

Martha Grace Reese
WITH AFTERWORD BY Brian McLaren

UNBINDING
the
GOSPEL

Real Life
Evangelism

Church Leaders' Study
Real Life Evangelism Series

Enthusiastic Endorsements for *Unbinding the Gospel*...

“Unbinding the Gospel 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, this book provides the most competent guide I know to mainline evangelism.

Unbinding the Gospel, like Reese, is the rarest of gifts: it gives us authoritative facts that arm us for real change rather than simply being alarming; it provides data that moves one to action rather than further depressing those of us who care about mainline churches.

Reese does the extraordinary: she removes guilt and lack of confidence regarding evangelism with the whole story, honest interpretation and with fresh, non-judgmental and kind insights for change. *Unbinding the Gospel* is realistic, clear and direct, but also hopeful, humble and genuinely spiritual. Anyone who cares about and works in the cause of mainline evangelism will find this book a treasure.”

Todd Hunter, National Director, Alpha USA

Former Director, Vineyard Churches USA

“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

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

Jim Griffith, President, Griffith Coaching

“With Martha Grace Reese’s *Unbinding the Gospel*, we may well be welcoming a significant moment in the unbinding of the Church in North America. In her keen-eyed, level-headed, and big-hearted approach to evangelism there is a palpable sense of God’s presence (and availability). 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

“Martha Grace Reese’s book is practical, biblical, and hospitable. The exercises were simple yet engaging. I found myself laughing and having moments of profound insight as I answered questions and engaged the exercises. 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

"I am delighted with the publication of *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism* by Martha Grace Reese. It is just the kind of challenge we need in the mainline Protestant churches today! God is calling us to a deeper relationship to Jesus Christ and a fresh passion to share our faith with others. 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 book is brimming with love for God and for God's children. *Unbinding the Gospel* reads like a prayer for mainline churches and for the people God intends to reach through those churches. It is equally inspiration, motivation and 'how to.' This is real life evangelism for real life Christians."

***Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)***

"This book combines research and hard data with warm stories of real people growing their churches in healthy ways. The anecdotal material inspires each of us as followers of Jesus to grow more comfortable in sharing our faith. But as important are the sections on congregational dynamics that impact the growth or stagnation of our churches. Reese has put together an approach to sharing the gospel that works."

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

"There is nothing quite like solid research to dispel the sort of misconceptions and self-serving biases and attitudes we of mainline churches have harbored for so long. Solid research is what 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, former Disciples General Minister and President
currently President of The Columbia Partnership***

"*Unbinding the Gospel* looks at the 'brutal facts' of evangelism in the mainline churches with a passionate and inspiring vision. Its real stories deepen a credible hope. We long today for a missional, relational, incarnational expression of the church's life in our society. This book helps. It teaches us how to re-learn 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

"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***

The Real Life Evangelism Series by Martha Grace Reese

Change Habits, Not Just Minds!

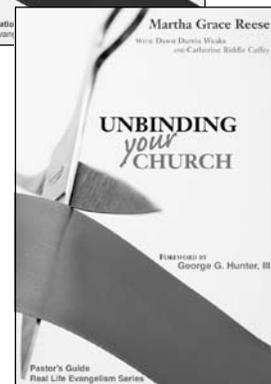
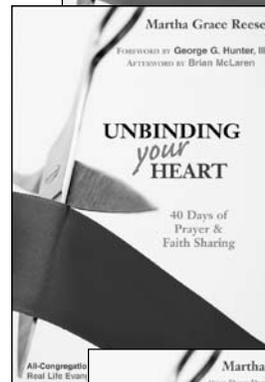
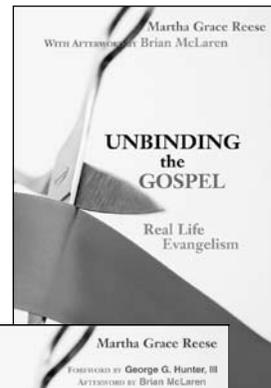
Evangelism books presume everyone *wants* to do evangelism, so they tell you *how* to do it. Four years of Lilly Endowment-funded research has demonstrated conclusively that most people would rather go get a root canal than think about evangelism!

The *Real Life Evangelism 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 *Real Life Evangelism 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 *Real Life Evangelism 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 *Real Life Evangelism 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: *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism* (*Church Leaders' Study*, Red Ribbon). Pastors, key congregational leaders and evangelism teams will benefit most from using *Unbinding the Gospel* as a seven- to ten-week small group study. This book sparkles with practicality. Each chapter concludes with questions, scripture suggestions and group exercises. *Unbinding the Gospel* helps committed leaders deepen and start sharing their own faith, understand our cultural context, and begin to plan for authentic congregational faith-sharing.

STEP TWO: *Unbinding Your Heart: 40 Days of Prayer & Faith Sharing* (*All-Congregation Study*, Purple Ribbon) is a six-week, church-wide, small group E-vent! It's perfect for a Lenten, summer or fall study for all established classes and small groups, and new ones formed just for the E-vent. *Unbinding Your Heart: 40 Days of Prayer & Faith Sharing* is a six-week version of *Unbinding the Gospel*, with the addition of 40 days of individual prayer exercises coordinated with each chapter. It will enrich your church's community life. It will help individuals risk face-to-face encounters with God. Your entire congregation will begin to talk about their faith. The E-vent creates momentum in your church.

SUPPORT FOR STEPS ONE AND TWO: *Unbinding Your Church* (*Pastor's Guide*, Green Ribbon). Pastors, teachers and church musicians are busy. This collection of fully integrated resources will help your church work and pray through the Series seamlessly. You will spend your time on what matters—praying, teaching, working directly with your people. *Unbinding your Church* offers:

- **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 church musicians (African-American, Hispanic, new church and traditional Euro-American).
- **step-by-step planning tools:** advice for pastors, church staffs, organizers, small group leaders, prayer group leaders and leaders of children and youth. Calendars, checklists, rosters, forms, impact diagrams, invitations, website 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.
- **integrated web sections:** select chapters are located on the web for **FREE** and easy access and downloads.

The *Real Life Evangelism 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

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Series Foreword

What a promising project! Martha Grace Reese’s “trilogy” may be the most useful resource for awakening slumbering churches that has come along in a very long time. She publishes it 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 forebears, 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 *Real Life Evangelism 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 *Real Life Evangelism 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 1% 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 melts traditional dividing lines. She and her colleagues stand on the shoulders of the Church’s evangelical tradition to help churches today to find their way forward. So traditional features like worship, sermons, small groups, prayer, testimony, and

narrative play prominent roles in the *Real Life Evangelism Series*. Readers will see, however, the imagination and innovation expressed in these expressions.

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” to catalyze the church into outreach. I expect such E-vents 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 *Real Life Evangelism Series* big time. Reese is right that our churches are stuck. By my calculations, at least 200,000 churches in the USA 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

Breaking the Curse

October, 2004. The country watched as the curse was broken. On the night of a total eclipse, after 86 years of heart-wrenching defeat, Boston fans' cheers ricocheted off the walls of Busch Stadium and ascended into the firmament as the Boston Red Sox won their first World Series since trading Babe Ruth. Ballplayers can be superstitious folks. They believe in things like Lucky Game Underwear that Can't Be Washed or the Winning Streak Will Break. Trading Babe Ruth was a Bad Thing for the Red Sox. As the results rolled in, year after year, the fans, the Red Sox Nation knew it. But 86 years later, the miracle happened in St. Louis, and the cheers echoed around the world.

About 86 years ago the mainline churches did something. Maybe we washed our lucky game underwear. Maybe we traded Babe Ruth. Lots of people have lots of ideas. But we have not been winning any evangelism series for one looong stretch of time. It's about time *that* curse gets broken. It can be done. It is time to see **our** players jumping and slapping each other's backs. It is time to hear the cheers of **our** fans echoing into the firmament again. It is time.

A Book about the E Word

That's what this book is about. It's about breaking the curse. It's about untying the knots that keep us from living exciting lives in the Spirit. It's about unbinding the Good News that God adores us and everyone else, that God has shown this to us through Jesus Christ. This is a book that is unabashedly about evangelism: faith sharing. It's intended for members and pastors of churches that want to start living a more exciting life with God and with each other. It's intended

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This book is about *evangelism*, the “E” word. The E word has replaced sex and money as “That Which Must Not Be Named” in our mainline churches!

The purpose of the Mainline Evangelism Project was to find churches that are doing effective evangelism. What motivates their faith sharing? What makes these congregations, their pastors and their members tick? What are they doing?

for members and pastors of churches that want to share that joy with people who don’t know it.

This book is about *evangelism*, the “E” word. The E word seems to have replaced sex and money as That Which Must Not Be Named in our mainline churches! The most comprehensive survey ever made of American congregational pastors (the Duke Clergy Study),¹ revealed that most pastors love being in ministry. It also showed that these pastors’ greatest discouragement is that they feel ineffective in sharing the Gospel.

A recent study of Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) laity shores up the findings of the Duke Clergy Study. Over 25,000 members of 262 Disciples congregations completed a 53-question survey covering the breadth of congregational life (Disciples Members’ Survey).² They ranked statements about their churches according to how strongly they agreed with them. The statement ranked dead last was, “This church is effectively reaching unchurched persons.” The second weakest score was in response to, “This congregation provides training in sharing Christ with others.”

Most of us feel guilty about our losing streak. Sometimes we ignore it. Sometimes we rationalize it. Let’s stop that. Instead, let’s look at what’s going on and make some changes in our focus, our training, our lineup and our game plan.

The book you hold in your hands can provide a starting point. It was born from the Mainline Evangelism Project, a four-year study of hundreds of mainline congregations.³ We interviewed over 1000 church members, new Christians and pastors. We scoured statistics and visited churches. We met with pastors and laypeople, professors and seminarians, denominational officials and kids in the youth group. We conducted a statistical study of the beliefs, motivations and actions of 150 of the mainline churches that are doing the best job reaching people with no church background.⁴

The purpose of the study was to find churches that were doing effective evangelism and to discover their motivation. We also wanted to discover what made these congregations, their pastors and their members tick. How do they think? What are they doing? We found some exciting answers.

Our most important discovery is that a vivid relationship with God lies at the heart of real evangelism. People who share their faith love God and believe that other people’s lives would be better if they were in a relationship with God, too. They know why they are doing evangelism: they want to share a driving force in their lives.

These Christians are growing in their own faith. They learn to talk about their faith. Their churches put a high priority on evangelism—faith sharing.

We will look into many aspects of faith sharing in this book. Here are three highlights:

1. Evangelism arises out of healthy relationships with God, within the church and beyond church walls.
2. Great evangelism exists in churches all along the theological spectrum. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives faith, but churches where evangelism flourishes cooperate with the Spirit. These churches focus on helping new people begin a life with God.
3. People who learn to share their faith say evangelism changes lives—their included!

Let's take a brief look at each of these three highlights:

1. Evangelism emerges from a trinity of relationships.

Congregations that are doing evangelism best are held together with three inseparable yet distinct areas of honest, loving relationships:

- with God,
- within the congregation and
- with people outside the church whose lives are not centered in Christ.

The heart of evangelism emerges from the interaction of these three sets of relationships: our personal relationships with God, healthy congregational relationships, and caring about people who don't have a conscious connection with Christ. The heart of evangelism is being in love with God, being part of a church you love and caring about other people who do not know that faith. Faith sharing focuses on relationships, not "bringing in more young people," or "helping our church to grow again." Evangelism is motivated by growing love—not by all the lists, bread deliveries, mailings, parties for unchurched friends, cell group curriculum decisions or new members' classes. Details matter. Means of showing love are important, but the heart of evangelism is love—of God, of church, of others.

2. Key leaders in churches of every theological stripe are doing great evangelism. These leaders hold their churches to a laser-like focus on: (a) church members' growing relationships with Christ, and (b) sharing their faith with others.

People in evangelistic churches can tell you what difference being a Christian makes in their own lives. They believe passionately that

These Christians learned to articulate their faith and share it with others. Life felt different. They never want to go back to the old days of mute, and muted, faith.

The heart of evangelism is having an alive relationship with God, being part of a church you love and caring that people outside the church find what you've discovered.

having a relationship with God and being part of their church community will help both friends and people they've never met. Many other mainline Christians, along with many mainline pastors, have a hard time articulating how being a Christian matters—for themselves or for anyone else.

Evangelism has no theological bounds. It isn't about talking people into beliefs. It isn't about scaring them with horror stories of Hell. There are no quick fixes, no silver bullets. At its core, evangelism is people sharing with others their personal understandings that life is better, richer, truer if one has faith in Christ and lives in a faith community. These are some of the things that people in churches, many of them quite ordinary churches, are discovering as they begin to share their faith beyond church walls.

3. Faith sharing changes the lives of Christians who do it. Many Christians in evangelistic churches (and their pastors) volunteered striking experiences. When they started learning to articulate their own faith and to share it with others, they began to see “coincidences,” “answers to prayer,” “miracles.” Life felt different. They were more aware of tiny promptings from the Spirit. They say this new life with the Spirit felt even richer when they started seeing changes in the lives of the people with whom they talked about their faith. They never want to go back to the old days of mute, and muted, faith.

One pastor said, “I used to preach and run the church. After the accident, I started talking with people about what really matters in my own life. After I had experienced a tragedy and recovered a bit, I wanted to at least listen to other people about whatever situation they're in. This has given me a feeling of being more in touch with God and of being a more 'full-time' Christian instead of a maintenance pastor. Talking about faith one-on-one and working with the church on it has become completely addictive. As addictions go, it's a great one!”

How to Use This Book

This book is for pastors and lay leaders. You can read it alone, as a church board, with the other elders or deacons, as an evangelism team, with friends from other churches, or with a small study group. Use it as a discussion book with a group of work or neighborhood friends. The course can run from seven to ten weeks. The more people in the congregation who study the book, the greater the chance of change and focused action.

Part One of *Unbinding the Gospel* is a look at “what is.” Chapters 1 through 3 deal with the questions, “What is evangelism? Why do it? How are mainline churches doing?”

Part Two shows examples of great churches doing powerful faith sharing. It should help you see what is possible. Chapter 4 deals with prayer in congregations. Chapter 5 discusses the three sets of healthy relationships we found in evangelistic churches. Chapter 6 looks at what new members say they need, and find, in their new churches.

Part Three will help you get started in your own congregation. Chapter 7 analyzes nine types of evangelism, barriers that fend new people off and ways of building bridges into the church for new members. Chapter 8 discusses “who does what” in healthily functioning congregations, with a special section for denominational ministers. Chapter 9 will help you see and deal with the growing pains, conflict, and distractions that can result from growth and change in churches. The final chapter, 10, suggests a year-long plan for several churches to help each other begin a year of evangelism.

Seven- or Ten-Week Study. If you want to use the book as the basis of an eight-week study, read the first two chapters for the first session and the last two chapters for the last session. There are discussion questions and exercises at the end of chapters 2 through 9. Please be flexible! There are no rules. Read the book and think. Pray about it. Laugh and talk about it with friends. If statistics are tedious for you, or if your group doesn't need information on mainline churches, skip or skim chapter 3. The more people in a congregation who use the book at the same time, the more momentum it can help generate. We recommend it as an all-congregation fall or Lenten study.

Discussion Questions and Exercises following chapters 2 through 9 will help generate conversation, discussion, and new directions for your group. They are simply suggestions. Feel free to ignore them or to have your own free-form discussion! Do what you have time for or what interests you most. Your group could spend an entire discussion session on Bible passages or on one of the questions that relate to the chapter. You might split up to discuss different questions. At the end, ask someone from each group to present highlights from the discussion. Some exercises could be done on your own during the week after the discussion. Some churches, or groups of churches, may have enough people to read the book together, and allow participants to choose whether they want to take part in a Bible study group, a discussion question group, or an exercise group. If you are reading this book on your own, you could use questions and exercises as a basis for prayer and journaling. It is always good to have a discussion partner.

Have Fun! One of the hallmarks of the great congregations I've been able to visit is that they have fun. Hallways echo with inaudible

Highlight Findings of the Mainline Evangelism Project

1. If we know **why** to do evangelism, we'll figure out **how** to do it.
2. Faith sharing arises out of vibrant relationships with God.
3. It is important to learn to talk about our faith.
4. Where it flourishes, evangelism is a high priority for pastor, congregation and individuals.

laughter. I hope a glimmer of that joy is reflected in this book. I am praying that your reading and discussions feel light rather than weighty and that they will help you get started on whatever adventures God wants to bring you next.

A Big Thank You...Names...and Stories. Over 1000 people spoke honestly with us about deep feelings and understandings of their faith. Thank you to each of you. This book would never exist without you. I quote many people and describe many churches. The geographic and denominational descriptions are accurate. I have changed people's and congregations' names. Where a full name is given for a person, it is a real name. I have masked the few negative examples more heavily. The quotations are accurate, although I have simplified some sentences and clarified some grammar. A few of the long quotes are compilations of basic stories that we heard again and again. Each of the three stories in chapter 4 is accurate to a particular church—they are *not* compilations. If you would like more detail from the sociological portions of the Mainline Evangelism Project, an expanded bibliography or additional information, please download them from www.GraceNet.info.

We found no rigid formula for success, no quick fix, no silver bullet. Each one of us must enter the great adventure by thinking, learning more, praying and asking God a humble question: "Which small things can I do today to help more people know you?"

Let's Get Started!

We have heard stories of inspiration, struggle, excitement, disappointment, spiritual learning and changes in lives and churches for four years. We studied hundreds of congregations and talked with over 1000 people about evangelism. It is clear. We found no rigid formula for success, no magic plan that will work for every church. Each individual must enter the great adventure by thinking, learning more, praying, and asking God a humble question: "Which small things can I do today to help more people know you?"

This adventure may take you on a trip you can't anticipate. You may have to pack a bag and go far. The Boston Red Sox won the Series in St. Louis—not before the home crowd at Fenway Park.

Are you ready to get going?

¹See the *Survey of Clergy* at www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/research.html.

²Homeland Ministries and Church Extension Faithful Planning Congregational Survey Results, 2001—2005.

³The Mainline Evangelism Project, made possible by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., studied congregations in seven denominations over a period of four years: American Baptist Churches USA, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church USA, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ and The United Methodist Church.

⁴See www.GraceNet.info for a formal sociological report on this survey.

Afterword

I went to my doctor this morning. It was a routine checkup. I need to see him every quarter to make sure that the medications that are supposed to help my blood pressure and cholesterol aren't damaging my liver. Our visits are usually very brief—you know, blood test results, blood pressure, temperature, pulse, followed by, "How are you feeling? Any problems?" to which I answer, "I feel fantastic. No worries at all," and he tells me to come back in three months.

But today was different. My doctor knows that I am a Christian, because it came up in an earlier conversation, maybe a year ago. So today he comes in and says, right off the bat, "I have a question for you. You know, I'm getting older, and that makes any sane person think about their mortality, their spirit...you know what I mean. But any time I begin to feel closer to God, I hear some wacko on TV say something absolutely outrageous in the name of God or religion, and it just smothers my interest. It pushes me in the totally opposite direction."

He said he had a question, but it was left unexpressed. It didn't matter, because with or without a specific question to get us started, we ended up having a good conversation. Three things are still kind of vibrating inside of me from that conversation.

First, people like my doctor—intelligent people, thoughtful, honest people—really want to talk about God and the spiritual life. In spite of the important statistics Gay Reese presents in chapter 3 (don't skip that chapter!), in spite of the fact that generation by generation, fewer Americans identify themselves as religious, everywhere I go I find people like my doctor who are thinking about life, its meaning, its destiny, their soul, their purpose, God. And they want to talk. They need to talk. And they need a conversation partner.

Second, there are plenty of religious wackos around who talk about God a lot. Whatever the religion, there are people who abuse it and say "absolutely outrageous" things "in the name of God or religion," as my doctor said.

And third, there are plenty of sincere and generous people of faith around too who would be great conversation partners for people like my doctor. But here's the problem: so many of them are so afraid of sounding like the wackos that they keep their faith to themselves.

Their silence, of course, makes the strident and outrageous voices seem all the louder, and so their silence ends up being complicit in smothering the interest of the spiritual seekers.

That's why Gay Reese's book is so important. That's why when you turn the last page, you can't just let this be another book you read. You need to let her message affect you, and your faith community, and through you, people like my doctor.

Her image of the pitcher being filled to overflowing is worth the price of the book. Her insight that there can be many sources of motivation and inspiration for faith sharing—many ways to fill the pitcher to the brim—rings very true to me. The statistics she gives sober me, and they motivate me too. And her stories of vibrant congregations give me hope.

Especially today, after my conversation with my doctor.

On my way home from the doctor's office, I turned on the radio and caught the news. More violence. More bad news about global warming. More political division and rancorous name-calling. More stories of people abusing people sexually, kids with guns, crooked politicians, corrupt business executives.

I thought to myself, "What can change this vicious cycle of viciousness?" I switched the radio off as I drove along in silence. I remembered the famous quote from the nineteenth-century British statesman, Edmund Burke: "All that the forces of evil need to win in this world is for enough good people to do nothing," or something to that effect.

I thought, "Somebody should start an organization that would mobilize people—recruit them, train them, support them—so they could be good people who do something so that the forces of evil don't win in this world. This organization would need to accept people just as they are, infuse them with hope, give them a vision of a better world, give them a vision for themselves becoming agents of making that better world a reality. It would need to both practice and preach. Why hasn't somebody started an organization like that?"

And of course, about a quarter mile down the road I realized that somebody had done just that. In fact, it had cost him everything to do so.

But that organization can become so preoccupied with lesser things—including its own institutional survival—that it forgets why it's really here: to recruit people to switch sides and opt out of the vicious cycle and join a cycle of healing, to infuse them with vision, to send them out as change agents, to help them experience transformation and sustain them so they can be lifelong catalysts of transformation, to give them good news to share to counter the bad news that is being reported every hour on the hour.

When you close the covers of Gay Reese's book, I wonder if you could say a prayer asking God to empower you to help your faith community become the kind of organization that Jesus intended it to be, the kind of organization that helps people like my doctor, the kind of organization that brings good news in a bad-news world.

And if your faith community is hopelessly stuck in the mud—let's face it, some are—then don't let that get you down. You have a kitchen table, right? Then invite some friends over and get them talking. Ask them about their faith stories. Ask them about their beliefs about God. Ask them about what kind of world they see, and what kind they dream of, and what they're doing about it, and how God might fit in. Make it clear there aren't "right answers"—just honest answers—and see what happens. See what God does around your table.

If you don't have a kitchen table, invite a friend out for coffee, or take a walk. Don't preach. Just do what Gay talks about in this book. And pray that God will somehow use you to be a blessing to somebody by being an available conversation partner about the things that matter most in life.

You don't need anyone's permission to do this. You don't need a committee or a budget. You don't need a degree in theology or (God forbid) sales and marketing. You just need a pitcher full of motivation—and Gay has given that to you in this book. Let it overflow. Let it pour.

Brian McLaren (brianmclaren.net)

EVANGELISM/DISCIPLESHIP

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Fuller Theological Seminary



MARTHA GRACE REESE, MDiv, JD, directed a four-year evangelism research project funded by the Lilly Endowment. The study, which included 1200 interviews, focused on highly effective examples of evangelism in mainline churches and the motivations for evangelism. This book, and two other books in the *Real Life Evangelism Series*, arise from this groundbreaking study. Reese has been a lawyer, a congregational pastor, a middle judicatory minister and has spent the last decade coaching more than 150 gifted pastors in spiritual leadership for church transformation. She serves as President of GraceNet, Inc., which specializes in church consulting and coaching (www.GraceNet.info).



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