

Unchurched not reached, leaders say

From wire service reports

ROSEMONT, Ill. — Churches are losing their hold on the hearts and souls of Americans in part because they're too busy taking care of their own to reach outsiders, leaders at an evangelism conference said.

"We do almost nothing for the truly 'unchurched,'" said the Rev. Alvin A. Illig, director of the National Catholic Evangelization Association.

He noted that 44 percent of adult Americans — 78 million people — consider themselves "unchurched," meaning they belong to no church or attend services only on holidays or for weddings or funerals, according to a recent Gallup poll.

That is up from 41 percent, or 61 million, 10 years ago.

Ninety-nine percent of U.S. Catholic parishes consciously choose not to try to reach the average of 4,000 unchurched people who live in each parish, Illig said Friday at Congress '88, a national evangelism conference in this Chicago suburb.

"The vast majority of our time, effort and money is spent on maintaining the faith of the active," added Illig, whose organization is an arm of the

church that reaches out to inactive Catholics and non-Catholics.

Protestant churches are just as guilty as Catholic churches in that regard, Illig said.

Paul Benjamin, director of the Washington, D.C.-based National Church Growth Research Center, agreed.

"American churches are going to have to take a really sharp look at themselves," said Benjamin, a minister in the Christian Church.

Sometimes churches are put off by the challenge of reaching potential members, Illig said.

But it can make all the difference, said the Rev. William J. Carl III, pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Dallas.

In the 1970s, he said, his church made a decision not to follow members to the suburbs, and to start caring for the homeless and hungry on its doorstep.

"The press picked it up, and we got a flood of volunteers and money," said Carl, whose 1,850-member church now boasts \$1.1 million in annual pledges, almost double the \$600,000 low reached during its transition.

"We have served 800,000 meals in the last 13 years," Carl said.