

Meet Unchurched Harry and Mary

by Lee Strobel, from *Discipleship Journal*

Over the years since I became a Christian, I've been kidded that I'm the quintessential Unchurched Harry. While there have been a lot of other "Harrys," it's true that I did fit that profile. And maybe you know someone who does, too.

Maybe you have a colleague at work, a neighbor down the block, a friend that you play tennis with, or even a spouse who's indifferent or skeptical toward Christianity. You desperately want God to use you to bring the gospel to that individual, but you're not sure what to do.

Or maybe you're a church leader, and you're frustrated because your congregation seems to be in the business of merely re-energizing wayward Christians. You want to reach real irreligious people, and yet you're not sure how you and your church can effectively connect with them.

Part of your hesitation in proceeding might stem from your own uncertainties about Unchurched Harry and Mary. You may wonder whether you really understand them well enough to know how to lovingly, tactfully, and powerfully bring them the gospel. After all, it may have been quite a while since you've lived a secular life—if you've ever lived one at all.

You may have found that since you've become a Christian, your unbelieving friends have drifted away as you've become increasingly involved in the social network of the church. And without frequent heart-to-heart conversations with unchurched people, it's easy to forget how they think.

So how can you begin to bridge the gap between you and Unchurched Harry and Mary? The first step is to understand where they are coming from.

So Who Are Harry and Mary?

In the last few years, researchers have been working hard to come up with a composite portrait of the average unchurched American. As never before, their demographic analysis has helped bring into focus the 55 to 78 million unchurched adults who live in the United States.

While these statistics give us a snapshot of what Unchurched Harry and Mary look like, what's really important is what's inside their heads. Before we begin to strategize how we can effectively bring them the gospel, we need to climb into their minds and delve into their attitudes and motivations.

Of course, their mindset can vary significantly according to several factors. Opinions about God and church differ between baby-boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) and baby busters (born between 1965 and 1983); females and males; Southerners and Westerners; and among blacks, whites, and Hispanics.

Based on my own experience as a non-Christian, my interaction with unchurched people, input from pastors, psychologists, and others who have dealt with them, and in-depth surveys by pollsters George Gallup, Jr., George Barna, and others, I've reached some general conclusions that might be helpful in understanding them.

So here are some observations about the unchurched. For convenience and consistency, I'll generally use Harry's name, but most of the comments apply equally to Unchurched Mary. As you read, consider whether there are implications for the way you befriend unchurched individuals.

Observation #1: Harry has rejected church, but that doesn't necessarily mean he has rejected God.

This is a crucial distinction. Unchurched Harry often is a "religious person"—in fact, he could be intensely interested in spiritual matters—but he may be turned off to the church because he sees it as an archaic and irrelevant institution. This means that he may be more open to talking about God and considering the claims of Christ than people think.

Many unchurched people exhibit a desire to interact with their Creator. In 1992, *Newsweek* magazine featured a cover story called "Talking to God" in which it observed that 91 percent of American women and 85 percent of men pray.

Many unchurched people consider themselves to be Christians. In fact, a majority of the unchurched—52 percent—claim they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is important in their life.

Yet they don't feel compelled to attend church. Unchurched people are virtually unanimous in believing that they can be a good Christian independent from any religious institution.

It's encouraging, though, that there's a vast reservoir of religious interest in this country. My wife, Leslie, was reminded of that when she began inviting neighborhood women to a Bible study in our home a few years ago. She expected to receive a cold shoulder from some, but to her surprise, everybody wanted to come. All of them expressed curiosity in learning more about the Bible.

As *Newsweek* concluded, "In allegedly rootless, materialistic, self-centered America, there is also a hunger for a personal experience of God."

Observation #2: Harry is morally adrift, but he secretly wants an anchor.

I know what it's like to live a life of moral relativism, where every day I made fresh ethical choices based on self-interest and expediency. Writing my own rules freed me up to satisfy my desires without anybody looking over my shoulder. Frankly, it's an exhilarating way to live—for a while.

Certainly America has been living that way for quite some time. That's what James Patterson and Peter Kim concluded after conducting a national study in which they asked people to be brutally honest about how they *really* live.

The first chapter of their eye-opening book *The Day America Told the Truth* says: "In the 1950s and even in the early 1960s, there was something much closer to a moral consensus in America..... There is absolutely no moral consensus at all in the 1990s. Everyone is making up their own personal moral codes—their own Ten Commandments."

Remember the original Ten Commandments, the ones Moses received from God? Well, only 13 percent of Americans say they still believe in all of them.

Instead, these are today's commandments, including the percentage of Americans who follow them: I will steal from those who won't really miss it (74 percent); I will lie when it suits me (64 percent); I will waste the equivalent of a full day of work each week (50 percent); I will cheat on my spouse (53 percent); I will lie on my tax returns (30 percent); and I am willing to put my lover at risk of disease (31 percent).

What a scathing indictment! The proliferation of situational ethics in recent years has plunged the country into a moral quagmire. Sixty-nine percent of Americans adhere to the attitude that there's no absolute moral standard, but that ethics should fluctuate according to the situation. And, of course, what causes that fluctuation is usually our own selfish agenda.

That's how many Harrys live. Yet numbers of them are beginning to conclude that moral anarchy isn't all that Hugh Hefner once painted it to be.

After all, it takes emotional energy to make day-to-day ethical choices with no baseline to start with and to keep track of a tangle of conflicting decisions. Often, there's a free-floating sense of guilt, and inevitably there's harm caused to oneself and others.

Gary Collins and Timothy Clinton studied baby boomers and concluded that millions of them "feel like they are drifting, with no absolute values or beliefs to which they can anchor their lives. Many feel empty inside, without firm standards of right and wrong, and with no valid guidelines for raising children, maintaining a marriage, building careers, doing business, or finding God. Now, perhaps more than at any time in baby-boomer history, these core-less people are looking for truth, identity, and something to believe in that will give their lives a real center."

With many Unchurched Harrys secretly seeking moral direction for their lives, the door is cracked open for Christians to share the Bible's guidelines for living. It's important that we think through how that plan is articulated, as this next point will explain.

Observation #3: Harry resists rules but responds to reasons.

Unchurched Harry doesn't like to be told what to do. He recoils when people tell him he ought to live a certain way because the Bible says he should. After all, he's not convinced yet that the Bible really is God's revelation.

Besides, there's been a society-wide erosion of respect for authority, and Harry thinks he's better qualified than anyone to decide what rules he should abide by.

Yet, at the same time, Harry is generally open to reasoning. When we as Christians lay out for him the underlying thinking behind the moral boundaries that God has drawn for us, and when he understands the benefits of abiding by God's commands, he's much more receptive to following them.

For example, I met recently with a businessman who confided in me that he was living with his girlfriend. Now here certainly isn't any shortage of Bible verses I could have read to him to point out that he had strayed from God's laws. What proved more effective was for me to explain to him the emotional, psychological, physical, and relational damage that can result from having intimate relations without the security of a marriage.

After painting the downside of his behavior, I cited Scripture against non-marital sex and said, "Don't you see—God said that unmarried sexual relations are out of bounds not to frustrate you, or to arbitrarily spoil your fun, but because He loves you so much that He wants to spare you these negative consequences."

Then I painted the benefits of living God's way—and Unchurched Harry is always ready to listen when the topic is how he can benefit.

So, for the most part, Unchurched Harry doesn't respond well to someone who predicates a command on, "Thus saith the Lord." He wants to see the wisdom behind changing his ways, which opens up terrific opportunities for Christians to explain how God's guidelines for our lives are reasonable, practical, and just, and how they are motivated by His great concern for us.

Observation #4: Harry doesn't understand Christianity, but he's also ignorant about what he claims to believe in.

Harry is a Christianity illiterate. Although he probably owns a Bible, the chances are he has never made an honest effort to read and understand it. He doesn't know Moses from Paul, or Abraham from Peter. He's full of misinformation, such as that the Bible says the earth is 10,000 years old, or that Scripture is full of contradictions.

His view of Christian theology is often garbled and inaccurate, perhaps a hodge-podge of New Age thinking grafted onto old Sunday school lessons. It's incredible the theological concoctions people can conjure up!

When I talk to unchurched people, I'm frequently amazed at the elementary nature of the issues they raise. I'm all geared up to argue ten reasons why the accounts of Christ's resurrection are historically reliable, and they're asking, "Who was this Jesus anyway?"

The key is, *assume nothing*. When talking to Unchurched Harry, always let him give you his version of what Christianity is all about. Take the time to gauge his level of knowledge. Listen for misinformation. Ask him to define the words he uses, since "sin" and "grace" may have totally different meanings to him than to you. After gently probing his base of knowledge, you'll be better equipped to begin talking to him about Christ at an appropriate level. You may even find he already agrees with some basic Christian doctrines that you had been planning to try to convince him are true.

But it's important to understand something else about Harry: In many cases he doesn't even have a handle on what he believes. One study showed that 51 percent of Americans have no philosophy of life!

Lots of times I've found that Harry has never really thought through his own belief system well enough to be able to articulate or defend it. Sometimes it seems that he's making up his beliefs as he tells them to me.

In fact, one of the most effective evangelistic approaches I've learned is to ask Harry to describe what he believes about God, and then let him talk. And talk. And talk. I listen with interest, I request details, I urge him to go deeper, and I ask him to define the words he's using.

You see, sometimes he has never verbalized with any depth what he believes, and as he describes his views of God and life, they begin to sound flimsy and cliché-ridden even to him. He may realize for the first time that he doesn't know as much as he thought.

Then I ask him what his truth source is. In other words, where did he get this viewpoint? Sometimes it was a friend who told him about reincarnation. Or he saw a TV show about meditation techniques. Or he read a book by Shirley MacLaine, or an article on Islam.

Next I ask him to assess the accuracy of that truth source. If he's going to pin his eternity on this source of information about God, then he ought to make sure it's reliable. Often, just asking the right questions can help Harry recognize that his personal theology rests on a feeble foundation.

Finally, I help him see the firm foundation on which Christianity is based. We have a truth source that's historically defensible, archaeologically sound, based on eyewitness accounts, substantiated by outside writings, and whose supernatural nature has been established by fulfilled prophecies and the millions of lives it has transformed.

Harry is usually much more receptive to talking about the basis for Christianity after he has come to the realization that his own personal beliefs aren't as well-developed or well-supported as he likes to pretend.

Observation #5: Harry has legitimate questions about spiritual matters, but he doesn't expect answers from Christians.

Unchurched Harry has a whole range of questions about Christianity, and they deserve answers. Whatever the nature of his inquiry, even if it sounds frivolous or elementary, it should be considered valid if it's hanging him up on his spiritual journey.

Similarly, when you're interacting with Unchurched Harry on an individual level, the manner in which you respond to his questions is extremely important. Many times, the first question he raises is a sort of "trial balloon." He wants to see whether you'll laugh at him, belittle him for his ignorance, dismiss his inquiry as trivial, or take the question seriously.

So his initial questions aren't the top ones on his mind but are just the ones he feels safest in expressing. If you validate his right to raise issues and you respond with sincerity, he'll be more willing to go deeper and ask about the issues that are really stymieing his spiritual journey.

There have been times when I've been talking to Unchurched Harry and he has prefaced a question with, "Now, don't laugh at this next one." That's his way of saying, *I'm going to get vulnerable and ask something that could make me sound stupid. So cut me some slack.* Unless you make him feel comfortable, he'll never get to the questions that are truly hanging him up.

One way I legitimize the inquiry process is to assure Harry at the outset, "You know, you're doing exactly what God wants you to do. He honors those who honestly check Him out. The Bible says in Heb. 11:6 that God 'rewards those who earnestly seek Him.' So you should have confidence; you're doing the right thing by asking whatever questions you have on your mind."

Observation #6: Harry doesn't just ask, "Is Christianity true?" Often, he asks: "Does Christianity work?"

A Christian leader from a large midwestern university was telling me about how students have changed in the last few decades. "Kids these days aren't asking, 'What's true?'" he said. "That's what college kids asked in the '60s. Today, kids are asking, 'What can help me deal with my pain?'" It seems like every kid I disciple comes from a dysfunctional family, and he's trying to process his pain."

The nature of Harry's questions is evolving over time. For many, especially the younger generation, truth isn't an issue because they've become convinced that all religious viewpoints are valid. It's the old, "You have your truth and I have mine."

We need to help Harry understand the absolute and unchanging truth of Christ, but we should also explain how Christ is available to help him in practical ways to heal his hurts and help him deal with everyday living. We need to communicate that Christianity isn't just for the tomorrow of his eternity but also for the today of his life.

Our challenge, then, is to help this new generation of Unchurched Harrys understand that Christianity *does* work, that is, that the God of the Bible offers us supernatural wisdom and assistance in our struggles, difficulties, and recovery from past hurts.

But we need to communicate that the *reason* it works is because it's true. Because Christ, at a point in history, had the power to overcome the grave, we can have access to that same kind of supernatural power to cope with the difficulties that face us day to day. And because the Bible is God's revelation to His people, it contains a kind of practical and effective help that's unmatched by mere human philosophers.

In other words, there's a cause and effect—the “cause” is that Christianity is *true*, and there's solid historical evidence to support that; the “effect” or result is that Christianity *works*, and there are millions of Christians who would attest to that.

Some people get mixed up in this area. They believe that because something appears to work it must therefore be based on truth. As far as Christianity is concerned, we're not saying it's true *because* it works; we're saying Christianity is true *and therefore* it works. So Christians need to continue to marshal the historic, archaeological, prophetic, and other evidence that Jesus is the one and only Son of God. But we shouldn't stop there. We should be ready to go the next step and tell Harry that because that's true, there are meaningful implications for his life today—for his marriage, his friendships, his career, his recovery from past pain, and so on.

Observation #7: Harry doesn't just want to know something; he wants to experience it.

For many Unchurched Harrys who are on a spiritual journey, experience, not evidence, is their mode of discovery.

“We want, as a generation, to move beyond philosophical discussions of religions to the actual experience of God in our lives,” said baby-boomer expert Doug Murren. “The boomer heart, like every human heart, has always cried out for a personal experience with God.”

In fact, one out of four unchurched people say they already have had a “particularly powerful religious insight or awakening.”

The objective of evangelism should be to bring Unchurched Harry into a personal encounter *with* God, not just to merely pass on information *about* God. Harry actually wants to meet this Jesus Christ we're talking about; he wants to sense the comfort and power of the Holy Spirit.

Observation #8: Harry doesn't want to be somebody's project, but he would like to be somebody's friend.

Have you ever had a “friendship” with strings attached? You felt the person would be your buddy only if you'd continue to do him favors, play golf with him once a week, or give him free professional advice. These relationships are inherently insecure, and over a period of time, resentment inevitably boils to the surface.

That's how Unchurched Harry feels when our behavior suggests that the main reason we're his friend is because we want to convert him. Maybe we don't call him as often after he rebuffed our invitation to come to a men's breakfast at church. Or maybe he hears that when we get together with our Christian friends to talk about our evangelistic efforts, we disclose private details of his personal life.

After a while, Harry feels like a case study. After all, he says, if this were a real friendship—based on affinity, mutual interest, concern for each other, and keeping confidences—it wouldn't be dependent on whether we succeed in bringing him to Christ.

This can be a downside to relational evangelism unless the Christian determines from the outset that his friendship with Harry is going to be authentic and unconditional. That is, the Christian's attitude should be to care genuinely about Harry as a friend regardless of his spiritual progress.

Take a Step

The question arises, “What do you do now?” Are you willing to prioritize irreligious people in your life so that you have the time and inclination to develop meaningful relationships with them? And is your church willing to prioritize them—to devote resources to create seeker-sensitive places where people can bring their unchurched friends? Because you can count on this: *If Harry and Mary remain afterthoughts, the chances are they're also going to remain unchurched.* You must be intentional in your efforts to reach them. But unless you take a step, some *specific* evangelistic action, it's a wasted effort.

Don't let yourself get overwhelmed by the size of the task. Jesus told His disciples to preach the gospel to all nations, but to start where they were—right in Jerusalem.

So start where you are. Think of three specific irreligious people in your own life—not a mass of faceless skeptics but three individuals within your sphere of influence. People you can pray for. People you can deepen your relationship with. People you can share your faith with over time. People you can invite to seeker-oriented events. Make them your personal mission field.