

UNBINDING
your
CHURCH

Enthusiastic Endorsements for *Unbinding the Gospel* and the *Unbinding the Gospel Series*...

“...with clarity and sound theological grounding, we are invited into a grand adventure....could be a watershed book for mainline Protestantism.”

Alban Institute, Congregations magazine

“...the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ evangelism program will not reverse the trend. Humor, whimsy and joy in the faith will serve us better. Reese’s book is written to provoke, to tease and to charm us back into telling our story.”

The Christian Century

“The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* is a power pack! Based on the extensive and authoritative research of Martha Grace Reese, and rooted in her passionate love for God and respect for the mainline church, these books, like Reese, are the rarest of gifts: they give us authoritative facts that arm us for real change rather than simply being alarming; they provide data that moves one to action....a treasure.”

***Todd Hunter, National Director, Alpha USA;
Former Director, Vineyard Churches USA***

“Martha Grace Reese gently but persistently lures the Mainline back to the ministry of evangelism that is the heart of the church. Based on careful research and extensive listening, the *Unbinding the Gospel Series* avoids gimmicks and the trap of the latest church growth fad. They invite pastors and members instead to a relationship with Christ that overflows the banks of our often cautious and reserved congregations. These books can convert even the most ‘evangelism-cautious’ Christians into eager disciples who love others enough to tell them why Jesus is the answer.”

John H. Thomas, General Minister and President, United Church of Christ

“Martha Grace Reese loves the Church. Hope for the mainline church abounds in these pages. She carefully demythologizes evangelism and then reconstructs it through common sense practices.”

Jim Griffith, President, Griffith Coaching

“*Unbinding the Gospel* teaches us how to relearn the practice of evangelism. It’s published at a teachable moment. Don’t just read this book—use it!”

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, General Secretary, Reformed Church in America

“Don’t miss this one!”

Evangelism Connections

“*The Unbinding the Gospel Series* is a great resource for congregations. It is inspirational, motivational, and a great model and companion for congregations as they seek to be faithful stewards of the Gospel.”

Belva Brown Jordan, Philips Theological Seminary (formerly Harvard Divinity School)

“The statistics Reese gives sober me, and they motivate me too. And her stories of vibrant congregations give me hope....when you turn the last page, you can’t just let this be another book you read. You need to let Reese’s message affect you, and your faith community, and through you, other people.”

Brian McLaren, Author of Everything Must Change

“The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* knocks one out of the park! Reese equips mainline church leaders with prayerful and practical tools needed to change the church through the power of Christ’s redeeming love.”

***Becky Garrison, Senior Contributing Editor, Wittenburg Door,
Author of Rising from the Ashes***

“This book is a marvelous resource—I heartily recommend it!”

***Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly,
Presbyterian Church U.S.A.***

“Written with intelligence, heart and a sense of humor....this is real life evangelism for real life Christians.”

Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President, Christian Church (DOC)

“*Unbinding the Gospel* is a must-read for those of us in the progressive mainstream church that are trying to reclaim the e.word.”

David Schoen, Evangelism Minister and Team Leader, United Church of Christ

“Look at Reese’s sections on the congregational dynamics that impact the growth or stagnation of our churches. She has put together an approach to sharing the gospel that works in mainline churches.”

***Bruce Humphrey, Senior Pastor,
Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, San Diego, California***

“There is a palpable sense of God’s presence and availability in Martha Grace Reese’s keen-eyed, level-headed, and big-hearted approach to evangelism. She poses the empowering possibilities of new life with style, verve, and an abounding sense of joy and trust in God. In a time when it is so easy to beat up on churches, she offers warm encouragement and wise guidance.”

Robert Lee Hill, Senior Pastor, Community Christian Church, Kansas City, MO

“This book will be a great resource for small groups, churches, and pastors who are ready to be instruments of unleashing God’s awesome Spirit in the world.”

***Yolanda Villa, Executive Pastor of Congregational Care, United Methodist Church of
the Resurrection, Leawood, KS***

“There is nothing quite like the solid research Martha Grace Reese gives us, along with clear, thoughtful analysis and concrete prescriptions for how we can move forward in faithful and effective evangelism. She manages to do all this in a book that is completely accessible to both clergy and lay people and fun to read! It is an amazing and timely accomplishment!”

***Richard L. Hamm, Executive Administrator, Christian Churches Together,
former Disciples General Minister and President***

“Martha Grace Reese has done a great service to the church by creating the Mainline Evangelism Research Project and then reporting on it in such an engaging, faith-filled, readable way. This should be required reading in all mainline churches. Our continuing existence may depend upon it.”

***Richard Peace, Robert Boyd Munger Professor of Evangelism and Spiritual Formation
at Fuller Theological Seminary***

*In more than 12,000 congregations in 50 states,
49 denominations, 8 countries...*

The Unbinding the Gospel Series by Martha Grace Reese

Change Habits, Not Just Minds!

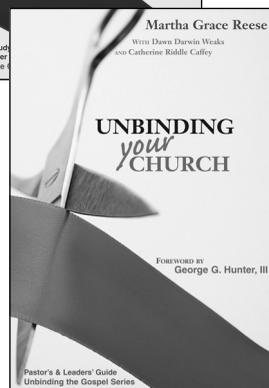
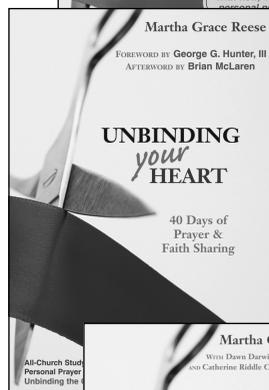
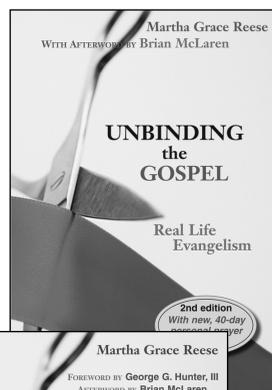
Evangelism books presume everyone *wants* to do evangelism, so they tell you *how* to do it. Four years of Lilly Endowment-funded research has demonstrated conclusively that most people would rather go get a root canal than think about evangelism!

The *Unbinding the Gospel Series*, based on this research, doesn't leap to the *hows* of faith-sharing. This course will help your church grapple with fundamental questions before it moves to the *hows: Why* share our faith? Why *do* evangelism?

Author, pastor, researcher and lawyer Martha Grace Reese discovered that most mainline Christians don't share our faith because we aren't clear why we should. (She calls evangelism the "E-word," because it's not a good out-loud word in most churches!) The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* will help your church get past the E-word stigma, answer the fundamental "why" questions, connect with the power of a deep faith in Christ, begin to pray for real and start to share *your* faith with enthusiasm and theological authenticity.

The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* is an integrated set of resources, endorsed by seven heads of denominations, evangelism experts and pastors. It is grounded in a four-year, Lilly Endowment study of superb evangelism that included 1200+ interviews, 50 site visits and a major survey of congregations doing the best job reaching unchurched people. The *Series* has sparked a transformation in understanding, thinking, habits and practices of prayer and evangelism in churches of all sizes, cultural and geographic settings and theological understandings.

The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* works. It is accessible, joy-filled, research-based, spiritually mature and beautifully written. It is not a quick fix. Please do not skim. Please do not skimp on time, planning or intensity. God can change our churches into vibrant, enthusiastic, articulate communities of faith *if* we'll change our habits.



- *Unbinding the Gospel* (red ribbon)
- *Unbinding Your Heart* (purple ribbon)
- *Unbinding Your Church* (green ribbon)

STEP ONE—Start with Church Leader’s Study: *Unbinding the Gospel*. Try one small group study with key leaders. Then move on to more small-group studies of *Gospel* with your church leaders and teachers (20% of your worship attendance).

- Pastor – the intro and chapters 1 & 4 of *Unbinding Your Church* will help you lead your *Gospel* studies effectively
- Study *Gospel* in small groups over eight sessions
- Do the exercises at the end of the chapters
- Start 40-day personal prayer journals after discussing chapter 3

If *Gospel* helps, keep going!

STEP TWO—All-Church Saturation Study: *Unbinding Your Heart* is a six-week version of *Unbinding the Gospel*. It includes a different individual prayer journal. Real changes start in churches that bring the “unbinding” experience to every person from the junior high group through the most senior seniors. Churches that build to a six-week study of *Heart* with 100% of their worship attendance change!

Each week, for 40 days, people will:

- **Pray** each day’s scripture and prayer exercise
- **Study** a chapter with their small group
- **Worship** together with sermon, music & prayers centered on the week’s chapter

Your whole church will start to pray, to talk about their faith, and to risk sharing their faith beyond church walls *if* you prepare well and give the Spirit room to maneuver.

SUPPORT FOR STEPS ONE AND TWO—Pastor’s and Leaders’ Guide: *Unbinding Your Church*
Pastors: read *Unbinding Your Church* before you lead your first study of *Unbinding the Gospel* with your church leadership. It explains our research-tested process. *Unbinding Your Church* will help you maximize results!

***Unbinding Your Church* offers:**

- **Step-by-step planning tools:** “Best methods” for pastors, church staff, organizers, small group leaders, prayer group leaders, and leaders of children and youth. Calendars, checklists, rosters, forms, impact diagrams, invitations, Web site and e-mail ideas will help you organize the E-vent, establish an intercessory prayer group, recruit small group leaders, form new groups and help existing groups commit to the all-congregation study.
- **Worship resources:** Seven engaging, theologically rich, inspiring sermons you can adapt or adopt; short Bible teaching on texts; children’s activities, prayers and complete coordinated music plans from four stellar and diverse church musicians.

The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* works! Congregations and people flourish when we are inspired, informed and given the chance to practice new ideas and skills together. The *Series* will help you invite the Spirit to sweep into your church. Ready?

More info, download free chapters: www.GraceNet.info

**Coming
September
2009**

Unbinding Your Soul
40 Days of Prayer & Faith Sharing for Small Groups
Next in the *Unbinding the Gospel Series*

For

Russ, Elizabeth & Sarah

First Christian Church, Miami, Texas

Lochlin & Catherine Anne

*and for all you pastors
who are willing to put out into the deep water
and let down the nets, one more time*

UNBINDING *your* CHURCH

Steps & Sermons

(Pastor's Guide to the Unbinding the Gospel Series)

Martha Grace Reese

WITH Dawn Darwin Weaks
AND Catherine Riddle Caffey



ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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➔ Read these chapters before leading your first study of *Unbinding the Gospel*.

* Chapter 11 contains three of the E-vent forms available for free computer download at www.GraceNet.info and a master list of the specially formatted material for your E-vent. Your password to gain access to this material is printed on page 82.

Licensing Agreement

The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* WILL change the way you think and practice evangelism IF you follow the guidelines, steps, and timetable contained in the books. We strongly recommend that you purchase a copy of *Unbinding Your Church* for:

- each *pastor* in your congregation
- the *E-vent Coordinator*
- the *Prayer Team Coordinator*
- your *Small Groups Coordinator*

Each of these key participants must have all the tools contained in these books to plan and organize a smooth and effective all-church study.

Purchasers of *Unbinding Your Church* are licensed to make as many copies as they need of the introduction and specific chapters of this book for all team members, small group leaders, office staff and musicians for one E-vent in your specific congregation (see chart on p. 41). Copying the book in its entirety is a violation of this agreement.

As a purchaser of this book, you are licensed to download one free copy of seven complete sample sermons and a full set of organizational forms from www.GraceNet.info. You may use the sermons for your E-vent in any way you wish, including preaching them verbatim. We have made these materials available online so that we could format them in a larger size, add color-coding and keep the price of the book low and accessible to everyone! Your password to access these downloads is printed on page 82.

Foreword

What a promising project! Martha Grace Reese's "trilogy" may be the most useful resources for awakening slumbering churches that have come along in a very long time. She publishes them at a critical time in the history of Protestant Christianity in North America. Ninety-nine percent of our mainline churches have little or no effective engagement with people in their communities who are not yet people of faith, hope and love. Unlike their forbears, our churches' main business is no longer "apostolic." We care for "our people" — oblivious to the fact that, due to the secularization of the West, our churches are now placed in the largest mission field in the Western hemisphere (and the third largest mission field on earth).

The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* includes three resources: *Unbinding the Gospel*, *Unbinding Your Heart* and *Unbinding Your Church*. Each has the "unbinding" metaphor in common. It is an accurate and powerful metaphor. Like Gulliver, who was once tied down by so many small strings he could not move, most mainline churches are so "tied down" by their traditions, customs, routines, assumptions, perceptions, anxieties, passivity, denial, scapegoating and (yes) rationalizations that they feel powerless to move. And, keep in mind these churches are in denominations and traditions that were, once upon a time, great contagious movements in this land!

It occurs to me that our need for unbinding extends even beyond Gospel, Heart, and Church. For instance, many conventional Christians have binders — or filters — over their eyes. They mistake the masks that people wear for their real faces, so they assume that people are more "okay" than they really are. They wager that pre-Christian people do not really need to experience forgiveness, justification, reconciliation or second birth; or to experience the grace, love, peace or kingdom of God; or to join the body of Christ; or join God's movement in the world; or to fulfill the will and purpose of God for their lives.

Most church members have bound "tongues" as well. They, tragically, assume that "witnessing" necessarily involves "preaching at" people. They do not want to do that! They do not even *want* to want to do that! Most church people love conversation, however. When they discover that faith-sharing best takes place through conversation, their tongues are often liberated.

Nevertheless, Reese's *Unbinding the Gospel Series* addresses eye and tongue bindings covertly, while addressing the bound heart and church overtly. These books are rooted in Martha Grace Reese's four years of Lilly Endowment-funded research into all kinds of effective evangelism, including a study of the one percent or so of mainline churches that actually reach unchurched people in significant numbers. The work seems to embrace the full range of mainline theology and to melt traditional dividing lines. She and her colleagues stand on the shoulders of the church's evangelical tradition to help churches today find their way forward. So traditional features such as worship, sermons, small groups, prayer, testimony and narrative play prominent roles in the *Unbinding the Gospel Series*. Readers will see, however,

the imagination and innovation expressed in these classic forms. Some features within these books are new, with little or no precedent. *Unbinding Your Church*, for instance, has a chapter specifically for church musicians, *by* church musicians! I noticed that the project commends resources in Spanish as well as English. I am embarrassed that, in the most multilingual nation-state on earth, recognizing any other language than American English will be regarded as *avant-garde*. This reveals the extent to which our churches are pathologically out of touch with the changing mission field around them.

Unbinding Your Church prepares churches for a sustained “E-vent,” an all-church small group study, to catalyze the church into outreach. I expect such E-events to move at least 20,000 churches into their first invitational foray into the community in anyone’s memory. To keep the momentum, they will need to “institutionalize” evangelism as a “regular” ongoing ministry of the People of God. Evangelism — like worship, Christian education, and regular giving — must be institutionalized expressions of our life together. Furthermore, the churches that get really serious will develop a strategic plan for their future mission and growth. They will become local movements through the strategic perspectives featured by the Church Growth movement at its best.

Most important, this whole series focuses on “Real Life Evangelism.” Christianity is not only, or even mainly, a fire escape or a ticket to heaven. The faith is a redemptive approach to the whole of our lives — this side of death as well as beyond. I predict that churches whose leaders and people are tired of net membership decline, and tired of slow death by attrition, will take to the *Unbinding the Gospel Series* big time. Reese is right that our churches are stuck. By my calculations, at least 200,000 churches in the U.S.A. are stuck. Alas, churches cannot get “unstuck” without their full cooperation. This series *can* help them regain momentum.

George G. Hunter III
Distinguished Professor of Evangelization and Church Growth
School of World Mission and Evangelism
Asbury Theological Seminary

Acknowledgments

I stand, daunted and grateful, thinking of all the people who have helped to create each of these three books in the *Unbinding the Gospel Series*. Thank you, first, to the 1200 individuals from hundreds of congregations who shared with us their understandings of their faith, their lives and their churches. The Mainline Evangelism Project (a historic, four-year study of successful evangelism in churches from seven mainline denominations) could never have helped thousands of churches across the country without you!

Thank you, second, to the thousands of thoughtful, faithful pastors and laypeople who have attended workshops and retreats with me this year. You all read the first book of the series, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism* (church leaders' study) (Chalice Press, 2007), worked with it in your churches, and helped me figure out what we needed to help individuals and churches take the next steps in freeing themselves to share their faith. *Unbinding Your Heart: 40 Days of Prayer & Faith Sharing* (the all-congregational study) and this book, *Unbinding Your Church: Steps & Sermons* (the pastors' guide) are what's next. Thank you. I hope they help you and many others!

This book, as well as the other two books in the *Unbinding the Gospel Series*, arose out of a unique four-year study of superb evangelism in seven denominations – the Mainline Evangelism Project. Thank you, Lilly Endowment, Inc., for funding the research. Thank you, Craig Dykstra and Chris Coble, for your advice and encouragement for so many years. I am more grateful than I can articulate.

Eight current and former heads of denominations have been unstinting in their support and advice throughout different stages of this work. Thank you, Wes Granberg Michaelson (Reformed Church in America); Dick Hamm (Disciples of Christ, current Executive Administrator, Christian Churches Together); Todd Hunter (Vineyard Churches, USA and current National Director, Alpha USA); Cliff Kirkpatrick (Presbyterian Church USA); Roy Medley (American Baptist Churches, USA); Stan Noffsinger (Church of the Brethren); John Thomas (United Church of Christ); and Sharon Watkins (Christian Church, Disciples of Christ). You all have been wonderful. Thank you for your involvement and help.

George Hunter has written the insightful foreword to this book, in addition to a beautiful endorsement of *Unbinding the Gospel*. This is only the latest demonstration of George's generosity, advice and gracious encouragement of this work since grant proposal stage. Brian McLaren wrote a powerful afterword for *Unbinding the Gospel* and *Unbinding Your Heart*. These two men are giants in the field of churches and faith sharing. Thank you both so much for lending your gravitas and humor as you cheered on this work!

Dawn Darwin Weaks and Catherine Riddle Caffey have been wonderful collaborators on this book for pastors. Dawn wrote sermons and worship resources to coordinate with the E-vent, the all-congregational study of *Unbinding Your Heart* that is the focus of this book. She first suggested doing this step-by-step book for the all-congregational study. Catherine named the "E-vent," the name we're suggesting for churches' 40-day prayer and faith sharing

experience. She has designed practical flow charts and forms you're going to love. They have mulled options, planned and strategized brilliantly! They have given their gifts and time to this project without reserve. They are praying for you who will use this book. Thank you, Dawn and Catherine.

Four fantastic musicians contributed to *Unbinding Your Church*. They have taken Dawn's sermons and created music plans for them. They haven't watered anything down. They have spun out the music that they would do in their own, completely different congregations. Church musicians are going to join me in singing a huge "thank you!" to Raymond Wise, composer, pastor and professor, Columbus, Ohio; Michael Graham, Woodmont Christian Church, Nashville, Tennessee; Raquel Martinez, UMC of San Antonio, Texas; and Joyce Meredith, New Life Community United Methodist Church, Hebron, Ohio. You all rock! (And so will the rest of us when *our* churches' musicians start taking your suggestions!)

Jacqueline E. Wenger of Catholic University helped design and oversee an extensive survey/questionnaire portion of the Mainline Evangelism Study with scholarly insight, deep faith and humor. Kris Tenny-Brittian worked with me during the two years of the most intricate portions of Project research. She not only collected and sorted information, data and stories, she thoughtfully and prayerfully helped me make sense of it. Jeff Gill, a brilliant pastor, has one of those minds that sifts ideas and data like a whale filtering plankton. Our years of ongoing e-mails and conversations made these books both stronger and the process a lot more fun! Don Schutt has been my prayer and figuring-things-out partner for almost 20 years. His spiritual presence is indelibly imprinted upon the entire *Unbinding the Gospel Series*.

Many friends and colleagues have been gracious conversation partners. You have mulled ideas, given sage advice, read versions of this and previous manuscripts, and given me your best thoughts. I'm so grateful to all of you. Thank you — Elizabeth Bowman, Sherry Brittian, Ellie Campbell, Phil Coons, Betsie Czechin, Chuck Denison, Sue & Kate Dullard, Barry & Patricia Feld, Becky Garrison, Nancy Lee Gauche, Sarah Emily Gauche, Jim Griffith, Elizabeth Harman, Ginny Heisey, Bob Hill, Terry Hodge, Jeff Johnson, Carol Loeb, Heidi & Leeann & Nicole Korstad, Kim Gage Ryan, Paul Scanlon, Letha Dawson Scanzoni, Tryna Loos, Luke & Margo Reese, Patience Schock, Dave Schoen, Nancy Stimson, Gary Straub, Joanne Thomson, Cameron Trimble, Sharon Tutko, Maribeth Blackman Westerfield, Sarah White and Newell Williams.

Carol Loeb and her crew in the Southwest Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church came up with the idea of a prayer wall for their annual conference in 2007. I loved it and have spun it into a congregational version for the E-vent, the all-church study. Cameron Trimble first suggested making a movie of your E-vent to post on MySpace and YouTube (see children & youth chapter).

Chalice Press, you all are wonderful! Thank you for everything, Wes Buchek, Trent Butler, Lynne Letchworth, Cindy Meilink, Lisa Scronce, Gail Stobaugh, and Elizabeth Wright.

And to my husband, Russ White — thank you more than I am willing to say right out loud, here. I love you dearly.

MGR

Wolf Run, Marcell, Minnesota

Introduction

Change Habits, Not Just Minds!

I'm an optimist. When I walk into a bookstore, part of me quietly scans display tables for the new Jane Austen.¹ I've discovered that I'm not alone. A lot of pastors are right there with me, shoulder to shoulder, hoping against hope. Pastors work with kids everyone else has given up on. Pastors love grumps who draw eye rolls from the rest of us. Pastors get excited over the tiniest signs of growing insight, one returning visitor, the faintest whiff of progress. No matter how badly the game is going, pastors know their team might recover the ball in the last 20 seconds and return it for a 68-yard touchdown to win the game. A miracle could happen at any moment! God will take care of it!

We pastors have that kind of job. We hope against hope. We wait for resurrection. We have watched a Word from the pulpit change lives. It's so great to get a sermon dead right, solidly crafted, brilliantly illustrated. The feeling of standing up and delivering those words is a rush, it's a joy. Our hope is our joy. Our hope is in Christ. Our hope is real.

Pastors' lives contain another element, in addition to hope. Realism balances hope. Hope perches on one end of a teeter-totter, weighing in with probabilities, statistics and likelihoods. When we are fully mature, we have hope *and* we look at realities. We have hope — we calculate the data. We trust Jesus' words and give away our coats. Then we make our pension fund payment. Hope/reality. Hope/realism. Hope/likelihoods. That's the teeter-totter rhythm of a mature life.

What Is Evangelism?

For the purposes of this book, evangelism is anything you say or do to help another person move into closer relationship with God, or into Christian community.

Unbinding Your Church

Most of us begin life with a tendency to gravitate to one end or the other of the teeter-totter. Some of us are natural hope people, who learn stubborn realities as a second language. Others of us think, calculate, strategize, look at reality naturally — only later in life do we learn to take risks, to trust the Spirit, to loosen our death grip on control! Balance comes with maturity. Balance is crucial for effective ministry. There is no place like the pastorate to learn the hope/reality balancing act. I pray that this book and the rest of the *Unbinding the Gospel Series* will help you dance the balance between faith in God's power *and* trust in human work. It takes a pretty good dancer to help our congregations change their minds and habits.

The purpose of an all-congregation study isn't to talk people into the idea of doing evangelism. The aim is to help our dear, faithful church people develop their own faith and to learn to talk about it — with each other first.

The Mainline Evangelism Project

I just finished directing the only major national study of mainline evangelism in memory. The Lilly Endowment helped us look at evangelism all over the country for four years. We scoured through stacks of statistics, conducting a sociological survey of the congregations that are doing the best job helping people with no church background move into Christian faith. We conducted more than 1200 personal interviews. We discovered fascinating things about churches that are doing a wonderful job with all different types of evangelism. Here are a few of our findings about great evangelistic churches:

- Evangelistic churches exist all along the theological spectrum.
- All sizes of churches are doing great evangelism — throughout the country.
- Leaders and members love Jesus. Their spiritual lives keep growing.
- These churches help their people articulate their faith. They encourage faith sharing.
- Pastors maintain a laser-like focus on evangelism, on reaching out to people *beyond* church walls.

I have great hope, and now substantial data, that these aspects of church life are replicable. Typical people, normal pastors, are doing great evangelism. Other typical people, normal pastors, are *learning* how to do great evangelism. My hope lies in the fact that evangelism isn't rocket science. It's faith sharing. We can learn to *connect* more deeply with Christ. We can learn to *talk* about it.

For the purposes of this book, evangelism is anything you say or do to help another person move into closer relationship with God, or into Christian community.

How Can We Replicate Great Evangelism?

I wrote a book for pastors and church leaders to study together in the hope that many more of us can learn to deepen our faith and share it (*Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*, Chalice Press, 2007). I have worked with thousands of people who have read *Unbinding the Gospel* in the seven months since the publisher released it. We have made important discoveries:

We can help churches — *mainline* churches — begin to do authentic, effective evangelism. The book actually works! Amazing!

Unbinding the Gospel helps most when churches study it slowly in small groups, doing the exercises. Start with the congregational leaders. Our people need the intimacy of small groups. They also need time and practice to assimilate new ideas and to begin to change their prayer and faith sharing habits.

The congregations that make significant, systemic changes have adapted the book as an all-congregational study after their leaders were trained. They work hard to saturate their whole church with new ideas, new ways to pray, new ways to share their faith. The “everyone together” spiritual experience is crucial. We don’t do church alone!

Think of it this way. A lot of churches are stuck on a treadmill because we *talk* about faith, but avoid the slippery slope of a visceral relationship with God. We talk about prayer, but we’re not exactly beating a path to the foot of the throne to worship our Savior and to gaze upon his face.

So *why* would our churches feel a little *dry* to people??

Hmmm. Curious.

We’re not going to fix these abstraction predicaments by *talking* about them. We must change our habits, not just our minds! Our people need to:

1. pray, and
2. practice talking about their faith experiences with
 - a. each other and
 - b. their friends.

We need to get real. It’s going to take some time, some organization, some soul growth and some systemic change in our churches.

We’re figuring out how to change habits. I have worked with many churches that have adapted *Unbinding the Gospel* (a 10-chapter book) to a six-week, all-congregational study. I now see that there is a broad-based need to take *Unbinding the Gospel* to the next level — an all-church, small group study version.

I have great hope, and now substantial data, that these aspects of church life are replicable. Typical people, normal pastors, are doing great evangelism. Other typical people, normal pastors, are *learning* how to do great evangelism. My hope lies in the fact that evangelism isn’t rocket science. It’s faith sharing. We can learn to *connect* more deeply with Christ. We can learn to *talk* about it.

Unbinding Your Church

What are the Questions? I have heard loads of questions during the course of these conversations. They are “How?” questions. “How do we lead small groups?...prayer groups? How can we integrate *Unbinding the Gospel* into worship, besides just a sermon? What else can we do to pull together activities for the whole church?...for the kids and youth? How can we take this book and sink it deep into the congregation so stuff will change around here?”

Here’s the Answer: At least, here’s *one* answer! I’m giving you my best shot at answers to these questions I keep hearing from pastors and lay leaders. I’ve written two new books that go together with *Unbinding the Gospel* to help you do an all-congregational study. We’re calling it the *Unbinding the Gospel Series*. It is testing *well!*

Unbinding Your Heart: 40 Days of Prayer & Faith Sharing is the six-week version of *Unbinding the Gospel*, *with* 40 days of individual prayer exercises. (This book has a purple ribbon on the cover.)² *Unbinding Your Church: A Pastor’s Guide* (this book, with its green ribbon) is a pastor’s and leaders’ guide to an all-church study, with small group and prayer group process suggestions, worship, youth and organization resources to do an all-church study, or as we call it, an “E-vent!”³

Why Do an All-congregation Study, an E-vent@Your Church?

An all-church, small group study creates synergy and momentum within your church. Can you remember the most powerful faith moment in your life? When you ask them to describe the most powerful spiritual experience of their lives, many Christian leaders point to a church camp experience, decades ago. A lot of them say that nothing has matched it since for spiritual growth, theological integration, or fun. It’s wonderful that they experienced camp in the first place, but that kind of intense experience of God and powerful community learning doesn’t have to stop with the end of adolescence. God will give it to us *now*. An all-church study is a saturation experience that can rival church camp in its impact on people’s lives.

One pastor told me, “I can’t explain the power of the synergy that exploded in our church when everyone was doing the same prayer exercises together, when they were all reading the same chapter, when the sermon took it a step further on Sunday. People were stopping each other in the grocery store and talking about the prayer they had both done that morning. Doing the all-church study

Think of it this way. A lot of churches are stuck on a treadmill because we *talk* about faith, but avoid the slippery slope of a visceral relationship with God. We talk about prayer, but we’re not exactly beating a path to the foot of the throne to worship our Savior and to gaze upon his face.

So *why* would our churches feel a little *dry* to people??

changed lives. It changed our church.” Experiences this powerful go into the memory banks, into the DNA of a church. **Then** you can change, “institutionalize” the creativity (in the very best sense of that word) using the momentum you’ve gained!

Our churches often struggle because we’re very rational people. We talk a lot. Typical mainline church members have not experienced enough

- consistent, disciplined prayer
- emotional, spiritual, intellectual sharing with other church members or
- unifying community experiences

One church member described the adults in her church, “We don’t really share anything deep in our lives, either in our normal lives, or in our spiritual lives (if we have one). What we do is **work** side by side. For **years**, we work side by side. We’re sort of like toddlers. We don’t interact. We do parallel play!”

A saturation experience can get us talking, for real. It can move us into significant prayer, powerful worship, and create lifelong connections — dear friendships anchored in bedrock. That’s the kind of faith that people talk about with their friends! This is a living faith that shifts into faith-sharing.

The purpose of an all-congregation study isn’t to talk people into the idea of doing evangelism. The aim is to help our dear, faithful church people develop their own faith and to learn to talk about it — with each other first.

A study of *Unbinding the Gospel* and *Unbinding Your Heart* is really aimed at the intimate, inside experience of the church. It’s not like sales training. It’s more like family camp. If our church family loves God and loves each other, the neighbor “kids” will want to come over and hang out at our house — because it’s fun and they can talk for real.

That’s **why** to do an all-church study.

The essentials of an E-vent. Don’t leave home without them!

Is an all-church study hard to organize and do well? Yes.

Is it worth it? Those who have done one say, “Yes!”

An E-vent is a huge undertaking. We all know that the Christian life is about crucifixion and that we must conform to the suffering of Christ. But we don’t need to be volunteers! Could we let **God** pick

We’re not going to fix these abstraction predicaments by **talking** about them. We must change our habits, not just our minds! Our people need to:

1. pray, and
2. practice talking about their faith experiences with
 - a. each other and
 - b. their friends.

We need to get real. It’s going to take some time, some organization, some soul growth and some systemic change in our churches.

Unbinding Your Church

our crucifixions and not just blunder into the first one that offers itself because we're not well organized? If you're going to do an E-vent, do it smart. Go slowly. Don't kill yourself with overwork. An all-congregation study is about faith and prayer, not over-functioning. Here are the essentials. Please do them!!

Step 1: Go slowly. Train leadership first. 20% of your leadership must study *Unbinding the Gospel* as a small group experience *before* you do an E-vent (the six-week, all-church study of *Unbinding Your Heart*). Go with the Spirit's timing. Don't rush.

Planning Phase: Take 12 to 16 weeks to prepare for your E-vent. Get well organized. Train and prepare leaders. Sign up group members slowly. If you rush, you will burn out your leaders, or they'll sideline themselves. The point is to get everyone in your congregation involved in a weekly small group study.

Small group studies work best when they're slow and experiential. Don't just *read* the books, *study* them, with trained leaders, using the discussion questions and the *exercises*. Please follow the group process suggestions in chapter 4 of this book. They form the solid foundation for an E-vent that will help you change your church's habits, not just skim the surface.

Pray seriously, both with the individual prayer exercises, and in your small groups. The Intercessory Prayer Team suggestions in chapters 4 and 5 are crucial for a successful E-vent.

Do nothing but the E-vent during the six weeks you've dedicated to it. Cancel all other church meetings. Think of the E-vent as a Sabbath. You'll have to scurry around the day before, but no cooking or cleaning or plowing on Sunday! Relax and enjoy time with God and your church family for this season.

Be flexible. Don't overload on activities. We suggest all sorts of things here. Pray together as you plan. Discern *with the Spirit* the worship parts, the activities with kids and the whole church that fit *your church*. Would you rather have your watchword be, "How much can we cram into this without actually killing ourselves?" *or*, "What specific things could we do that would help us relax into God?" You choose!

You can do an all-congregational study in many ways. Use all of your creativity. BUT!! **Include these essentials if you want to help your congregation change and actually start doing effective evangelism.** Churches that skim over these essentials may have a nice experience, but the experience doesn't tend to make much of a dent in their church's preexisting patterns. Why do all this work for nothing?

One church member described the adults in her church, "We don't really share anything deep in our lives, either in our normal lives, or in our spiritual lives (if we have one). What we do is *work* side by side. For *years*, we work side by side. We're sort of like toddlers. We don't interact. We do parallel play!"

Unbinding the Gospel Series Chart (Sequence of Series)

What?	Step 1	Planning	Step 2, The E-vent
Which book?	<i>Unbinding the Gospel</i>	<i>Unbinding Your Church</i>	<i>Unbinding Your Heart</i>
	8–24 weeks	12–16 weeks	6 weeks
<i>(Step 1 & Planning can overlap a bit)</i>			
How?	Study for leaders — 20% worship attendance	Leaders organize for E-vent	Whole church experience
Who?	Pastor & small groups	Pastors & E-vent coordinators	all church divided into small groups
	Visionary leaders “test balloon”	Church staff & music director	existing groups
	Core leaders	E-vent Team	new groups
	Enthusiastic leaders	Small Group Team	all do individual prayer
	Church staff	Prayer Team	
	Youth & children’s ministries		
Decide!	Do E-vent — >	Organized? — >	Evaluate — > Your future!

A study of *Unbinding the Gospel* and *Unbinding Your Heart* is really aimed at the intimate, inside experience of the church. It’s not like sales training. It’s more like family camp. If our church family loves God and loves each other, the neighbor “kids” will want to come over and hang out at our house — because it’s fun and they can talk for real.

What’s in This Book?

The rest of this book (*Unbinding Your Church: Steps & Sermons*, green ribbon) should help you with the details of an E-vent.

Part I spells out our best wisdom for *timing, organization, preparation, group recruitment and leadership, as well as suggestions for specific activities*. If you want a successful E-vent, the small group process and the Prayer Team suggestions in chapters 4 and 5 are critically important. Please don’t take the rest of it — the specific organizational or activity suggestions — as written in stone. They’re thoughts, ideas, suggestions. Discard or invent new possibilities that will fit you better!

Part II gives you *worship ideas, with sermons, prayers, music and scripture lessons that are integrated with each week’s chapter from Unbinding Your Heart*. Dawn Weaks is the pastor of a 400-persons-in-worship church in the Kansas City area. Fred Craddock, Barbara Brown Taylor, Rick Warren, T. D. Jakes or the pastor of a 40-persons-in-worship rural congregation would each preach differently. So will you!

Unbinding Your Church

The sample sermons are, in several senses, “generic.” First, they are consciously a little “impersonal.” They are intended to be a framework, upon which you can hang your own examples and personal style. Second, you can use them any time of the church year. Many congregations will choose to do the E-vent during Lent, so you might choose to stay with a Lenten focus. If so, please do try to use your sermons to draw in the crucial themes from that week’s chapter of *Unbinding Your Heart*.

These sermon samples are meant to prime the pump. Use ideas, pitch them. You may preach these sermons word for word if you want! Incorporate what’s helpful; bag what isn’t. (*See instruction for downloading complete sermons on page 82.*)

Music. Four great church musicians matched music to Dawn’s sermons. They didn’t “dumb down” their music plans — these are the hymns and anthems each one of them would use in their own churches. The musical styles represented are African-American/Gospel; new church contemporary; rather elegant, traditional Euro-American congregation; and Hispanic. Musicians (and everyone else): Enjoy!

Part II also contains *forms, diagrams, lists, weekly checklists and organizational aids*. Catherine Caffey is a spiritually deep, ebullient marketing executive who revels in planning and organization. List and diagram people — you are going to *love* this section! For those of you who see an instruction manual and start to hyperventilate from flashbacks of assembling that Barbie’s Dream House at midnight on Christmas Eve, with those diagrams about inserting something or another into sprocket D — just skip on down! You’ll be fine in a minute. It’s a spiritual gifts thing. The organizers will do the organizing (1 Cor. 12). Download organizational forms from www.GraceNet.info, using your password, found on page 82.

This book is to help you use *Unbinding the Gospel* and *Unbinding Your Heart* to create an effective E-vent, as easily as possible. We offer you one set of thoughts, one plan, one set of sermons out of a million ways you could do a study in your church. ***Don’t follow any ideas rigidly except for the essentials on page 6!***

Pastors — spend your time where it matters. Pray and think with your leaders rather than reinventing organizational wheels! Remember: the point of the E-vent is to help your members deepen their faith so that they have something to share. Then they can take the first steps toward sharing their faith, toward real evangelism that can change lives. If your E-vent is during Lent, members could invite friends to Easter egg hunts, Palm Sunday and Easter. If your E-vent is

Would you rather have your watchword be, “How much can we cram into this without actually killing ourselves?” **or**, “What specific things could we do that would help us relax into God?” You choose!

during the fall, invite friends to Christmas parties and Christmas Eve. Who knows where this could lead in your church? I would love to hear your story. If something great (or ghastly!) happens as a result of your E-vent, will you tell me? (Contact me through our Web site, www.GraceNet.info. Please put “E-vent Story” as the subject line, okay?) I really want to know!

We’ve Discovered Some Extremes to Avoid!

Pastors, thank you for your ministries, for spending your lives serving God. It matters. I want to say one more thing that I’ve learned as I’ve worked with pastors who are using *Unbinding the Gospel* in their churches.

The pastors who do the best job of helping their churches begin to do substantial evangelism move up and down the hope/reality teeter-totter. If they sit, parked in the dust at either end of that teeter-totter, so do their churches! Hope without structure has the substance of cappuccino foam. Rigid structure without flexible faith can quench the power and spontaneity of the Spirit. The key to helping churches change is to stay hopeful and flexible, and to provide habit-changing structure. Keep that teeter-totter moving!

Some pastors do more than strike a shaky balance on the hope/reality teeter-totter. They pirouette on that board like Fred Astaire or Ginger Rogers (same steps, but backwards, in heels)! Most of us need a *couple* more dance lessons before we start dipping and twirling. This book is my attempt to help you move into the fluid, structured, acrobatic type of pastoring that promises the best chance to help your church change. That sounds cute, but abstract, doesn’t it? All right. Sometimes it helps us to see what *doesn’t* work in order to catch the vision of what might be helpful in our specific situations.

How Could We Shoot Ourselves in the Foot?

Here are the two main reasons I see pastors sitting on the teeter-totter, smiling and nodding as they read their copies of *Unbinding the Gospel*, rear ends planted firmly in playground dust.

Hope Pastors

The “hope end” pastors have a tendency to grab *Unbinding the Gospel* off shelves. Boy! Do *they* move quickly! They read it on an airplane on Wednesday. They say “Wow! *Everyone* in my church could get these ideas! This is *great!*” They scribble out a newsletter

E-vent Essentials

1. Train leaders first (*Unbinding the Gospel*, 8–24 weeks)
2. Prepare for the E-vent slowly (16 weeks)
3. All studies — slow and experiential
4. Pray seriously
5. E-vent itself is a Sabbath (6 weeks)
6. Don’t overload on activities!

The pastors who do the best job of helping their churches begin to do substantial evangelism move up and down the hope/reality teeter-totter. If they sit, parked in the dust at either end of that teeter-totter, so do their churches! Hope without structure has the substance of cappuccino foam. Rigid structure without flexible faith can quench the power and spontaneity of the Spirit. The key to helping churches change is to stay hopeful and flexible, and to provide habit-changing structure. Keep that teeter-totter moving!

article as they gulp their diet Cokes and gobble airline peanuts. They write sermons straight out of chapter 2 on Thursday. On Sunday, they tell their people to go do evangelism. Then they go do something else. But most of their people keep *not* doing evangelism. Huhhh. Curious.

I don't mean to be rude here to my "hope end of the teeter-totter" brothers and sisters. (Remember, I'm the one operating with the "Jane Austen *must* still be out there" magical thinking.) I *certainly* don't want to suggest that my book, your sermons and all those excited conversations aren't brilliant, fascinating, scintillating. But we may need to stroll down to the reality end of the teeter-totter for just a moment. I think we've uncovered one *slightly* unrealistic, unconscious expectation that may be sabotaging the effectiveness of a lot of our ministries.

Many of us work out of an unconscious expectation that if we tell someone something, if we hammer home a persuasive point in a sermon (or book), that the people we serve are going to rush out and start doing it. They *may* go right out the door and start doing it. But that's usually if we're telling them to go to the all-church luncheon that starts right after the second service.

If the sermon (or book) contains the word "*evangelism*," odds are pretty good that all those people who gaze at us with such rapt attention may *not* race out and do it. Not any time soon.

It's going to take more than pastors reading *Unbinding the Gospel* one afternoon, thinking it's great, then mentioning it in a sermon. The very idea of evangelism, the "E word," "That Which Must Not Be Named in Mainline Churches," is too scary to most of our people. Most of our people need a conversion experience in relationship to the very *word* "*evangelism*" before they can hear anything we say about sharing our faith.

Josh Lyman was one of the characters on *The West Wing* (a TV show). Relationships with women were not his strong suit. Josh was a brilliant political strategist. He was also naive, avoidant, romantic, smitten, goofy (an extreme case of a "hope end" kind of guy). Donna Moss, his administrative assistant, finally laid it out for him, in a tone of utter frustration. "Look, Josh, you have to ask her out on a *date*. You can't just keep randomly tumbling into women *sideways*, then waiting for them to break *up* with you, like you *always* do."⁴

Let's think about the way we approach evangelism for a moment. Could we go about it intentionally?...slowly?...over time? Will we

give strategic attention to training our people to have a spiritual life?...to learn to articulate their faith? Could we give them a viable opportunity to change their minds *and* their habits — all together, at the same time? Could we pray and plan so that instead of vaguely expecting total strangers to drop by our churches uninvited some day, we intentionally *ask* them to come, prepare the party for them, and make a place for them in our churches and in our lives?

What if we really *meant* it when we said we wanted to do evangelism? What if we actually asked people out on a date, instead of just waiting for them to randomly tumble into us sideways and hoping they break up with us soon, like we always do?

Reality End Glitches?

Dearest reality end pastors —

How might you end up sitting on the ground at *your* end of the teeter-totter? From everything I've seen, you'll understand the need to structure your people's experience. You won't just talk to your people one day and expect them to change their habits by next Tuesday. You'll understand the need for classes and steps and structure. If *you* mess up, you're much more likely to have a blind spot that could make you miss the need for flexibility, fluidity, change, experimentation, trust, flowing with the Spirit!

Whatever you do, *don't* take this book too seriously! (Okay, take it seriously, but don't take it *literally*.)

The part of *Unbinding Your Church* that matters is the long, slow, step-by-step process. Be ready to ditch a lot of specifics! The sample sermons Dawn Weaks wrote are suggestions, from *one* pastor, from *one* preaching tradition. So are all the fabulous music plans that four different musicians have played out for you. The idea of doing an "E-vent," sermons, prayer walls, vigils, kids' activities and inviting friends to a celebration at the end are just ideas.

You may need to do something completely different.

The important thing is that

first leaders,

then the whole congregation

work on this book themselves,

in small groups,

over time,

doing the exercises!

Remember: the point of the E-vent is to help your members deepen their faith so that they have something to share. Then they can take the first steps toward sharing their faith, toward real evangelism that can change lives.

After that, you have to do what works for your church.

A while ago, a large church called me to discuss using *Unbinding the Gospel* for an all-church study. I invited them to be a “test” congregation. So I gave them all the materials for *Unbinding Your Heart* and *Unbinding Your Church*. They decided to do the study

Pastor’s Guide with their leaders first
 then the whole congregation
 in small groups
 over time
 doing the exercises.

Include these essentials, if you want to help your congregation change and actually start doing effective evangelism. Churches that skim over these essentials may have a nice experience, but the experience doesn’t tend to make much of a dent in their church’s preexisting patterns. Why do all this work for nothing?

Perfect! See? It’s the essentials!

University Church told me that they were going to do their study in the context of trying to discern where God is calling their congregation in their next major phase of ministry. They just finished a massive building project. The senior pastor of almost 20 years has announced that he is willing to stay with the church two to four more years before he retires. He’ll stay *if* the church feels called to work on discernment for the future, and transition toward that change. He’s too intense to coast!

Elizabeth, their associate pastor, called me several weeks later. She worried that doing an E-vent with the activities, sermons and worship designs in *Unbinding Your Church* might feel manipulative to people, that they might feel railroaded into designating “evangelism” as their call to the future.

She’s exactly right. It could *feel* manipulative to people because at this moment in University Church’s life, it would *be* manipulative! Their people need to be asking God what they should focus on next, not presuming that God is going to tell them that evangelism should be the most important expression of their next phase of ministry.

Studying *Unbinding Your Heart* in small groups and doing the 40 days of individual prayer exercises is perfect for them. The thoughts for pastors (chapters 1 & 2), the organizational ideas (chapter 3), the small group process ideas (chapter 4), the Prayer Team processes (chapter 5), the youth ideas (chapter 6) outlined in *Unbinding Your Church* should work beautifully. But University Church ought to construct their own sermons and congregational events that help focus attention on the book’s prayer, discernment, community, and congregational systems themes.

What would a discernment-focused E-vent look like? What if University Church emphasized the prayer wall and prayer vigil

suggestions? Instead of a celebration at the end to which to invite friends, how about a one-day prayer retreat for the entire church? What if the leaders began with a leadership retreat Friday at dinner? The rest of the congregation could begin a 24-hour prayer vigil at the same time. The entire congregation could gather on Saturday morning to pray and discern together about where God is calling the church. They could ask the Spirit what specific steps they should take next. End the vigil and the retreat late Saturday afternoon.

The next morning in worship, the senior pastor could preach a great sermon, summarizing what God has taught the congregation, where Christ is leading them.

What would a sermon series trajectory look like for University Church's six-week, all-congregation study of *Unbinding Your Heart*? Here's one possibility. Each sermon would match the themes of that week's chapter:

- Introductory sermon for "Sign-up Sunday" (Six weeks before they start the study): We're going to discern God's call for our next phase of ministry together. Will you help? Will you pray together and join a small group? God has new ideas for us! Let's find out what God has in mind, together!
- Week 1: What is my faith? Who is Christ in my life? Why does being a Christian matter?
- Week 2: Prayer — we at University Church have seen what prayer can do! Where could God lead us next?
- Week 3: Real life in Christ — What can it look like here? What's most vibrant about us as a church? Where are we still a little fakey, a little plastic?
- Week 4: What do new members want? People in this community need Christ, they yearn to be accepted and loved. Do we care?
- Week 5: How are we doing as a church? What are our greatest strengths? What are our most profound weaknesses? What about us makes God say "Hurray!?" What would God change in us or in what we're doing?

[Prayer Vigil and Congregation's Retreat]

- Week 6: Okay, we had our retreat. We heard these words from God _____; we felt these nudges from the Spirit _____. Shall we go together? It won't all be easy. There will be wind, waves and currents to navigate, but if we're with Christ, it will be great! Are you ready? All right, let's go!

What if we opened ourselves to be vehicles for the Spirit? God can do miracles through us that we cannot imagine yet. We leaders can each say "yes" or "no" to God. Something real, powerful, creative, new, is beginning. We can each play a role in it.

Do you see how University Church could have sat in the dust at the “detail/routine/statistics/this-is-the-*plan*” end of the teeter-totter? Elizabeth is a reality end pastor. And she prays, big time! She felt that something in the plan wasn’t right for their congregation. She perceived that they needed to do something else. Her instincts were spectacular!

Reality Pastors — stay open to the Spirit. Be ready to scrap the plan and do something else!

Hope Pastors — slow down and focus! We must put structures in place. We need to routinize some of this creativity if we expect it to change people’s lives. **Reality Pastors** — you don’t need to do all this work yourselves. The Spirit will do much of the heavy lifting of evangelism. Keep listening. Pastors: we have two jobs. We must pray, love God, trust, hope against hope, believe in miracles and follow the leadings of the Spirit. **And** we must think, prepare, organize, communicate, educate, train and plan strategically.

God’s Doing Something Different

The Mainline Evangelism Project and our experience with *Unbinding the Gospel* showed that entire churches are ready to pray and to begin to talk about their faith with others. Mainline churches are ripe to slow down and pray. They’re poised to get intentional about prayer and faith sharing.

I’ve visited many cities and spoken with thousands of church people during the last few years. I have a hard time even articulating this, because it feels new and fragile. But the Spirit is beginning to do things all over the country, in all sorts of churches — yes, mainline churches! I was concerned that I was making this up out of my own fevered imagination, so I have spoken with gifted church leaders with deep insight and broad exposure to the church. They see something new, too. Many of us are experiencing hope grounded in reality. God is at work.

How will we respond? In some ways, mainline churches have operated like a minority political party, the “loyal opposition” for too long. We have critiqued, held back and said what’s wrong with *other* parts of Christ’s church. Many of the things we’ve said may have a lot of truth in them. But it’s the holding back that’s the problem. That’s us planted in playground dust. Many of us haven’t done as good a job putting our beliefs and lives on the line to follow the Spirit. We don’t have a lot of experience leading in new, positive directions. It is

How will we respond? In some ways, mainline churches have operated like a minority political party, the “loyal opposition” for too long. We have critiqued, held back and said what’s wrong with *other* parts of Christ’s church. Many of the things we’ve said may have a lot of truth in them. But it’s the holding back that’s the problem. That’s us planted in playground dust.

going to take vast, divinely inspired imagination for us to shift if we want God to use us in powerful, creative ways for *new* things.

What if we opened ourselves to be vehicles for the Spirit? I don't want to sound any more grandiose than I can help, but I think God can do miracles through us that we cannot imagine yet. We leaders can each say "yes" or "no" to God. Something real, powerful, creative, new, is beginning. We can each play a role in it.

Will you pray? Will you let God show you new ways to lead and serve? Will you ask people from other parts of Christ's church to teach you things we don't know well, particularly about prayer and following Christ every step of the way? Could you help the people you serve begin to connect so deeply with Christ that they will let the Spirit use them, too?

Who knows where God is leading us? I know one thing. I want to be part of it.

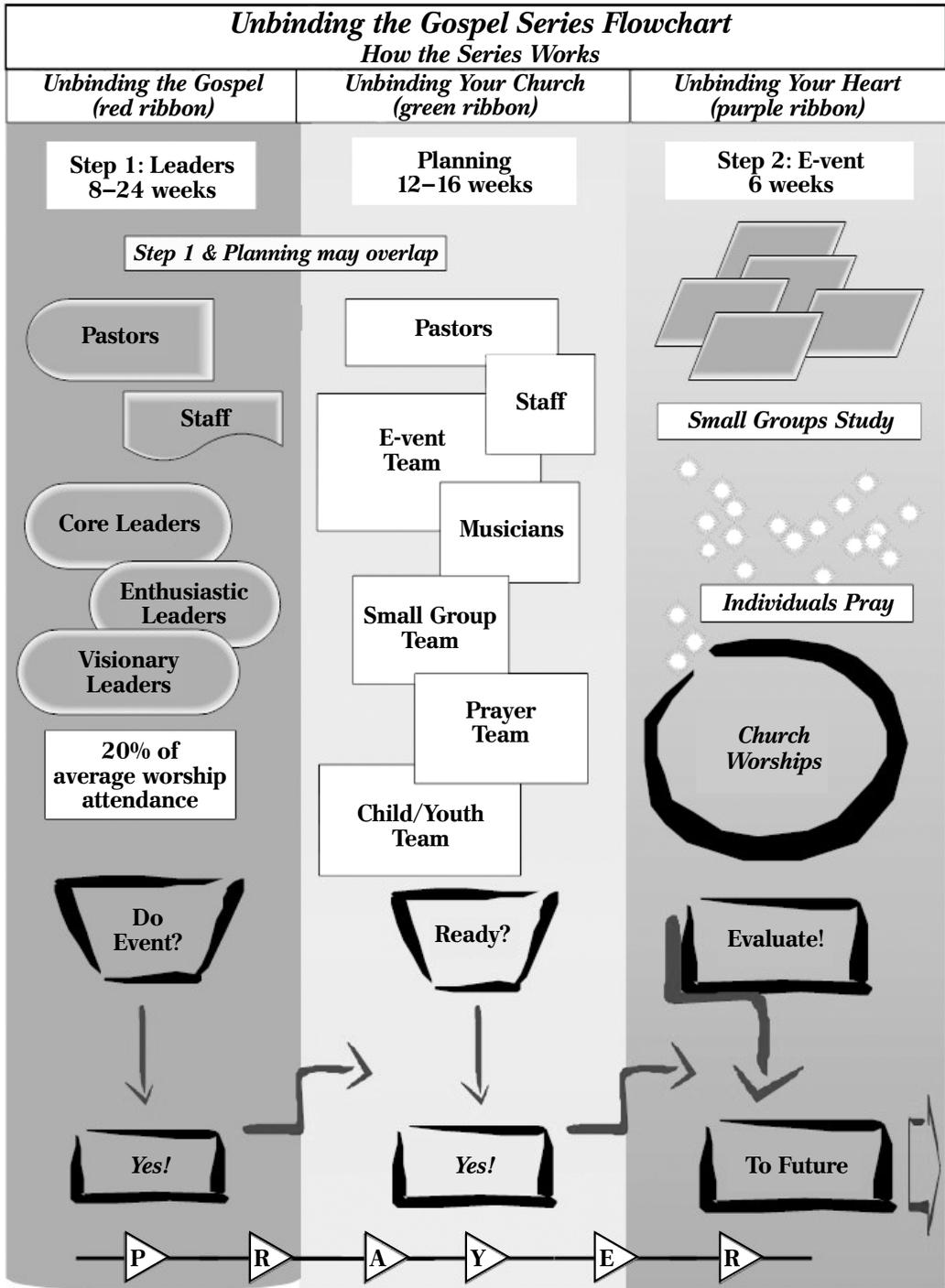
Many of us haven't done as good a job putting our beliefs and lives on the line to follow the Spirit. We don't have a lot of experience leading in new, positive directions. It is going to take vast, divinely inspired imagination for us to shift if we want God to use us in powerful, creative ways for *new* things.

¹I laughed out loud until the dogs stared at me when I read Nevada Barr's (mystery writer, national park ranger and recent convert to Christianity) recollection that her friend Debra defined optimism as "walking into a bookstore thinking, 'Hey, maybe there'll be a new Jane Austen.'" Nevada Barr, *Seeking Enlightenment...Hat by Hat* (New York: Berkley Books, 2003), 23.

²Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding Your Heart: 40 Days of Prayer & Faith Sharing* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008).

³Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding Your Church: A Pastor's Guide* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008).

⁴*The West Wing, Third Season*, Warner Brothers, 2004.



Unbinding Your Church

PART ONE

The E-vent@Your Church

Advice for Pastors and Leaders

- **PART ONE** explores why and how to help your church start to do evangelism. How can you work effectively with your church to plan an all-congregation prayer and faith sharing study? What is the best timing, pacing, style of leadership for small groups? for prayer groups? for youth and children? How do you organize an E-vent?
- **PART TWO** provides examples of an integrated, all-church study. Reinforce individual, small group prayer and faith sharing with congregational worship. See sermons, scriptures, prayers and integrated music plans. Part II will also provide you with forms, lists and organizational aids to help you prepare for an integrated, effective E-vent.

Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets."

Luke 5:3-5

...one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:13b–14 (RSV)

Unless the LORD builds the house,
those who build it labor in vain.
Unless the LORD guards the city,
the guard keeps watch in vain.
It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for he gives sleep to his beloved.

Psalms 127:1–2

The most effective evangelistic pastors hone in with laser-like focus to entice the people they serve to share the faith with new people. These pastors strive, plan and organize with the intensity of the apostle Paul on a mission! All the while, they are resting in God. They are listening for whispers from the Spirit.

Martha Grace Reese

Pastors: Step 1

Unbinding the Gospel with Your Leaders

Highlights of Chapter 1

- Miracles Require Spiritual Leadership
- First Things First – Your Spiritual Life
- The Secret to Real Life Evangelism – Transformation, Saturation, Momentum
- Identify Your Leaders & Begin a Step 1 Study (20% of worship attendance)
 - Test Balloon with Visionary Leaders
 - Core Leaders
 - Visionary Leaders
 - Church Staff
- The Pastor as Spiritual Leader
- Discern Whether to Move on to Planning for Step 2, the E-vent

The point of the study is to help your leaders become spiritual leaders. We can't just tell people to "go be spiritual." (How has *that* gone in the past?)

Miracles Require Spiritual Leadership

Do you want change in your church? Have you ever had the sneaking suspicion that real change (well, *good* real changes) would take a *miracle*? You're probably right.

Miracles, true transformation, happen most often when leaders are spiritual leaders. Do you hear the two components to that? The first is "spiritual"; the second is "leader." Real change in churches starts with leadership. Start with your leaders, start with your leaders'

spiritual connections with Christ, *if* you want to see shifts toward life, health, deeper spiritual responsiveness to God and systemic changes in your church.

Once your leaders start living the changes, you can move toward a broad-based, all-congregation saturation of the new ideas and habits. We recommend that you train 20% of your average worship attendance during a Step 1 study of *Unbinding the Gospel*. Your true leadership will be ready to share their faith as soon as they are connected with God and see the importance of it. God will reinforce their learning as they teach the rest of the congregation during Step 2, the E-vent.

Miraculous, transformative leadership starts with us, the pastors! The Spirit can use us a lot more easily if we are in love with God and if we're growing, accountable, rested, engaged.

First Things First

How's your spiritual life? Our research has confirmed a fact that seems so simple, I hesitate to say it out loud. Miraculous, transformative leadership starts with us, the pastors! We must be physically, psychologically and spiritually healthy if we want our congregations to have a chance to flourish. We need to be growing, spiritually and intellectually. I have spelled all of this out in chapter 8 of *Unbinding the Gospel*. Here's the shorthand version: the Spirit can use us a lot more easily if we are in love with God and if we're growing, accountable, rested, engaged.

The flip side of this truth is that we pastors will tend to *stop* authentic movements of the Spirit if we're intellectually or emotionally stagnant; if we're burned out; or if we don't have a vivid, growing relationship with God. God can use us more directly if we're consciously living "in Christ," in the most Pauline sense of that phrase. Can you remember a time when you loved Jesus so much that you prayed for other people to know him, too?

If you aren't in the best spiritual health of your life so far, please start praying and ask God to get you there! Pray with a prayer partner, pray with other pastors in town (*real prayer, not meetings or discussions*). God can restore us to places of spiritual depth that we cannot imagine. Christ can give us vision we never dared hope for, if we *ask* to see, like blind Bartimaeus (Mk. 10:46–52). Will you ask now? Will you yell for healed vision? Will you risk embarrassment? Will you ignore the voices inside and outside your head that tell you to shut up and stop bugging Jesus?

The Secret to Real Life Evangelism

Your goal is to help God spark interest in evangelism (that is, true faith and real faith sharing) in your church. Then you work with

that little flame until you have long-term, slow-burn momentum in your congregation. Identify and prepare your leaders. You will pray for them and work with them for 8 to 10 weeks. By the end of the ***Unbinding the Gospel*** study, your leaders should be carrying the process in prayer and bursting with ideas and energy that the Spirit is giving them.

Real life evangelism is a movement of the Spirit. The Spirit moves, then we respond. We can't just hand our leaders a book and tell them to go **do** it. We start by offering ourselves to God to be shaped and transformed as a group of Christians. **This** is what we must offer leaders first — the same thing that is changing our own lives. Our leaders need to experience prayer, not just talk about it. They need to talk about their own faith experiences in small groups. They don't need to **talk about** talking about it!

Some bland “interesting class” or “good program” isn't going to change much. But if your leaders have an experience of God and of actually articulating their faith, they will be ready to lead the whole church into prayer and faith sharing.

Identify Your Leaders and Begin a Step 1 Study

Every congregation has key leaders. Let's think about three types of important leaders. Let's call them “Visionary Leaders,” “Core Leaders,” “Enthusiastic Leaders.” These categories will merge and overlap, but let's talk simplistically for a moment.

Try a test balloon with the visionary leaders. Who are the laypeople to whom you go for sage advice? Which people see issues, dynamics and spiritual realities quickly and clearly? Whom do you trust to read tricky situations? These are your visionary leaders. Sometimes it's best to start with these people. Give a group of 4 or 5 or 6 of these people copies of ***Unbinding the Gospel*** and ask if they'll read the book straight through, then meet with you in a couple of weeks to talk and pray about it for an hour and a half.

When you meet, talk about the book, then pray together, for each other and for the church. If they think the book is a good fit for your church, get ready for one or more 8- to 10-week studies of ***Unbinding the Gospel*** with all your key leaders — Visionary Leaders, Core Leaders and Enthusiastic Leaders. (The visionary “test balloon” leaders should be part of one of the groups studying the book. Perhaps they should lead one or two of the groups.)

The more resistant your church tends to be, the more slowly you should move. Start with only one group, if that feels best. Let momentum build slowly, but keep fanning the flames!

Real life evangelism is a movement of the Spirit. The Spirit moves, then we respond. We can't just hand our leaders a book and tell them to go **do** it. We start by offering ourselves to God to be shaped and transformed as a group of Christians. **This** is what we must offer leaders first — the same thing that is changing our own lives. Our leaders need to experience prayer, not just talk about it.

Move on to the core leaders. When you consider who should be in the group(s) to study *Unbinding the Gospel*, think about the true leaders in your church. Some leaders are “governing leaders,” “spiritual leaders,” “core leaders.” These leaders serve in different positions in different types of congregations. They may be your elders, deacons, the council, the session, vestry or an *ad hoc* group of key advisors to the pastor. Think about the people who get things done in your church. Think about the people whose opinions, discernment, influence and leadership matter most. Who can stop things from happening? Who can start new projects and keep them moving? These are your core leaders.

Some bland “interesting class” or “good program” isn’t going to change much. But if your leaders have an experience of God and of actually articulating their faith, they will be ready to lead the whole church into prayer and faith sharing.

Enthusiastic Leaders. Enthusiastic leaders are another critically important group of leaders. They’re like their name. Who’s enthusiastic in your congregation? (Effectively enthusiastic! Remember — we’re going for real change, not the congregational equivalent of soap suds.) Who’s organized? Who are the inspiring teachers and leaders of your ongoing classes and ministry groups? Who are your spark plugs? Your intercessors? The great youth leaders? The artists? The committed prayer people? Your beloved Sunday school teachers? Who would make a great addition to an evangelism team? (See chapter 10 of *Unbinding the Gospel*.) Who might be terrific leaders for small groups for the all-congregation E-vent? You want to help these folks get involved **now**, so they can help plan and lead the E-vent later. (All three groups of these leaders should make up your 20% of your average worship attendance. Think strategically now!)

Church staff is crucial. We learned something important during the Mainline Evangelism Study, as we snooped our way through countless congregations, large and small. Many senior pastors underestimate the crucial importance of the staff. Senior pastors often skimp on team-building, skim through team communication. Pastors can boldly set the direction, fearlessly chart the course, then notice after a while that they’ve charged off on a walk by themselves. No one’s following. That’s not so good.

Here’s a solution: Pastors, work relationally with your staff team. Take the time. Do it first. Do it **now**. *Please do* it!

The church staff can determine evangelistic momentum in your congregations. They can help start and sustain movement in a church. They can sabotage change. Work with all the pastors, youth leaders, music directors, administrative assistants, custodians and office workers now! They are the people who will help your congregation

change. Or not. Please use this study of *Unbinding the Gospel* to build your team. Study it together, as a staff, over time, *before the Step 2, all-congregation E-vent*.

Some large congregation staffs have chosen to work through *Unbinding the Gospel* weekly for eight to ten weeks during summer or fall, ending with a staff retreat. THEN they are ready to move into leading small groups with their church leaders (Step 1 studies). Your staff will be more likely to be united and in spiritual agreement if you commit to a staff study of *Unbinding the Gospel* (doing the prayer exercises together). The more you talk about these issues and do the exercises together, the more powerfully an E-vent will saturate your church. The dividends of staff spiritual agreement can be enormous.

The Pastor as Spiritual Leader

Lead a study of *Unbinding the Gospel* with your leaders over a 8- to 10-week period. In medium and large churches you may need two, three, four, 15 study groups – with core leaders, enthusiastic leaders and the church staff. Groups of 8 to 10, with two leaders, are the best size for group dynamics. Here's the key: your personal presence and leadership on any core initiative in your church is irreplaceable, to the extent feasible within your church's size and structure.

The point of the study is to help your leaders become spiritual leaders. We can't just tell people to "go be spiritual." (How has *that* gone in the past?) We pastors need to work with leaders in the same way our mentors and the Spirit work with us. If we will be brave enough to walk through experiences with God with the people we serve, Christ will have a much better chance of helping us and our churches become more surrendered, more faithful, more fruitful.

I've found a little quirk in most of us mainline pastors and in the dynamics of most mainline churches. We talk a good game about prayer and faith, but most of us ***talk*** a lot more about it than we ***do*** it! We often want to ***talk*** about prayer, but somehow never get around to praying together. We would rather talk ***about*** God than do much listening to God. Here's a prediction: both you and your leaders will probably want to talk about God and faith theoretically, but will avoid actually praying together or doing any of the exercises at the ends of the book chapters. We're big talkers. But we need to learn to put our money where our mouths are!

Do everything you can to share your own faith and to pray together during the course of these studies.

Here's a prediction: both you and your leaders will probably want to talk about God and faith theoretically, but will avoid actually praying together or doing any of the exercises at the ends of the book chapters. We're big talkers. But we need to learn to put our money where our mouths are!

Ask someone who's more comfortable with the experiential pieces to co-lead the group with you if you're great on the theoretical, terrific at telling-people-stuff, but a little weak on actually praying and talking from your heart. Remember — the goal of the ***Unbinding the Gospel*** study is to help your core leaders: (a) change their ideas about evangelism and (b) deepen individual habits of prayer and faith sharing.

Visionary leaders, core leaders, enthusiastic leaders and staff are Step 1. They may be the same people in small congregations. Larger churches have many distinct leadership groups. You will know how to work with your people. Just keep the goal in mind. Get the leaders who can help evangelism (and the leaders who can stop evangelism!) on board. Incorporate leaders and teachers of existing small groups and educational classes during this first stage of the Unbinding the Gospel Series, so that they are committed to the process. If they love ***Unbinding the Gospel***, they can lead their own classes in a study of ***Unbinding Your Heart*** during an E-vent. This provides extraordinary continuity and integration of learning.

As you lead your study, remember: Church life can be a spiritual adventure. Our people yearn for an experience of true Christian community, a relationship with God and spiritual excitement. Don't you? Who lusts after tedious meetings and interminable talk?

To help your people launch into a spiritual adventure:

- Pray for this process every day. Ask Step 1 group members to commit to pray with you and do the daily prayer exercises in the Prayer Journal. You might also use the *Intercessor's Weekly Prayer List, Prayer Form #33*.
- Use the discussion questions and work with the exercises in ***Gospel*** each week. *Or* develop your ***own*** exercises. Just don't skim over the experiential pieces. Start the *Prayer Journal* the day after your second meeting. Discuss your first completed week of prayer when you talk about chapter 4 on prayer. Don't skimp on time. Pray together as if it mattered. (It does!)
- Use the suggestions for E-vent small group leaders (see chapter 4 of this book) as you lead your Step 1 study of ***Unbinding the Gospel***. You may want to develop a Prayer Team. If so, see chapter 5 for suggestions about how to go about it.

Remember — the goal of the ***Unbinding the Gospel*** study is to help your core leaders:

- a. change their ideas about evangelism
- b. deepen individual habits of prayer and faith sharing

Discern Whether to Move on to Planning for Step 2, the E-vent

As you and your leaders study *Unbinding the Gospel*, you will all start to sense whether this process is helpful to you. Pray together and discuss whether you should move forward to plan for an E-vent (the all-church study of *Unbinding Your Heart*, the purple ribbon, six-week version of *Unbinding the Gospel*, with individual prayer exercises). You probably have ideas about which of your leaders will do the best job leading small groups, which are great organizers and communicators, who are the natural intercessors. Ask people to begin thinking about their willingness to lead in each of these areas during the E-vent. Pray about pairings of small group leaders.

Order *Unbinding Your Church (this book) for leaders.* If you are going to go ahead with an E-vent, **order copies of *Unbinding Your Church*** well in advance of the first meeting of your E-vent Leadership Team. (See chapter 2.) It is best to pass them out at the first meeting. We recommend that you purchase a copy of *Unbinding Your Church* for each pastor involved in the E-vent, as well as for coordinators of the three teams that will organize the E-vent (the E-vent Team, Small Group Team, and the Prayer Team). You may duplicate sections of the book to make folders/notebooks for every team member, office staff and music staff, under terms of the license agreement on page x at the front of this book. (Chapter 3 details what to put in each group's notebooks. The E-vent Team will be in charge of folder creation.)

Enjoy your *Unbinding the Gospel* study with your leaders. You stand at a choice point. **Decide together:** Do you feel called to move this study into the full congregation? If yes, move on to the next chapter!

NEWS FLASH!

We have discovered that weekly studies of *Unbinding the Gospel* work well. Monthly elders' meetings do not provide the concentration or intensity necessary to produce real change.

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