

# 5 Key Differences Between Church Shoppers and the Unchurched



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- [CHURCH GROWTH](#)

Every week you hope to have new people at your church.

But there's a world of difference between reaching the unchurched and attracting serial church shoppers.

While it's easy to think of a visitor as simply a 'visitor,' not all visitors are the same.

Like many of you, our goal is to reach the *unchurched*. And in nearly every community, there's a [growing number](#) of unchurched people to reach.

But there's another group entirely that shows up at your church regularly: church shoppers.

Serial church shoppers are not the same as the family that moved and is looking for a church in their new community who might try five churches before settling. Nor are they the same as family that is leaving a church they've been part of for years, has exited well (here are [some thoughts on how to do that](#)) and is looking for a new place to call home for a long time.

Families moving to your community and Christians who transfer well out of another church can be welcome additions to any local church.

But serial church shoppers are different. They're consumers.

If you end up facing a true church shopper, you might discover that they've been to 5 different churches in the last 10 years, and will soon have another one (that's not yours). Or you might discover they've never settled down anywhere and have 3 churches they sample regularly, when it's convenient.

As a leader, being aware of the difference between church shoppers and who you truly want to reach is critical.

I have seen far too many church leaders waste time and energy trying to please church shoppers, to no avail. Do it regularly, and it will take you completely off mission.

Trying to appease a serial church shopper is an exercise in pleasing the un-pleasable.

Here are 5 key differences between church shoppers and the unchurched every church leader should know to ensure your church stays on mission.

1. Church shoppers think their job is to evaluate. The unchurched are looking to learn

A church shopper comes into every church with an evaluation mindset.

- Is this my kind of music?
- Is the preaching good?
- Did the people notice me?
- Do I like this place?

It's not that unchurched people don't ask the same questions. They do. And, to some extent, we *all* do.

But a church shopper thinks the church exists to please them. After all, that's why they left the last eight churches.

An unchurched person might start with evaluation, but they ultimately don't stay there. They want to learn. They want to grow. They want to challenge and explore, and most are very open to a much deeper journey than one that starts and ends with evaluation.

Church shoppers ask, "Did I like it?" And the moment they don't, they're done.

If you really boil it down, serial church shoppers think their mission is to criticize, not contribute.

2. Church shoppers move quickly from love to hate. The unchurched warm up to you gradually

It's not uncommon to have a church shopper tell you how much they *love love love* your church on the first Sunday.

But over the years I've seen this pattern: people who love your church immediately and go out of their way to tell you how it's the best thing ever rarely feel that way for long.

In fact, they often end up disliking your church just as strongly. And they're vocal about it.

The unchurched (and healthy Christian transfer growth) is different. They might like your service, but they're a little more reserved in getting involved or even letting their heart buy in.

In my experience, the people who begin a little cautiously or at least moderately and who gradually warm up turn out to be the healthiest church members in the long run.

Contrast that with a church shopper. Sometimes it seems like everything church shoppers love about your church today they will dislike tomorrow.

3. Church shoppers want your church to be like the last church (that they left).  
Unchurched people don't

I continue to be amazed at how often a church shopper will tell you how much they didn't like their last church but then ask you why your church isn't more like that church.

- "Our old church had a men's ministry."
- "Our old church had more singable music."
- "Our old church had far more mid-week activities happening."

Which makes me want to ask: "Then why did you leave?"

It's actually a good question.

The unchurched, if they have any concept of a 'last church' are usually opposed to some stereotype of church that revolves around judgmental preaching, boring services and outdated methods.

Often they're railing against a straw man from the last generation. And they appreciate the alternative you've created.

4. Church shoppers blame the church when things go wrong. The unchurched take responsibility

Somehow, the fact that a church shopper doesn't like *any* church never seems to be their fault.

It's always the church that lets them down.

In preparing to write this post, I put feelers out on social media, asking what frustrations people experience with church shoppers. [Jason Stockdale](#), who pastors the three month old [Hills Church](#) in Memphis, shared this story from another ministry he was part of:

*A couple had been to 4-5 churches over the last 2 years, I followed up with their "connection card" when they visited. They claimed they never*

*could get "connected" at any other church, but really liked our church the few times they had been. Proceeded to then tell me the son plays competitive baseball 6-7 months out of the year and the dad often travels with him on the weekends, the daughter plays competitive volleyball and soccer (pretty much year around) and the mom travels on the weekend with her. The mom worked nights as a nurse so they had no nights during the week available to get connected in a group and were rarely ever going to be at church together as a family.*

*I did everything I could to get them involved in one of our Sunday morning small group classes we offered, they lasted about 6 months and then he called me one day and said they were going to start looking for another church, they just didn't feel connected to ours.*

I think every church leader can relate. Sure, shift work is tough, but there are other choices in the mix that might have prompted more introspection and ownership.

Sadly, I suspect the pattern for this family might repeat itself again and again.

Why is it the people you do the most for are the people who claim you failed them?

In my experience, the unchurched, by contrast, take far more responsibility if things don't work out. They'll say "Hey, I'm just not sure this is the right thing for me. Keep doing what you're doing. But I think I'm out."

Sure, that's disappointing, but it's healthy.

Before we leave the subject of responsibility, here are [5 things people blame the church for...but shouldn't.](#)

5. Church shoppers want to lead THEIR ministry; unchurched people want to get involved in THE ministry

If a church shopper gets involved for a season, they'll often want to lead THEIR ministry rather than get involved with your ministry.

Maybe it's a group or something they did at their old church, or a special cause they're passionate about.

Often with serial church shoppers, ministry involvement is more about them than it is about the mission.

Unchurched people are usually fine getting involved with the wider mission of the church. They're content with finding their part in a larger story. They don't have to be the story.

What Do You See?

Am I saying that ALL church shoppers are unhealthy and ALL unchurched people are healthy?

No.

There's likely a story under some serial church shoppers' experience that explains the behaviour.

And is every unchurched person healthy?

No, not at all.

But I will take a genuinely unchurched person over a serial church shopper any day, not just because that relationship is far more on mission, but because it actually has the potential to change a life.

Serial church shoppers are more interested in changing a church than they are in changing their life.

It can be discouraging to put your heart into your ministry and still see it plateau or, worse, decline. But that's the reality facing many churches today.

According to one study, 94% of churches aren't growing. That means more than 9 out of 10 churches are stuck or losing ground.

Sadly, people in your community are experiencing widespread loneliness, polarization, and hopelessness, and they need the local church more than ever before. So, why does keeping people in church (much less attracting new members) feel like such an uphill battle?