A pair of silver scissors is shown in the process of cutting through a thick green ribbon. The scissors are positioned diagonally across the frame, with the blades meeting at the top left and the ribbon extending from the bottom left towards the top right. The background is a plain, light color.

Martha Grace Reese

WITH Dawn Darwin Weaks
AND Catherine Riddle Caffey

UNBINDING
your
CHURCH

FOREWORD BY
George G. Hunter, III

Pastor's Guide
Real Life Evangelism Series

Enthusiastic Endorsements for *Unbinding the Gospel* and the *Real Life Evangelism 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 *Real Life Evangelism 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 *Real Life Evangelism 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 Real Life Evangelism 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 *Real Life Evangelism 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***

The Real Life Evangelism Series by Martha Grace Reese

Change Habits, Not Just Minds!

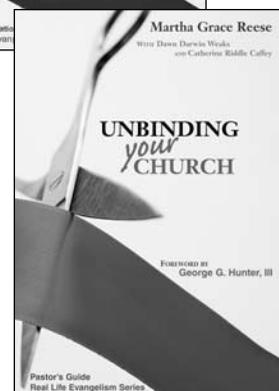
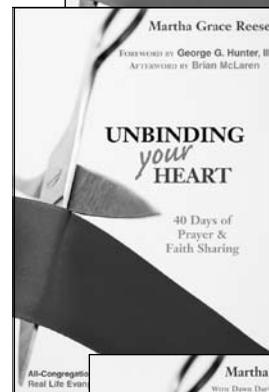
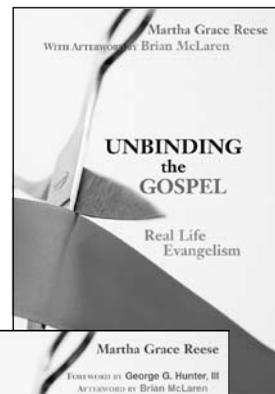
Evangelism books presume everyone *wants* to do evangelism, so they tell you *how* to do it. Four years of Lilly Endowment-funded research has demonstrated conclusively that most people would rather go get a root canal than think about evangelism!

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. **IMPORTANT NOTE: Pastors should order a copy for each person participating in the study. There is an individual prayer journal included that should be used by each participant.**

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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* 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 *Real Life Evangelism 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 *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 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 *Real Life Evangelism 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 *Real Life Evangelism 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

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 *Real Life Evangelism 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 *Real Life Evangelism 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. About 15–20% of your leadership must study *Unbinding the Gospel* as a small group experience *before* you decide to 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

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 dent in their church’s preexisting patterns. Why do all this work for nothing?

Real Life Evangelism 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 — 15–20% worship attendance | Leaders organize for E-vent | Whole church experience |
| Who? | Pastor & small groups | Pastors | 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! | Choice: 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, Jeremiah Wright or the pastor

of a 40-persons-in-worship rural congregation would each preach differently. So will you!

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, above!***

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

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!

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 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

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!

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get these ideas! This is *great!*” They scribble out a newsletter 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

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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.

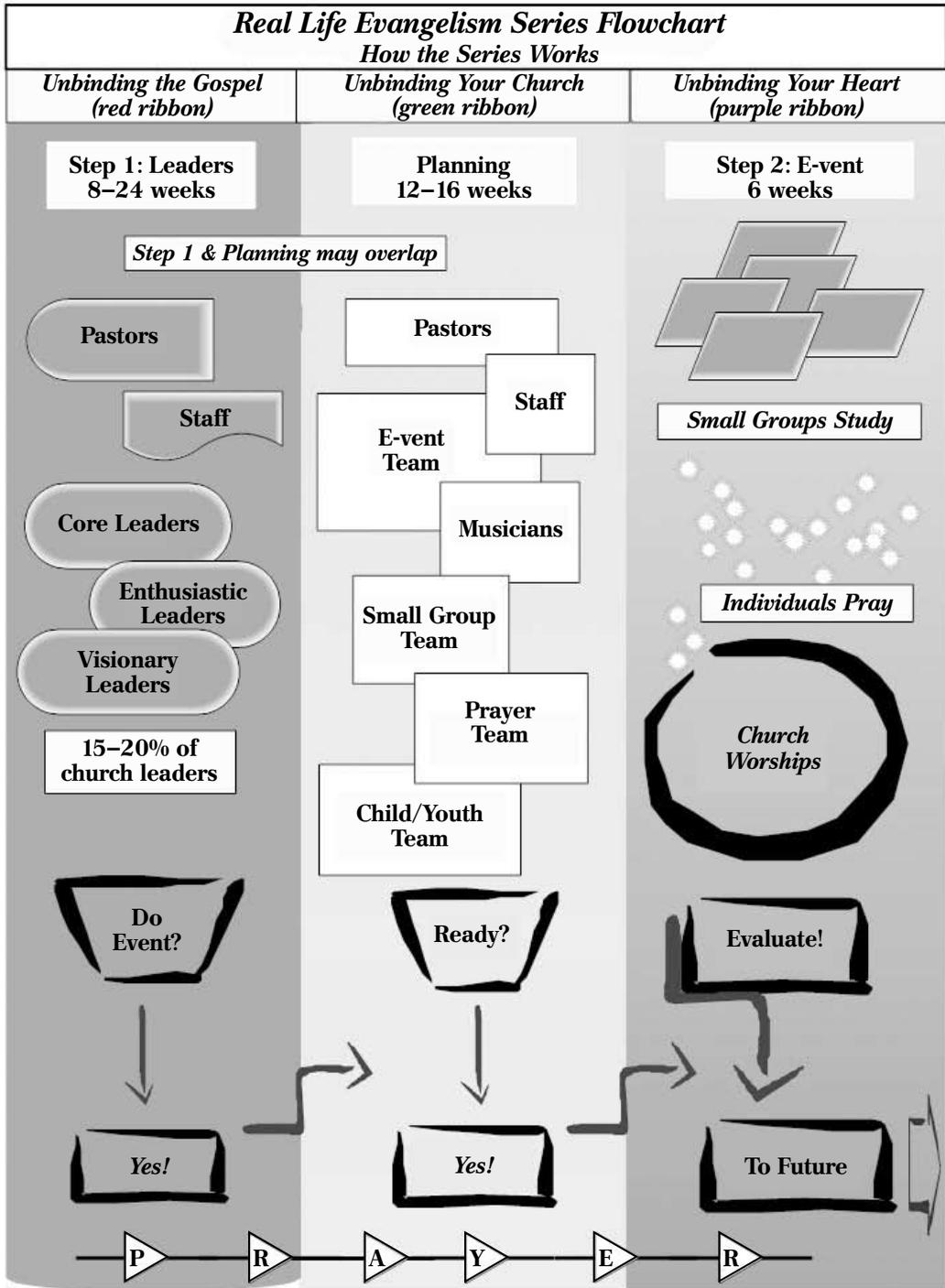
¹I laughed out loud until the dogs stared at me when I read Nevada Barr's (mystery writer, national park ranger and recent convert to Christianity) recollection that her friend Debra defined optimism as "walking into a bookstore thinking, 'Hey, maybe there'll be a new Jane Austen.'" Nevada Barr, *Seeking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



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(This and other E-vent forms available at www.GraceNet.info.)

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MARTHA GRACE REESE, MDiv, JD, embodies the experience of a researcher, corporate attorney, congregational pastor, middle judicatory minister, church consultant and author. She directed the Lilly Endowment-funded Mainline Evangelism Project, in which this book and the two other volumes of the *Real Life Evangelism Series* are grounded. The study, which included over 1200 interviews, focused on highly effective examples of evangelism in mainline churches across the theological spectrum. Reese serves as President of GraceNet, Inc., specializing in church research, consulting and coaching (www.GraceNet.info).