

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

### *Summary of Series*

*Unbinding the GOSPEL/HEART* are for the majority of mainline churches and groups in the US (those that would rather go get a root canal than think about evangelism). *GOSPEL/HEART* is what most mainline churches need: “*pre*-evangelism.” These resources help the whole church change its habits to reflect habits of members and leaders of highly effective mainline evangelistic churches. They begin to pray daily, to talk about their faith with each other & to take steps toward significant faith conversations with friends without a faith/church relationship. *Unbinding Your Church: Pastor’s & Leaders’ Guide* outlines process from the beginning.

*Unbinding Your SOUL* is for small groups that are ready to invite! Ask friends who don’t go to church to join you in an experiment in Christian prayer & community. Use *SOUL* in new churches, new members’ classes, young adults’ groups, churches that have done the full Gospel/Heart process, and for “on fire” groups in typical congregations.

## **TESTED STEPS FOR USING THE UNBINDING THE GOSPEL/HEART PROCESS**

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? If you’re not sure, ask a key lay leader to read it and meet you for lunch in two weeks to discuss it.

*Martha Grace Reese may be available for a phone conference call  
consultation with groups of pastors at this point.*

*To participate in a call, each pastor  
must have read **GOSPEL** and liked it!*

*Contact us through [www.GraceNet.info](http://www.GraceNet.info) to discuss a call.*

2. If you read *Unbinding the Gospel* & really like it **PLEASE DON’T preach or do a newsletter article about it!** That:
  - A. doesn’t help &
  - B. creates 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. Read the Introduction, Chapter 1 and Chapter 4 of *Unbinding Your Church (green ribbon)*.

4. Skim *Unbinding Your Soul (yellow ribbon)* to read 70 stories and quotes from churches that have worked with the Unbinding coaching process to see the typical trajectory of mainline churches praying, talking about faith and beginning to reach out beyond their walls. Quick version: (a) read the Introduction, (b) Read the last 3 pages of the book, the story of the *Unbinding Series* in the largest United Methodist Church in Illinois, (c) read chapter 7, (d) starting with chapter 1, read all the sidebar quotes.

5. Start a small group (8-10 people plus leaders) of your quickest adapters to do a test study of *Unbinding the Gospel*. Ask the key leaders you think will like it best. (Order one copy per person – they contain individual prayer journals.)

6. Do the study **for 8 weeks in a row (don't try it with your once-a-month church board)**. We're seeing that these studies are interesting, but result in disappointing statistical outcomes. This experiential process needs the intensity of weekly sessions.)

- a. Combine Chapters 1 & 2, then spend a week each on Chapters 3 through 8, combine Chapters 9 & 10.
- b. Begin the prayer journals at the back of GOSPEL the day *after* you discuss Chapter 3.
- c. Pastor should lead the first group.
- d. Select 8-10 of your most enthusiastic, strongest leaders for this first study - your quickest adapters for the first study. (This study trains co-leaders for any subsequent groups.)
- e. Support prayer journal engagement by:
  - i. opening each meeting with a 10 minute check-in, asking "How is your prayer going?"
  - ii. Let participants select prayer partners during the 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting
- f. Spend half the group time talking about prayer and doing the group exercises at the ends of the chapters. Spend the other half talking about the chapter content. (The experiential piece of this is crucial to actual change in churches.)
- g. Maximal group meeting time is 1 hour - 1.5 hours.
- h. Optimum group size is 8-10 participants with 2 leaders.
  - i. Order an individual book for each participant. We see that when married couples share, no one marks in the book, and they don't use the prayer journal.
- i. Pastors - please pray seriously for this group each day. Do the prayer journal with them. Facilitate the group (or co-lead it) as transparently as possible.

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.

*Martha Grace Reese is available to help with your evaluation in another conference call with your group of pastors. If you are invited to form a coaching group (with church board approval), formal coaching would begin at this point.*

8. Next steps are to do small group studies of ***Unbinding the Gospel*** with all of your functional leadership – at least 20% of your average worship attendance (include youth group leaders and teachers of all Sunday School classes and existing small groups). Large churches should do a staff study. Include the musicians *early* in the process.

9. If your 20% wants to keep going (keep giving them choice points!), 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 Leaders' and Pastor's guide, downloadable resources on [www.GraceNet.info](http://www.GraceNet.info), including the *Unbinding the Gospel Community*.

10. 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 week, everyone junior high & older:

- 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*** for all resources, including children's Sunday school lessons & music plans.

11. Congregations reach almost double the rates of congregational involvement with Lilly Endowment-supported coaching. Congregations without coaching average 45-50% of average worship attendance participation in the E-vent. Congregations participating in the *Unbinding the Gospel Project* average 85% congregational saturation. *The greater the congregational involvement in ***Unbinding Your Heart*** studies, the greater the chance of significant congregational transformation.* Contact Martha Grace Reese at [www.GraceNet.info](http://www.GraceNet.info) for more information about Lilly 2:1 matching grants for coaching.

**12. Steps 1-11 can take 18 months. 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 lay movement as it develops.**

**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! The 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.

### **INVITING: *UNBINDING YOUR SOUL* (YELLOW RIBBON)**

*SOUL* is where typical mainline churches start inviting and helping new people enter the faith. *SOUL* offers 4-week modules of small group material for groups who may want to invite unchurched friends or recent visitors to the church to try an experiment (some churches call it a "test drive") of 4 weeks of Christian community and prayer. Groups double, divide, continue, with the "friends" inviting *their* friends in future modules.

We are seeing exciting outcomes from *Unbinding Your Soul* in:

- Churches that have studied *GOSPEL & HEART*
- New churches
- New members' classes
- Young adult, high school & college groups, and
- Vital, invitational small groups in typical churches (*pre-GOSPEL/HEART*)

#### **CONCEPTS & STEPS:**

1. *Read the Facilitators' Guide* before planning groups (*SOUL*, p. 133-144). Page 101-02 presents a synopsis of the invitational process.

2. *What's the study like?* Soul offers two sets of 4 short chapters, with individual prayer journals. This isn't a big production, all-church study like HEART. It's the logical, next step, small group curriculum for groups that would love to keep going. Think of it in 4-week modules. Participants join and exit group at 4-week intervals. No one commits to more than 4 weeks. The groups have no predetermined end. Multiple groups in the same church needn't be in sync with each other. (*People may be intimidated by the idea of inviting friends, even after the E-vent. Soothe the fears by saying, "It's okay. Let's just do this with our small group for 4 week. You can continue if you want, but no one is obligated. Just do 4 weeks. Let's see where it goes."*)

4. *When to start groups?* If you'd like to use SOUL for Lent, plan to have church groups start 2 or 3 weeks BEFORE Ash Wednesday, then unchurched friends will be finishing their study as Palm Sunday and Easter. We recommend starting fall groups at the beginning of October, so that friends join the beginning of November and can become incorporated into the congregation during Advent.

5. *E-vent momentum.* Our research is showing that the more quickly you start *Unbinding your Soul* groups 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 - move right to *SOUL!*