



EXCERPT

IVP Books

The Reluctant Witness

Discovering the Delight of Spiritual Conversations

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Don Everts grew up assuming that spiritual conversations are always painful and awkward. But his surprising—and sometimes embarrassing—stories affirm what Scripture and the latest research reveal: spiritual conversations can actually be a delight. With original research from the Barna Group on spiritual conversations in the digital age, this book offers fresh insights and best practices for how to become eager conversationalists.

Getting Honest About the State of Our Witness

How would you characterize your own witness efforts? A characterization must be accurate enough to truly name reality, but short enough to be memorable and useable. Getting to a place where you can honestly characterize your own witness efforts should take some time and work. The process should force you to reflect and think. We read one of Luke's characterizations of the witness of the early church at the beginning of this chapter: *they were devoted followers of Jesus and they had favor with all the people. And the result? God was adding to their number daily.*

So, how would you characterize your own witness? This is a tricky thing to do. It can be difficult to get perspective on ourselves, and Luke certainly isn't around to help us. So, let's begin this way: let's look in the mirror together. A big collective gaze in the mirror: How is the church in the United States doing with witness? This collective gaze should help us each jump-start our own personal self-reflection.

And this collective gaze really is possible because of a recent partnership between two Christian organizations. Lutheran Hour Ministries recently partnered with Barna Group to assess the state of witness in the US church. Their careful qualitative and quantitative research produced a fascinating snapshot of the state of witness in the United States.

Comparing their findings with a similar study they did twenty-five years ago, Lutheran Hour Ministries and Barna Group have given the US church a gift: an accurate look in the mirror. Details of their findings can be found in the Barna Report *Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age: How Christians' Approach to Sharing Their Faith Has Changed in 25 Years*. But even a brief overview of what they found can help each of us kick-start our own self-reflection. So, what does this research show us about ourselves?

Finding 1. We are having fewer spiritual conversations. To put it simply, Americans today are less involved in spiritual conversations than we were twenty-five years ago. A "spiritual conversation" is defined as *any* conversation about spiritual or faith matters (including doubts) with *anyone*. This would include talking about Jesus with a non-Christian friend but would also include talking about the sermon you just heard with your spouse. These spiritual conversations could have been in person but also could have occurred on the phone, via text, or even on social media. In this way the researchers used a fairly broad definition for spiritual conversations. . . . We are what the researchers characterize as "reluctant conversationalists."

Finding 2. We are uncomfortable with spiritual conversations. On the whole our engagement in spiritual conversations has gotten worse over the last twenty-five years, especially when it comes to spiritual conversations with non-Christians. The reality is fewer of us feel adequately prepared to share about our Christian faith. Only 57 percent of us feel our



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Don Everts is reluctant to call himself an evangelist, but for decades he has found himself talking about Jesus with all sorts of skeptical and curious people. He is a writer for Lutheran Hour Ministries and associate pastor at Bonhomme Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Missouri. He has also been a speaker and trainer for Alpha and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. His many books include *Jesus with Dirty Feet*, *I Once Was Lost*, and *Breaking the Huddle*.

church does a good job of training us to share our faith—compared to 77 percent of us twenty-five years ago. If fewer of us feel equipped to talk about our faith, it makes sense that we are talking about our faith less.

Finding 3. Our spiritual conversations mention Jesus and the Bible less. We are less comfortable talking with non-Christians about our faith, and when we do engage in spiritual conversations with non-Christians, what we talk about today is different. We are less likely to talk about the benefits of trusting Jesus: only half of us (50%) bring up how good it is to follow Jesus when talking with non-Christians (78% of us were bringing that up twenty-five years ago). We are less likely to tell the story of how we ourselves began to trust Jesus (45% of us, down from 57%). We are also less likely to quote from the Bible (37% of us, down from 59%), and very few of us challenge others to defend their own beliefs (24%, down from 43%).

Finding 4. Our approach to spiritual conversations mirrors our surrounding culture. In their research project, Lutheran Hour Ministries and Barna Group didn't just take a look at Christians' approach to spiritual conversations, they also did a survey of the general population. What they found was that we Christians are not so different from our surrounding culture.

The research revealed that only 8 percent of Americans talk about God, faith, religion, or spirituality even once a week. Only an additional 15 percent talk about spiritual matters even once a month. The average American says they only have about one spiritual conversation a year. Americans are talking about spiritual matters less, and the American church seems to be following suit.

Finding 5. We know spiritual conversations need to be initiated. The research has revealed that we are more convinced than ever that spiritual conversations with non-Christians don't just happen on their own. They take effort. Twenty-five years ago, most of us (75%) believed that opportunities to share our faith happened unexpectedly. Today only 61 percent think so. Perhaps this is why the number of us who actively seek opportunities to share our faith in a conversation has actually gone up slightly since 1993.

We also are more convinced than ever that genuine relationships (which take time and effort to initiate and nurture) are a prerequisite to effectively sharing our faith—47 percent of us, up from only 37 percent in 1993.

Finding 6. Our conversations increasingly have a digital element. You might be encouraged to know people are still experiencing big life changes because of spiritual conversations. This is what the research tells us. It also tells us that increasingly parts of those life-altering spiritual conversations are happening digitally: through email, text, social media, and so on.

Barna's research characterizes most Christians in the United States as *reluctant conversationalists*. Luke characterized the Christians in Jerusalem as *devoted, active witnesses*. These are characterizations. If you had to characterize your own witness efforts in just one phrase or sentence, what would it be?

—Adapted from chapter one, "Reluctant Conversationalists: Getting Honest About the State of Our Witness"



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