandparents. The cultural river has moved, and if we want our churches to make an eternal difference, we need to build new bridges of love-hope-faith.

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[Peggy Noonan](#), a weekly columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, believes that “we’re in the midst of a rebellion.” She cites “the general decline of America’s faith in its institutions” and notes that “we feel less respect for almost all of them—the church, the professions, the presidency, the Supreme Court.”⁸

As Karl Barth, influential Swiss Protestant theologian from the 20th century, wrote, “Take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.”⁹ Increasing our cultural IQ is crucial as Christians. When we take the time to understand the cultural signs, in a small way, we can understand what lies ahead. That’s the power of understanding our culture through the lens of God’s word.

EVERYDAY MISSIONARIES

I planted four churches that got stranded on dry land before I began to understand the river had moved, and my *bridge* was no longer relevant in helping people far from Christ. If I truly wanted to provide hope for my community, I needed to incorporate what God had revealed to me about love-hope-faith. I needed to engage unchurched people in their own cultural environment and then connect them to Christ and the local church.

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I refused to stay marooned on dry land while my surrounding culture moved further and further away from Christ. Violence cut too many lives in the inner city short, many of them children. I needed to act and do so quickly. I needed to join Christ in building the kind of church that reached lost people. Time was short; eternity hung in the balance.

I could no longer expect lost people to come to my church. I needed to go to them. And I knew that would take a shift in our church's scorecard. We would have to create a new culture that redefined what our church considered a success. Darkness only does what darkness knows to do. Sin is ugly, eternally destructive and void of hope. Darkness prevails unless light shows up. If I wanted to light a dark world, I needed to connect with the unchurched around me.

When religious leaders stood ready to stone a woman caught in adultery, Jesus challenged their hypocrisy. If Jesus didn't condemn her; neither should I condemn the lost. He met the woman in the middle of her mess. I needed to do the same. If I could meet my lost neighbors where they were, God could use me to provide hope.

My unchurched neighbors had a difficult time getting involved and understanding unfamiliar biblical concepts. Even my traditions and language left them feeling like outsiders. Because the cultural river had moved, I needed to love my unchurched neighbors in fresh and meaningful ways.

After my first four church plants stagnated, I gathered a small group who also hungered to birth a church focusing on reaching the unchurched.

We intentionally mobilized our congregation to serve the unchurched. Our people became everyday missionaries who learned to follow God's calling to make disciples using their unique gifts. Of course, that all happened outside the walls of the church. Exponential's CEO Todd Wilson says it well: "As leaders, we have to shift our paradigm from *recruiting volunteers to accomplish 'our thing'* to *mobilizing everyday missionaries in their common and unique callings to accomplish 'God's thing.'*" We need to mobilize God's people God's way—looking at them as more than volunteers but rather, missionaries with a unique calling to carry the fullness of Jesus into the world.

When our church connected with our unbelieving neighbors, we gained social influence for spiritual impact. As a result, we began to see relationships formed where the love of Jesus was extended in powerful ways.

With this small beginning, our new church, Bridge, was born. Making church relevant to the unchurched meant a leadership-directed approach focused on building a great city instead of simply building a great congregation.

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