

A person's hands are visible at the top, holding a map of a region with various towns and roads. The map is held over a person wearing a red, blue, and white plaid shirt. The background is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the map and the person's hands.

Reputation & Identity

By **Dion Garrett** | *Senior Pastor*

Last month I completed my thirteenth year as a pastor. Who says 13 is unlucky? It was a great year for me personally and especially our church! As I reflect on my relatively short tenure in ministry, I'm struck by how much the world has changed in that time. We're living in an era where more and more people are saying, "No thank you" to church. Their past experiences with church have left them wanting, sometimes even wounded. It seems that in America, *churches* have become the biggest obstacle to people finding a relationship with Jesus, which is an irony of ironies since we, the Church, are called his *Body*.

As a pastor, I know this. I encounter it all the time. People are hungry for greater meaning. They seek mystery in their lives, and they are curious about Jesus and the things that might be unseen. But many of them no longer see the Church as a place to experience that. As I heard in one of our focus groups of unchurched people in West County last summer, *"I would like church to be more interactive with the soul, not what I'm supposed to mumble at the time. I detest that ... it doesn't have meaning to anybody."*

Through our research – both of what's going on in the Church in America, and of what unchurched people in our community are saying – we've discovered that St. John breaks the mold in so many ways. In our focus groups, we spent time asking participants to describe their ideal church, the kind of church they would be interested in attending if it existed.

Here are the things they envisioned:

- Inclusive, welcoming and accepting
- No judgment
- Accepting of all backgrounds/ non-denominational
- Feel connected to others in the church
- Not too large, not a mega-church
- Brings the community together
- Committed to helping local community
- Messages are personally relevant
- Grounded in the Bible, yet meaningful for today
- A balance of traditional and modern
- Relaxed and casual, not stuffy or rigid
- Programs to engage children and teens

As you read through the list, doesn't that sound *exactly* like us? **They were describing us as their *ideal church*!** I was so encouraged by that, I hope you are too! But here's the frustrating part: We discovered that few unchurched people know we exist! Even when we told them that we *do* exist, they were skeptical. Standing in their way is all the baggage from previous church experiences, general cultural attitudes toward Christianity, and closer to home, our perceived *brand* (If the word *brand* makes you uncomfortable, it's only a shortcut for bigger concepts like reputation, identity, and personality). What we discovered is that even after explaining our true personality to these focus groups, their perceptions of us – based on things like the size of our campus ("hard to navigate"), our name ("sounds Catholic"), and our look ("seems like an office building or doctor's office") – made them doubt our claims. In short, who we are at our core is not clear and accessible to seekers out in our community. Or to put it another way: **We have the real thing to offer, but our community has no idea.**

For the last year, I've been wrestling, praying, and conversing about what to do about all this. Finally, through some wise counsel and a constant burden (thanks to the Holy Spirit) I found a path to help us move forward in light of these revelations. In addition to talking with our Board of Directors and Elders, I formed a "Brand Advisory Team."

The vision behind the Brand Advisory Team is to get a diverse group of our own St. John people together to wrestle with all that I've been wrestling with and to see where God leads us. I intentionally invited people from a variety of backgrounds, age cohorts, tenures at St. John, and a good mix of gender. I'm grateful to the following individuals for being so open to talking, exploring, sharing, and praying about our church's brand in our community:

Trish Alexandre
Stacie Brasseur
Allison Brune
Amy Calzada
Rick Fessler
David Jameson (staff)
Mindy Jeffries (board)
Karl Kamrud

Adam Kurkiewicz
Ashley Mendez
Brian Olivio (elder)
Sharon Schaller
Annmarie Wallis
Ray Ward
Neal Weber (board)
Carol Wyatt (staff)

I've already met twice with our Brand Advisory Team (lively group!), and as we move forward, they will be having lots of conversations with people. In fact, maybe you've been part of such a conversation already. If not, feel free to seek these people out! They are excited to share what we've been working on and get your perspective on how we can better help people find Jesus here.

One thing I *know*, the entire basis for my call into ministry 13 years ago is that I want people to see God as he *really* is, not who the world and even well-meaning Christians have made him. Here's what I firmly believe: If we can first help people understand who *we really* are as a local church, they'll without a doubt meet Jesus here.