

6 Environments Your Church Must Choose from When Attempting to Reach the "Nones"

Much attention has been given to the rise of the "Nones" and rightly so. They are currently the single fastest-growing religious group of our time and currently represent 20% of the population. This person needs someone or something to facilitate the process of moving him or her toward being able to even consider the life and message of Christ. The following 6 types of environments are among those that a church can present.

>> None Hostile

The first environment a church can manifest is **none hostile**. A church can be **openly antagonistic** toward *nones* who might venture to attend its services.

Michelle was trapped in the demeaning world of prostitution, drug addiction, and alcoholism. Wanting to escape this life, Michelle disguised herself and hid from her pimp for several days while going through chemical withdrawal. She was discovered and dragged into the chambers of the raging man, where she was beaten until unconscious while the other prostitutes watched and learned. Next Michelle tried suicide — anything to escape the nightmare of her existence. A relative found her body, hours from death, and rushed her to the hospital where her life was saved.

This time Michelle turned to the only place she could imagine there might be hope — a local church. She had no sense of self-worth. Used by men, rejected by the world, she turned to God's people. She knew she deserved punishment but hoped against hope that she might find mercy. Halfway through the church service, the pastor recognized her from her life on the street. Before the entire congregation he pointed her out and then lectured her for defiling the house of God with her filthy presence. Then he ordered her out.

An extreme case? Perhaps. But it is all too common in lesser forms.

Kristina and her roommate decided to go to church because they had hit on some rough times. Kristina's roommate had become pregnant outside of marriage. They decided to search a little deeper for purpose and meaning. High on their list for investigation was Christianity.

They decided to try a church near their apartment. They went, attended faithfully, and tried to build some relationships. They both wanted to turn from the lifestyles they had been living and seek God. After just a few weeks, however, it became known in the church that the baby carried by Kristina's roommate was conceived out of wedlock. Suddenly people wouldn't sit by them and stopped talking whenever they approached. No one smiled at them when they entered the church. It wasn't long before the pastor asked them not to return because of the nature of their situation. As you might imagine, Kristina and her roommate never wanted to darken the doorstep of a church again. The pastor's explanation?

"You're just not our type."

>> None Indifferent

A second environment can be termed ***none indifferent***. This church climate is **not hostile, merely apathetic**. The questions, concerns, and exploration process of a person like the *nones* are simply overlooked.

While in New England for a speaking engagement, I recall meeting a pastor of a Baptist church who shared his frustrations regarding the growth of his church. I asked him what he thought the problem was, and he responded, "Well, there just aren't any more Baptists in my area." Cultivating an atmosphere for someone who was not a Baptist, much less a Christian, had never entered his mind. He was not hostile to those outside of the church, just oblivious to them.

>> None Hopeful

A church that creates a ***none hopeful*** environment wants to see *nones* come and meet Christ, but they have never thought about the nature of the church's climate. Altar calls are extended with great hope and fervor, revivals are held, Sunday school campaigns are enacted, but the warmth of the incubator has not been adjusted. The **internal environment has not been changed for years**, and as a result, nothing has been done that will effectively bring in *nones*, much less serve their pilgrimage toward Christ. This type of environment is like a fishing expedition in which people put bait on a hook, place it in the middle of the boat's deck, and then join hands to pray for the fish to jump in and grab the hook.

>> None Sensitive

A fourth environment that a church can offer is ***none sensitive***. This atmosphere exhibits **some concrete efforts to draw and encourage** the *nones*. While the overall orientation of the church is still directed toward the growth and maturation of the *already convinced*, the thermostat has clearly been adjusted to allow all eggs to receive some of the warmth and care they need in order to hatch.

>> None Targeted

The fifth atmospheric category is best termed ***none targeted***. This is preferable to being *none driven*, which would mistakenly intimate that the whim of the *nones* is what determines the theology and direction of the church. In truth, a *none targeted* environment is one in which church members place a high priority on the needs of the *nones* and make every effort to **remove any and every barrier** that could impede the exploration process. Every barrier, that is, except the scandal of the cross. This is not about an abandonment of orthodoxy in an effort to cater to the sensibilities of those alien to the Christian faith. A *none targeted* climate is just that — targeted on facilitating the process of evangelizing *nones*. The growth and maturation of believers is certainly cared for, but there is a conscious attempt to be an evangelistic incubator that is set at just the right temperature in regard to the front door, or entry points of the church.

But there is still one more environment, and it arguably the most subtle of all.

>> No Man's Land

I grew up with Wheaties, the cereal known as the “Breakfast of Champions.” You knew an athlete had arrived on the cultural scene if their picture landed on the front of one of its boxes. But Wheaties has fallen onto hard times of late. There are many reasons for this, but industry insiders say that the heart of the matter is simple:

Wheaties is in *no man's land*.

That's my terminology, but here's what the pundits are saying: Wheaties isn't healthy enough for the Fiber One crowd, and isn't unhealthy enough for the Frosted Flakes crowd. That's *no man's land*. By not positioning itself firmly in any camp – not quite the health food, not quite the junk food – it reaches no one.

It's not just cereal that can fall into this category.

The heart of *no man's land* for a church is not being targeted *enough* to reach the unchurched, but being *too* targeted to the unchurched for the church. Such churches are too tilted to those exploring the Christian faith to have their weekend services attract large numbers of traditionally minded, church-is-for-me believers, yet too caught in the cultural trappings of traditional church to attract explorers – or at least have their members feel comfortable inviting their unchurched friends.

Why is it so common for churches to find themselves in *no man's land*?

It's because many churches get the surface issues of connecting with those outside of the church, but little more. They get the music, the dress, the style. Yet they don't go far enough in leading the church to have a missional heart to reach out to those outside of the church and invite them in; and they don't have culturally informed and culturally sensitive messages and environments that address the questions and concerns of our day. In other words, they have style but not substance, décor but not decorum. They're trying to stand on Mars Hill with an Acts 17 vibe, but they're doing it with a Jerusalem/Acts 2 DNA.

So they end up reaching neither group.

They know about Mars Hill, talk about Mars Hill, even yearn for Mars Hill, but they don't really know, in an intuitive sense, how to *stand* on Mars Hill. They are cultural critics, even cultural students, but not cultural *apologists*. A real Mars Hill person could spend ten minutes in their church service and see a mindset oriented toward those already convinced of Jerusalem playing out all over the place.

You pick where your church should stand – Mars Hill or Jerusalem. Of course I would argue for Mars Hill. But whatever you do, there's one place you don't want to find yourself:

No man's land.

[Read more from James Emery White here.](#)

Sources

Adapted from James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Baker).