

# the magic of asking.

By Dion Garrett | Senior Pastor

It's an election season, in case no one told you about it already. A season of muckraking, tabloid sensationalism, and lots and lots of digging into candidates' pasts. I understand the need for good investigative work when it comes to electing public officials. But in the rest of life I live by a simple axiom, there's no better way to learn the truth about someone than actually asking them.

You've heard and read a lot from me about the state of the Christian Church in America. Churches are declining and closing at record pace. Denominational churches are the hardest hit while non-denominational churches have dramatically increased their market-share. As the pace of life increases, even faithful people are attending church less often, sending pastors everywhere in a panic about declining worship attendance! Most concerning is that increasing numbers of (especially young) people are claiming no religious affiliation at all, up to 23% (from 16%) in the last 8 years. But a bright spot in the middle of all the gloom and doom is that people may actually be feeling more "spiritual" even as they become less "religious." The phrase, "Spiritual but not religious" has become increasingly common in our culture, especially among young people. In other words, people are still highly interested in how to find spiritual peace and well-being, meaning and purpose, but they no longer think churches can help them with that.

So is that true of people in our community? Here in our part of west St. Louis County, we tend to lean toward more historically conservative values, even Christian values. Does that mean these national trends are happening in our own community, and if so, what do the "unaffiliated" actually think about faith, spirituality, churches, and specifically St. John?

Rather than speculate, infer, or debate, we put my axiom to work and decided to simply ask them.

In late July, we conducted focus groups where we asked 37 "unaffiliated" people what they actually think, feel, and believe about faith, spirituality, churches, and specifically our church. As a guy with an undergraduate degree in social science, it was important to me that we not only ask people these questions, but we do it in a way that had professional validity. So here's a word about our methodology.

- Leading our effort were three members from our Board of Directors, two current, one past, with specialties in marketing and branding.
- The participants were recruited using Peters Marketing Research, a respected, 60-year-old local company.
- The focus groups were moderated by a professional facilitator, with decades of experience.

- The sessions were held on "neutral ground" of a nearby, newly built, state-of-the-art, corporate HQ, thanks to the generosity of one of our STJ members.
- Four focus groups were conducted, two of unchurched people, two of de-churched people. De-churched people were defined as people who have had no regular church attendance for at least three years; unchurched were defined as people who had no meaningful connection with a church ever.
- We targeted two separate age ranges, 21–35 and 36–54, for each segment since younger people are the most likely not to be attending a church. Most participants came from within a 5 mile radius; a few stretched out to nearly 10 miles.
- While only the moderator was present in the room with the participants, a live feed of the sessions allowed members of our staff to privately view the full sessions in progress.

While the data is still being analyzed, wow, what a powerful experience! Some of the stories were heartbreaking! Some of the participants shared stories of rejection and judgment by church leaders, others decided after growing up in churches that church was irrelevant to their lives, and others talked about how when they had questions, no one would answer them or take them seriously. Yet, most described an interest in spiritual things, in finding community with others, in learning how to find greater wholeness and abundance, and in seeking answers to life's problems.

Although it's too early to speak conclusively, for now let me simply share an observation. Those in our community who aren't a regular part of a church might not be what you think. They aren't all closed-minded, God-hating, immoral, and uncaring people. Instead they are often very thoughtful people who are interested in spiritual things, in life's great questions, and in becoming more whole people. They don't pretend to have life all figured out, but they have stopped looking to the church for answers. As someone once said, "I know why you don't go to church, because you've already been." Most people in our community assume that their bad impressions and experiences with church would just be repeated if they stepped into any church today. They haven't given up on God or a search for meaning. They've given up on the church.

But here's some hope for us at St. John. As a part of the focus group sessions, we put forward a few paragraphs about who St. John is – a statement of identity and purpose. We asked the participants to highlight things that really resonated with them and strike through things that didn't. What we found is that many (even most) of the things that are true about us, resonated with our focus groups! One woman even said, "If that's really who this church is, I'd be very interested in checking it out." Then she followed it up with this statement, "But I'm not sure I believe this is really true." At that moment, I wish I could've broken into the room and said, "It's true! Just come see for yourself!"

While there was some positive resonance to our identity and purpose statement, my early-and-unscientific conclusion is that St. John is pretty misunderstood by our community. I believe we are the church that many unchurched and de-churched people are hungering for, but they don't even know we exist (let alone in their backyard!) If that's true, we need to work to change that, so that people will come to know who we are and the amazing things they could be a part of here. But I'm probably getting ahead of myself.

As we finish the research and fully analyze the data, my challenge to you is this: Please don't make assumptions about that friend, neighbor, or co-worker who doesn't attend church. Instead, put my axiom to the test, learn about what they really think by asking them. You can learn a lot from someone by asking, and after listening carefully, you might actually get a chance to share how your experiences have been different, how our church is different. Here are some questions that might help get you started:

- What's been your journey with churches, faith, and spirituality? How would you describe it?
- What does your ideal church look like?
- If you could change one thing about churches, what would it be?
- What's one thing you feel like you're missing by not being a part of a church?
- What's the one thing that would prompt you to visit a church?

