

MARTHA GRACE REESE, MDIV, JD

PRESIDENT

867 Tuxedo Boulevard

St. Louis, Missouri 63119

314.963.3334

Reese@GraceNet.info

www.GraceNet.info



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In January 2008, the Lilly Endowment awarded a new grant to help Mainline US congregations revitalize through a process of faith, faith sharing and prayer, using the Unbinding the Gospel Series. The purpose of the grant is:

- A. ***To support groups of 8-10 congregations with coaching*** through a year long, all congregational saturation in faith development, prayer and faith sharing, using the Unbinding the Gospel Series and a collaborative reflection process; and
- B. ***To discover dynamics of congregational renewal and transformation*** as 1000 congregations work with this process.

Coaching is for congregations that have chosen, after an initial study of *Unbinding the Gospel*, to pursue an all-congregational saturation study, using the *Unbinding the Gospel Series*. We conduct coaching for pastors and key lay leaders over the course of a year, with follow-up, in a group format, primarily through telephone conference calls. The coach leads two days of on-site prayer & planning work at the mid-point of the coaching. The Lilly Endowment grant provides a substantial portion of the coaching costs.

Please contact Martha Grace Reese, Project Director, if you might be interested in forming a coaching group. She will work with groups of pastors who have read *Unbinding the Gospel* and think it might help their congregation. Reese will help pastors lead an initial *Gospel* study group in their churches and help them discern whether forming a Project coaching group would be appropriate.

Here is a preliminary, raw-data report to the 150 congregations involved in the initial stages of the Project. Please contact Reese if this looks as if the Project might help you or a group of the congregations you serve.



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FIVE KEY FINDINGS & QUOTES FROM PASTORS HALF-WAY THROUGH THE PILOT GROUPS

***Big picture: The books work. The coaching helps.
The year-long saturation experience is hard work --
those who do it well are starting to change in great ways!***

October 27, 2008

Dear Pastors and Leaders in Unbinding the Gospel Congregations,

You all are GREAT! Thank you so much to the 150 churches that are participating in this first year of the Project. We are so grateful for all your prayer, planning and thinking about your experience as you guide your churches toward E-vents and through some significant transformation. I thought it might be helpful to give you a sense of what we're learning in the 9 months since we started the Project. As I read all of your notes and reflection pieces, I see 5 main findings. We'll know more about long-term results of the *Unbinding Series* and the coaching in a year. We'll know *much* more in four years. For now, here's a "half-way through the pilot group findings" report.

Your churches range from 20 to 1850 in average worship attendance, represent 8 denominations, vary in theology from quite evangelical to extremely progressive and are located from eastern Pennsylvania and up state New York to Colorado and Idaho; northern Minnesota and Michigan to southwest Georgia and Texas. Some of you started last January, others a month ago. Congregational ages are from over 2 to 200 years old. Our ordained and licensed pastors' ages range from 26 to 80. Isn't that great?

Our Five Big Findings

1. **A big, all-church process like this is really different for most of our churches. Something this big "connects the dots" for people. It takes lots of planning. It requires different "muscles" than we usually use!** Most churches have only done a process this intensive when they've done a capital campaign. Seven or eight pastors have told me almost the exact same thing: "Wow! I guess it's about priorities. We've only put big, all-church efforts into raising money. We're ready to do the coaching. It's time to let God develop our *Spiritual* capital."

2. ***Pastors and lay people usually say that their covenants to pray daily are: (a) a challenging practice to develop, and (b) a powerful, joyous, transformative experience.*** Here's the most typical statement of this finding: "Whoa! This is ***killing*** me! I had no idea how much I *wasn't* praying. ☺ Thanks for holding my feet to the fire. I had no clue that ministry could be this exciting. The Spirit really can do things with me when I listen."

3. **Talking about our faith is not our strong suit in mainline churches. AND we can learn how to do it with great results!** One pastor told me: "We're reserved around here. It took every ounce of courage we had to come in and do the exercise at the end of chapter 2 in GOSPEL. But the results were staggering. People wept at the depth and power of each others' stories. That hasn't happened in this church. I just told our group something I've never talked about to anyone but my wife, and I love this church. I've served it for 12 years. The payoffs of doing these exercises are amazing. Then it takes every ounce of courage we have to come in the *next* week and do the exercise at the end of *that* chapter. But we're doing it!"

4. **Thinking & talking about profound faith issues (and praying together) is fostering deep changes in congregational patterns of relationships. It helps churches navigate through differences of opinion. We're seeing early signs of congregational transformation.** The most frequent comment I hear is that churches are working together differently. We see (a) more open and honest relationships forming that make church a much more exciting and "growing" place to be *and* (b) churches moving together as a community in positive connections. Pastors point to encouraging (and remarkable) instances in which church members have dealt kindly and firmly with cranky people who have stopped forward momentum in the past.

5. **Churches that have taken the process most seriously are showing signs of creativity, joy and numerical growth.** A conference minister says, "these pastors say that this process is the most intensive, hardest thing they've ever done, and they're thrilled with what's happening in their churches. They are coming up with all sorts of creative, exciting ideas. The pastors are having fun - that's not usual. The changes I'm seeing feel as if they'll stay and not disappear." Members are praying for people outside the church and are finding themselves in situations where people are talking about God and faith. Even at this early stage in the Project, we are seeing churches beginning to grow numerically.

We are still at the beginning, but what a great start! Thank you all for your love for God and these people you're serving, and for all the hard work and disciplined prayer you're putting into this. I thought it might help you to see what other pastors have been writing in response to their reflection questions. Here you go! These are unedited answers from pastors in just one group. We'll highlight another group next time. *Remember - when something great happens, tell us about it! (So - what do you think about this?)*

Blessings,

mgr

Martha Grace Reese (Reese@GraceNet.info)

Pastors' Answers to Reflection Questions

October 27, 2008

All quotes except the first one come from pastors in one pilot group. The group started in January, 2008 and most of the churches are just beginning E-vents now.

*You'll see these pastors' struggles, their questions, their love of God and the people they serve, terrific insights and advice that may help **you**.*

From a coach, quoting the pastor of a church a month into coaching. (This is the only quote that doesn't come from the January '08 coaching group. The coach describes this pastor as having a profound grasp of the importance of both spiritual depth and pragmatic planning. I just threw it in as a very sweet, well-expressed "extra!"):

"We're praying for each other. We're praying for people in the neighborhood we don't know. Faith sharing is increasing, but it's incredibly delicate and fragile. People don't yet have the words for it. My goal is to bring them to a place where they can tell their own stories. They're not there yet. But we're working toward it. It's very, very tender and sacred.

From a pastor, 6 weeks into coaching, answering two questions:

- 1. How are you praying each day?***
- 2. How does your prayer relate to your spiritual leadership in your church?***

My answers to these questions seem to be changing daily. For the past two weeks I have been struggling with the flu -- which has been a miserable experience for me, my wife, and our children who seem to want to do everything as a family.

There have been three ways that I have been focusing on prayer in the past few weeks. I have been spending some time in prayer at the beginning of the day -- before my feet hit the floor. This is not a new practice, but I have been much more intentional about this time. In the past it was a very brief start the day in prayer and get it over with. As I am an early riser this seems to be the best "uninterrupted" time in my day. I have been quite amazed at how staying with this prayer has transformed this time, spent in thanksgiving, prayer for other people and the church, and prayer for direction and guidance for the day. I have found the prayer time to be lengthening. I was afraid that I would run out of things to say, but on several occasions, have been surprised to be interrupted by the sounds of others stirring in the house.

I have also been spending some time in my study in personal devotional time. I have been reading selections from Bonhoeffer's writings and the scriptures (Bonhoeffer's references). During this time I have taken some time for meditation and prayer. Some days this has seemed very exciting, other days the readings seem to be distracting.

I have also been trying to use my physical exercise time as a time of prayer. I have often found this time to be an effective time to think, to plan and solve problems. I usually spend 30 to 40 minutes in cardio activity several times a week. A good amount of time, but the gym can be a very distracting place. I have been attempting to focus on praying in repetitive phrases -- "Lord Jesus Christ, Unbind Me (or "Our Church) or perhaps a passage of scripture, etc... I expected this to be soothing and meditative. I did not expect two things which I experienced. 1. Time elapsed

very quickly. I found on almost every occasion I went over the time I had planned to spend on the machine and did not realize the time had gone by. This is quite different than my usual passing the time calculating over and over again what % of my workout had been completed. 2. I stayed within my target heart rate almost the entire time of the workout (ex. On my last workout 39.4 minutes out of 40, my heart rate was in the target zone) This has never happened to me in the past (repeat –never happened before) there is no question that using this physical exercise time as a time of prayer has had a clear impact on my experience of time and physical well being.

As I said earlier I have been struggling with the Flu for the past two weeks. This has been a miserable time physically and spiritually. During this time, most of my prayer time has been spent wallowing in guilt/self pity. I honestly did not have the mental or physical ability to focus on prayer. It was very difficult to just be in prayer I finally had to give it up to God and just be with God in prayer. When our 7 month old was crying and every bit as miserable as I was, I realized I didn't know what to say. When the two year old showed every sign of having the flu, but still had the energy to dump another kitchen drawer, I didn't have the right words to pray. But I knew someone was going to be asking me how my praying was going. So, I had no alternative. I had to ask God to pray for me. I had to sit in prayer with God, and let God do the word part. This was a difficult time of prayer. Yet I found myself asking God over and over again to pray for me. This was very helpful prayer.

I believe this has had an impact on the prayer life of the congregation. I have found myself talking with people about prayer in a very different way. There are several things I have noticed or have had people share with me

1. The folks who come to the Tuesday morning Bible Study have told me the studies have been very exciting lately.

2. Following a Board meeting I missed due to the flu, the President told me (with excitement) she had found devotion on her own using the Lenten Email Devotions from our denomination we had encouraged people to use. This was something she would have said she was uncomfortable doing in the past.

3. A Deacon contacted me following our first gathering of UNBINDING THE GOSPEL to say he wanted to share an experience of feeling closer to God he had not shared at the gathering. One Sunday my wife and I had approached him after noticing he had not communed during the service. He said that at that moment he felt very close to God. He said it had meant a lot to him (we were really unaware of how much it meant). He said he had never shared this with anyone else, but he wanted to share it now.

4. We have been having a difficult time finding a new organist. Following an interview that was less than hopeful we began a conversation with people saying we have no choice and will need to settle for what we can get. I said very little, as I have no voice and spend much of this coughing. In a short time the conversation moved to we need to go home and pray about this – not think about it, or make phone calls, but we need to pray about this – this is very unusual for our congregation.

5. Finally, last Sunday after thinking I was up for leading worship (I should have stayed in my sick bed), I did a sad job of leading worship During the Prayers of the People we always ask for prayer requests -- I did not expect someone to stand up and ask for prayers for me – I thought maybe “you fool, go back to bed” but not to ask prayers for me. We have only taken a few baby steps in this prayer process, but there have clearly been a change – It strengthens my faith that God can do some things that we cannot even yet imagine.

The rest of the writing is from pastors of churches that have been in the coaching group for 9 months. They are all answering these two questions:

- 1. What has happened in your church because of your *Unbinding the Gospel* studies? Any good stories?*
- 2. As you reflect on your congregation, do you identify any markers/signs/indicators of transformation? What encourages the transformation? What impedes it? What's going on in your church?*

Pastor, after 9 months:

We have almost 100 members signed up to read *Unbinding Your Heart*. Our Prayer Team has pretty much decided to continue meeting after the E-vent every Wed at 5:45 pm. Some younger leaders have spoken in church about the effect of the *Unbinding the Gospel* to their faith.

We will begin our whole church work in Nov and I think the church is looking forward to this as a next step in reclaiming our evangelical nature. One of the transformations is that we are welcoming and keeping more people who feel outside the church - gay folk and young singles - and our members are very open to the understanding that Jesus welcomes us all, a message I have been hammering away at for 9 years. We have a few grouchy old people who are never very happy, but are loud about it. We just smile and I tell them that if Jesus accepts them and me, then Jesus can accept anyone.

9 months into coaching

We are just beginning our E-vent. This past Sunday was sign up Sunday and we will begin with the 40 days in October. There was an air of excitement in the church. More than 60 members of the church have signed up for small groups and we have more to contact. Our shut-ins will have difficulty in participating in the small groups, but seem excited to be included in the 40 days of devotions.

I was very pleased to see our group facilitators' walking around with their copies of the book with them. People are asking questions and, in general, seem happy to be a part of the event.

Our Board of Christian Education seems to be on board. Although it has caused some anxiety over how everything will work out. We have never done this type of program before, so we are not certain about how everything will work out. Our biggest dilemma is where to put all of the groups on Sunday morning. In addition to our regular classes, we have four small groups who would like to meet on Sunday mornings at the church. The growth can be seen - they were too busy for Sunday morning classes before. The struggle is there - where are we going to put them all on a Sunday morning. We will figure it out and Relax into God.

We also have a group of mid-thirties to mid-forties, with children group that wants to meet on Friday night. I honestly was surprised that they would be willing to give up Friday nights for something with the church.

There is a different atmosphere at the church. People who have come to the church have noted this change.

A new family began attending about five weeks ago and will be joining the church. They

said they had lived in the area for almost two years and had visited several churches, but did not feel the welcome and the greeting at the other churches.

One woman who has recently begun worshipping with us telephoned me this week to inquire about the 40 days and which group would work best for her.. “Our hope,” I said, “is that this will have a dramatic impact on the people and the congregation.” The woman, who has participated in small groups at another church said, “Oh, it will.” I believe our membership is beginning to believe this process will make a difference in our church life.

We do have barriers.

Primarily we are asking people to make changes. It takes a lot of intentional behavior and commitment. It also asks us stretch our comfort zone. This can be very overwhelming for people. Again we say relax into God and take one prayer at a time.

We do have some people who are resisting. One woman refuses to participate, and is very surprised so many people in the congregation are participating.

We also had a very negative situation between a few members of the congregation. It was a not un-common event in the life of our congregation. However, it was dealt with in a very different manner.

One of our members did not like a decision of our governing body. Over a couple of weeks the tensions grew, and this person became quite angry. She went as far as to make a public display on Sunday following church. Members of the congregation and I tried to speak with her. When we shared with her that we could not accept name calling and personal attacks on one another, we were informed that her words and actions were intentional and she wanted everyone to know what she had to say. It should not have been a surprise, for years she had used verbal aggression and intimidation to get her way.

She did not get the response from the congregation she was expecting. Shortly thereafter we received her letter of resignation from the church. She was quite shocked to learn the Elders had received her letter, were taking seriously and would present it to the Consistory. Behaviors that had worked for so many years did not receive the expected response, and the leaders of the congregation were acting in a very different manner as well.

We, the Elders and Pastor, did meet with her again. She did want her letter of resignation back. She also reaffirmed that her actions were intentional, and expressed her strong disapproval of a list of members of the church. We did not hear her say that she wanted to affirm her covenantal relationship with the church, or that God had anything to do with anything.

It was decided by the Elders that a 90 day “cooling off” period was needed. If after this time she wanted to affirm her relationship with the congregation we would welcome it with open arms. We do not know how this will turn out, but we do know that she has been worshipping with us on Sundays.

9 months into coaching

We also had a first a couple of weeks ago. We held our first Men’s Breakfast Bible Study. There we 11 people in attendance and all seemed to participate and be engaged with the text. Our study focused on Moses as a prominent male character in the Bible. The men were in agreement that they want to continue to get together. In the past there has been no interest shown.

What is encouraging is that we can see areas of growth, and we can see that we can work through stressful and destructive situations. We are still at the very beginning of our journey through the 40 days. We continue to pray and trust in God.,

9 months into coaching

What's happening in our church? There seems to be an encouraging sense of interest in the upcoming E-vent.....not excitement but interest. Folks are talking differently among one another --- they are practicing faith sharing in ways that our church has not seen. And some folks who would not express their faith verbally in a public setting, are less reluctant....this occurred just last evening during our board meeting. Encouraging signs.

Signs of transformation? Transformation we are seeing or that I am seeing is a willingness to talk about faith, a purposeful mindset that talking about faith is healthy and good. We have a newly 'organized' Sunday prayer group that will be around for our 40 days and it might take on a life of its own. Too soon to tell on that one. We've been able to deepen our corporate prayer life as a congregation with just some injection of 'fresh strategies' for us...nothing major but obviously meaningful for the congregation. We are using more of our kids and teens in worship in key leadership areas without violating our tradition. We are seeking to find creative and helpful ways to engage in a ministry of hospitality.....yesterday and this coming Sunday will be two keen illustrations of that. And people are just taking upon themselves, without prompting, or asking, to spend the time on behalf of others, of sending a note or a card to someone suffering from grief or crisis. Infectious transformation.

What impedes transformation? Weariness by many folks....folks who are carrying administrative, teaching, ministry tasks and they are tired. We are seeing more visitors and we have received new members but with the exception of one newer member, the rest are here but don't have the 'background', are not disciplined sufficiently to carry on some tasks nor show any desire --- like an entitlement rather than servant mentality.

We keep workinghopefully as a congregation we can be open enough to the Spirit that during the 40 day E-vent --- we will discern maybe lots of things. I have to say personally that I am not carrying this 40 Day E-vent on my shoulders that I need to 'make something happen'. I think that is a good thing.....especially for someone like me.

9 months into coaching:

What's happening in your church? We had 46 people participating in the *Unbinding the Gospel* course; 13 in the first round and 33 more in the second round. Where were some wonderful testimonies that came out of those. "I've gotten to know some people here, that I thought I knew, so much better." "I have never thought about sharing my faith with others and wasn't even aware that I didn't know what I believed much less how to share it. This course helped me to see I've got work to do." "The support that I have felt from you all during the time of my family's crisis has made such a difference."

Signs of transformation? Just the fact that our Board is moving forward to have an *Unbinding Your Heart* series this fall is a positive indicator. They preordered 100 copies of *Heart*.

One family scheduled a prayer/healing service in our chapel for their extended family to focus on a crisis the family was having and invited a few of the unbinding group to join them.

(This type of service is a first for this congregation.) The crisis had been brewing for many months and took a dramatic turn for the better the week after the service.

What impedes transformation? Our German-Dutch culture with its lack of emotionality and sense of privacy that plays its cards close to the vest has made this a tough sell. “We were taught not to talk about that,” and, “We have never done it that way before,” have been shared more than once. Yet, we’ve cracked the egg, are working towards an omelet and most of those who participated in *Unbinding the Gospel* and very hopeful and positive.

9 months into process, preparing for an E-vent:

We were excited to have most of the leaders we invited to participate in *Unbinding the Gospel* get involved. Most of the thirty leaders were faithful through the eight weeks, and gave positive evaluations. I cannot say that I have noticed any dramatic transformation in our congregation. But as we prepare for the fall E-vent, I am thrilled with the commitment and creativity with which the coordinators and their teams are working. I am hopeful that we will again involve many people in the congregation in *Unbinding Your Heart* this fall. Personally, I have appreciated the support to deepen my daily spiritual life. I feel that I have developed a healthier habit of prayer and scripture reading that I trust will stay with me. And I am sure that this renewed habit is making an impact on my daily work and my worship leadership.

In the past months we have been reading the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and family. Now we are reading of Moses and Miriam. One of the things I am noticing about these wonderful stories is that transformation takes time, patience, and perseverance. It is a process of risk taking and discernment. It is also a process of forgiveness and second chances. Because of our participation in the Unbinding Project, we are becoming more aware of God's transforming Spirit alive and at work at our church. I pray that we will allow that Spirit to lead us to new life.