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BEST PRACTICES FOR ESTABLISHING THE *UNBINDING THE GOSPEL SERIES* IN YOUR CHURCH

November 1, 2013

Summary of series

The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* is in 15,000 congregations. The process was developed for the majority of mainline churches, where members would rather get gall bladder surgery than think about evangelism! The purpose of the *Series* is to help typical congregations develop the three key indicia we identified in successful evangelistic churches during the Lilly Endowment- funded Mainline Evangelism Project, the only major study of evangelism in mainline churches:

(a) a deep relationship with God, (b) the ability to talk comfortably about faith, and (c) a real focus on people *beyond* church walls. We're trying to change habit, not just minds! The *Series* takes the whole church, leaders first, through what most mainline churches need: "*pre*-evangelism." Then we progress to actual invitation – community and small group faith-sharing with friends who have little or no exposure to Christianity.

Unbinding the Gospel, the first book, helps church leaders begin to pray daily, talk about their faith with each other and begin to think about people beyond church walls. These leaders, in pairs, lead everyone in the church through a six-week, small group study of *Unbinding Your Heart*. *Unbinding Your Church: Pastor's & Leaders' Guide* is the instruction manual that outlines this all-church process from the beginning. *Real invitation: Unbinding Your SOUL* is for churches that are now ready to invite! Ask friends who don't go to church to join you in a small- group experience of Christian prayer & community. Three of the books (*Gospel, Heart & Soul*) contain 40-day prayer journals. Two of the books (*Heart & Soul*) utilize all-church worship & educational resources.

**TESTED STEPS FOR USING
THE UNBINDING SERIES**
First “Semester” (fall or spring)

1. Pastors – read *Unbinding the Gospel (red ribbon)*. Do you like it? Does it feel as if it will be a fit for your people? The *Unbinding Series* presents a *process* to help typical churches develop the practices of the extraordinary evangelistic churches in the only major national study of evangelism in mainline churches. The prayer journal and the exercises at the ends of the chapters are as important as the chapter contents!
2. **PLEASE DON'T preach or do a newsletter article** about *Unbinding the Gospel*. It doesn't help. It will create resistance.

(Preaching won't help. A newsletter article won't inspire. Be quiet. Operate by stealth. Let the group process and the Spirit start working with people. You're trying to help a lay movement emerge, not give them more information.)

3. BEFORE leading the study, **read** the Introduction, Chapter 1 and Chapter 4 of *Unbinding Your Church (green ribbon)*.
4. Watch some of the videos at www.GraceNet.info. Download and read Martha Grace Reese's *2012 Unbinding the Gospel Research Report* (www.GraceNet.info, bottom of home page). And you could skim *Unbinding Your Soul* for 70 stories and quotes from churches that have worked with the *Series*.
5. Start a “test group” – a small group of your quickest adapters, with as close to an equal gender balance as possible, to try *Unbinding the Gospel*. (Put in some new Christians and a couple of young people if you have them.) The magic number is **8-10 people, even in tiny congregations**. Individually invite key leaders from different parts of the congregation, NOT the council, not any existing group. We find this inhibits later, all-church participation. **Choose people who have the capacity to lead in pairs** if you all decide at the end that the process is a good fit for your church and you want to go further. **Multiple staff churches** – each pastor lead a test group with his/her normal constellation of leaders, roughly simultaneously.
6. Do the study **for 8 weeks in a row** (**don't try it with your once-a-month church board or any existing group - we're seeing you need the 8 week intensity to affect change**).
 - 1) **First session**: Read Chapters 1 & 2 before your meeting. **Do** the group exercise?
 - 2) **Second session**: Discuss Chapter 3 and the introduction to the prayer journal (pp. 149-155. Choose prayer partners. Begin prayer journals at the back of GOSPEL the day after the 2nd session.
 - 3) **Sessions 3-8**: One chapter a week, combine chapters 9 & 10.
 - 4) Pastor should lead this first “Test Group.”
 - 5) Support prayer journal engagement by:
 - a. Pastor does the prayer journal and prays seriously for the group and the church daily. We can't lead where we aren't going!

- b. Participants select prayer partners during the 2nd session (couples should choose a prayer partner other than their spouse. Pastors, please don't be a prayer partner with anyone in your group - it skews relational dynamics).
 - c. Beginning with Session 3, open each meeting with, "How's your prayer going? Let's go around the circle and each say one thing."
- 6) Divide group time into thirds to focus on each of three critical elements of process
- a. Discuss ideas in chapters (prompt discussion with questions at ends of chapters)
 - b. Talk about prayer journal experience
 - c. Do the group exercises at the ends of the chapters. (This experiential piece of this is crucial to actual change in churches.)
 - d. Maximal group meeting time is 1 hour 15 minutes to 1.5 hours.
 - e. Optimal group size is 8-10 participants with pastor leading.
 - f. Order an individual book for each participant. (When couples share, they don't take notes in the book or use the prayer journal.) Current discount codes & best prices for books are listed on www.GraceNet.info.
 - g. Facilitate the group (or co-lead it) as transparently as possible. Don't "teach" the material - get the people to talk. The less facilitator talks, the better! And remember
 - the prayer journal and the group exercises are crucial. This is an experience, not information to be absorbed!
7. After the test study, read Chapter 2 of *Unbinding Your Church*. Discuss with the group whether *GOSPEL* has been helpful with your people. If so, you could keep going.

Second "Semester" (spring or fall)
20% of AWA studies GOSPEL; plan for all-
church saturation study

8. Your *Test Study group becomes a leadership group*. Leading is always in pairs. Your Test Group can continue with two functions: (a) they continue to be a group for mutual learning & support (b) they discuss leadership of their own groups & pray for groups and church. Pastor continues leading. This group can meet for 45-60 minutes after worship.
9. **20% of average worship attendance studies GOSPEL**. Involve all of your leaders in small group studies of *Unbinding the Gospel*. It's crucial to include at least 20% of your average worship attendance (include youth group leaders and teachers of all Sunday School classes and existing small groups, mission groups, ministry teams, the choir, women's and men's' groups). **Large churches** should do a staff study. Include the musicians *early* in the process. **Select leaders for this 20%, not existing small groups members**. You will include the small groups next semester, during the all-church, saturation study, the "E-vent." This is how you get to high saturation rates for the E-vent.

*Third “Semester”
The “E-vent”–your all-church saturation study using
Unbinding Your Heart*

10. If your 20% wants to keep going, you’re ready to plan an E-vent, our name for a six- week, all-church saturation study of *Unbinding Your Heart (purple ribbon)*. *HEART* is a 6-chapter version of *GOSPEL* with a different prayer journal. Use *Unbinding Your Church, the Pastor’s & Leaders’ Guide* (Green ribbon), and downloadable planning, worship & educational resources on www.GraceNet.info, including:
- *7 sermons* for the introductory Sunday and the 6-week E-vent, in two formats for reading and preaching. You may use verbatim or adapt – please credit Dawn Weaks as author.
 - *Children’s and Youth Curricula* for the E-vent. Choose from several curricula developed by churches for their E-vents – or write your own!
 - *All-Church Study (“E-vent”) Promotional Resources* – invitations, sample newsletters, posters, more for you to use/adapt to promote your E-vent in your congregation and community
11. Offer God your time and attention during the 6-week E-vent. Don’t schedule other church meetings. Let this feel like a “Sabbath,” a rest. During the six weeks, everyone junior high & older (and all the friends, family, co-workers, school and golf buddies they can invite):
- a. prays individually
 - b. meets with their prayer partner and with their small group weekly
 - c. worships weekly, with all of worship – sermon, music, liturgy – wrapped around the theme of that week’s chapter. See *CHURCH* and also our website, www.Gracenet.info / Download Resources (password for Exclusive Downloads is on p. 82 of Church) for all resources, including children’s Sunday school lessons, sermons & music plans, and organizational forms.

This process is organic. It’s participatory. Facilitate. Support. Don’t “teach!” It requires a long runway. Don’t rush it. The goal is not to “do a program.” The goal is to support a developing lay movement as the Spirit works with all of you.

Note: We see statistically significant, transformational changes in congregations in which at least 85% of their average worship attendance participates in a small group study of *Unbinding Your Heart*. The church in Story 4, chapter 7, of *Unbinding Your Soul* is the world record holder so far! This church had gradually declined in worship attendance from 275 to 110 over a 35-year period. The co-pastors are wonderful. They had served the church for five years, won trust, and they pray. They pray seriously. And they took this process very slowly, methodically, and with room for the Spirit! They began with 110 people in worship. 159 people participated in small groups. Average worship attendance for the same 3-month period a year later was 160. Ten adults were baptized. 145% of their average worship attendance participated in small groups. The congregation grew 46% in average worship attendance over the previous year. This is a great example illustrative of the pattern we’re seeing. Generally speaking, the higher the percentage of people who prayerfully study *Unbinding Your Heart* in small groups for six weeks, the greater the impact on the congregation and the greater change in congregational trajectory.

THE YEAR OF INVITATION

INVITING: *UNBINDING YOUR SOUL* (YELLOW RIBBON)

E-vent momentum. Our research shows that it's crucial to continue immediately into a "Year of Invitation" if you want the momentum and excitement of the high-energy E-vent to move into actual evangelism. Evangelism, faith-sharing and a real change in the church won't happen unless you pray and plan for conscious streams of invitation. The more quickly you start your initial pastor-led facilitators' study of *Unbinding your Soul* after an E-vent, the greater the chance of a continuation of your E-vent momentum and significant numerical growth. Don't let things go back to normal – walk into the world through the door that Christ has opened in your church!

Key Question for the Year: Let's name the incredible things we've done and that God's done through us (...during the E-vent...this spring/this fall). Look at this! How can we do more of this??

Unbinding Your Year of Invitation Retreat: Download a retreat plan for a Saturday morning retreat to help you move from your E-vent into your Year of Invitation. Your leaders participate in an "unbinding" prayer and discernment process to help them make the transition seamlessly from the excitement of the E-vent into the adventure of their year of invitation.

Your leaders will start planning for a Year of Invitation that includes:

1. ***Personal invitations*** ("How can I pray for people who are far from the church and feel far from God? How can I include them in my faith life, or how could I connect with their faith lives? How can I invite them to connect with the church?")
2. ***Team invitations*** ("How can our mission team [...our finance committee...our youth group...our prayer group] invite and include people outside the church this year? What can we plan or do that will help others join in these things God's doing?")
3. ***All-church invitations*** (What can we do to give new people have entry points into our church? A Christmas tea for women? Work with the high school kids? Personal finance classes with a dinner and a faith component for the community?)
4. ***Unbinding Your SOUL*** (yellow ribbon) is the invitational small group study specifically designed for the Year of Invitation. Aspects of ***SOUL*** will comfort your people – they're familiar – small group exercises, discussions and a prayer journal. (Remember how scary that stuff was a year ago?) That "comfort food" will help your church members rise to the *new* challenge – invitation! ***SOUL*** isn't about churches, as ***HEART*** is. ***SOUL*** helps you grapple with eight key themes of Christian faith. And it's about invitation, designed so that everyone can invite friends who *don't* go to church to be part of a four-week small group experiment ("test drive") in Christian prayer and community. (See www.GraceNet.info, then select *Multimedia / Videos / First Presbyterian, Gainesville Florida Unbinding Your Soul* group to see an exciting video!)

How to use SOUL: News flash! The best model for **SOUL** is for the pastor and a key lay leader to lead a large group of leaders (20-30-40-50 potential leaders) through an 8-week study of SOUL (chapters 1-8 in that order, with 6 weeks of prayer journal). If you had a Lenten E-vent, do a fall 8-week **SOUL** study. Keep the same prayer partners throughout the 8 weeks. Do the group exercises and chapter discussions in ever-changing groups of 3 or 6 so that they *don't* make the intimate small group connections yet! Each week, hold before these leaders' eyes the vision that next "semester" they will help invite and co-lead small groups of people, maybe half of whom have no connection with Christianity! Form/invite/organize 4-week **SOUL** groups (chapters 1-4) for a year after your E-vent. Groups that want to continue can move on to chapter 5-8. (The book is designed with a built-in multiplication system.)

This **Year of Invitation Leaders' Guide** will help you. Please follow it to help your people move the Unbinding prayer and outreach into your committees, task forces and church board, and *out into the neighborhood*.

Churches that have their E-vent in Lent/fall and then study *Soul* will be ready to have their **Soul Sabbatical** in fall/Lent respectively. Dawn Weeks, who wrote the **Unbinding Your Heart** sermons) has written another set of sermons to help your church members invite friends, and to coordinate with the SOUL groups, once formed. They're wonderful! Find them on www.GraceNet.info / Public Downloads / Year of Invitation.

For groups that are heading into Fall/ Spring **Unbinding Your SOUL** leadership groups and Spring/Fall **Soul Sabbaticals**, see the **Unbinding Your Soul – Plan for Classes and Sermons** for chapter and sermon correlation. NOTE: *Sermons are numbered in the order of their USE, not in correlation with the chapters!*

Research finding: We discovered that the pastors who served the statistically growing congregations in the Mainline Evangelism Study all actively invited people to church, to worship, to small group and mission experiences. Pastors – if you aren't inviting, your people won't either. (Take heart – the pastors of the most evangelistic churches in the country said it scared them, too!) So think about holding office hours in Starbucks every Tuesday. Think about riding with the police officers on duty regularly. We can't lead where we're not going. (Watch Cathy Townley's webinar on *Invitation: Reaching Your Mission Field* (www.GraceNet.info / Download Resources).

So – Do you have any questions? Please contact us. And tell us what happens when you try the Series. Send us the resources you develop! We love pictures and videos. And let us know the great stories of what God does with you and the people you serve. You're in our prayers. Blessings,
Martha Grace