

**Mainline Evangelism Project II  
("The Unbinding the Gospel Project")  
Christian Board of Publication**

**First Report to the Lilly Endowment, Inc.  
Grant No. 2007 1506-000**

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**April 7, 2009**

***Overview***

What a year! This grant project is going beautifully. In the 14 months since the grant period began, we have put a structure in place to coach groups of mainline congregations through an 18-24 month saturation process with the *Unbinding the Gospel Series*. (The bulk of the coaching is for a 9-month period.) About 200 congregations are in the process at this point. We have three goals:

- (1) To support a high percentages of individuals (clergy and laity) in roughly 1000 churches to begin to pray seriously, to grapple with individual & relational faith issues, and to develop the motivation to begin to share their faith beyond church walls
- (2) To help about 1000 congregations make significant shifts in their corporate spiritual practices and evangelism
- (3) To collect and analyze data that will help us identify factors that encourage or inhibit faith deepening and faith sharing in pastors, lay leaders, new Christians and congregations.

This process works better than we could have hoped. We're working with mainline churches ranging in worship attendance from 35 to 1800; across an enormous theological range (GLBT pastors thru Renewal movement pastors); with new church launch teams and with 300 year old congregations that participated in the Great Awakening; in Kansas farm towns, elegant neighborhoods, middle America suburbs and decaying downtowns.

The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* itself is reaching quite surprising numbers of congregations. *Unbinding the Gospel* itself is in at least 12,000 congregations in all 50 states, and is being used to some extent in 49 denominations, across the theological spectrum. The bulk of its presence is among mainline churches (PCUSA, DOC, UCC, UMC). *Unbinding the Gospel* and the full *Series* work well in churches of all sizes.

The response to the *Series* (and the coaching process itself) tends to be surprise. (We've heard comments like, "This is not your dad's evangelism!") First, people are surprised that the books fit a complex, mainline theology. Second, although the ideas are complex, the language is simple ("What difference does it make in your life that you're a Christian?"). Third, the books don't contain checklists of key points and formulaic suggestions. Instead, it's "let's talk about what we really believe, and let's pray and see if God will do something with us." The pastor of one of the mega churches in the coaching process wrote, "The *Unbinding Series* is not as much about evangelism as it is about unfreezing icy hearts. The real focus is to invite people to try God again for the first time. When their hearts begin to thaw through the practice of the spiritual exercises, they are opened to God and others in ways they never imagined possible. The serendipitous result is the inclusion of new people into the faith."

We see encouraging results, even this early in the course of the grant. We are seeing signs of transformational shifts in pastors, lay leaders and congregations. Here are some of the signs we see with marked frequency:

- Pastors and members are praying seriously, often for the first time
- Members are beginning to articulate their faith with each other and get to know each other well, sometimes after decades of attending the same church
- Members are grappling with issues of *why* they should share their faith.
- Once they answer the *why* question, answers about *how* to share their faith begin to emerge
- Members are beginning to invite friends to church and into conversations about faith issues
- Increased numbers of youth and young adults
- Adult baptisms
- Pastors describe "having fun" with ministry, being more energized than they have for years. They talk about spiritual deepening and "joy."
- Pastors and judicatory members describe numerous instances of members navigating conflict much more healthily. (We're not addressing conflict expressly, but the relational health seems to be shifting over.)
- Church boards and committees describe renewed creativity and new ministries
- Numerical growth

The path to these significant congregational changes is becoming clearer: a slow, thorough saturation of the church with a combination of the intellectual, experiential and spiritual aspects of the *Unbinding the Gospel Series*. Changes that augur some degree of permanence emerge from (a) persistence in the process, (b) deep prayer, (c) experiential learning coupled with intellectual insight.

## *First Year Specifics*

*Here are highlights of what we've done in this first 15 months of our four-year grant:*

- ***Developed a high-commitment coaching model*** (see attached Coaching Documents). We're working with groups, primarily by conference calls, with a two-day, on-site visit where the coach works with pastors and up to 20% of each congregation, all of whom have studied ***Unbinding the Gospel*** in small groups. I prepare groups for coaching. Coaching lasts for 9-15 months, with follow-up a year later.
- ***Developed a team of six coaches, a Project Administrator, and Reese*** (UMC, UCC, ELCA, Episcopalian, DOC & PCUSA).
- ***Developed a public web site*** for the Project with information, discussion community for people using the Series, videos, downloads & podcasts ([www.GraceNet.info](http://www.GraceNet.info)). The site receives visits from about 2000 people per month (11,000 hits).
- ***Developed a sophisticated research website*** for working with coaching pastors and ongoing data collection (same site, need password)
- ***Started three sets of coaching groups, a total of 22 groups of churches (roughly 200 congregations)***
  - 8 pilot groups - January '08
  - 7 groups with new, higher expectation covenant September, '08
  - 7 groups began January '09)
- ***Staff of the Project:*** Reese (Director), Elinor Campbell (1/2 time Project Administrator); Nancy Lee Gauche (10 hour a week Coaching Director); Dave Yankowiak (web developer); 6 coaches (Gauche ELCA, Paul Nickerson UCC, Cathy Townley UMC, Nancy Wood UCC, Jeff Gill DOC, Pamela Dolan Episcopalian); Jackie Wenger, religious sociologist of Catholic University will analyze data when we get to the end of the Project.
- ***Denominational affiliations of current coaching churches:*** PCUSA, DOC, UMC, Episcopalian, Church of the Brethren, UCC, RCA
- ***2008 additions to the Unbinding the Gospel Series.*** Chalice Press published the second and third books in the ***Unbinding Series*** in January 2008 (***Unbinding Your Heart*** and ***Unbinding Your Church***). These books expand ***Unbinding the Gospel*** into a full-year, all-congregational saturation experience. I added a 40-day prayer journal to ***Unbinding the Gospel*** (1<sup>st</sup> ed. January 2007, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition November 2008). The prayer journals in ***Gospel*** and ***Heart*** have proven to be immensely helpful. See attached brochure to get a sense of the parameters of the Series.
- ***2009 addition to the Unbinding Series.*** I have started to work on a "What do we do next?" book for congregations that have used the full *Series*. ***Unbinding Your Soul:***

**40 Days of Prayer & Faith Sharing for Small Groups** will be available 9/09. **Soul** will help small groups invite unchurched people into a small group, prayer and discussion experience in homes.

- **We're exceeding numerical goals for the Grant.** We are working with almost twice the number of churches we estimated at this point. We're a bit under budget.
- **Coaching efficacy rate:** We realized early that results in churches depend heavily on the numbers of people who participate in small groups for the six-week congregational saturation study of **Unbinding Your Heart**. We've raised coaching expectations and efficacy to the point where the 85 coaching churches doing their studies during Lent 2009 **average 85% of their worship attendance in small groups**. (We don't know what changes have taken place in these churches yet, but early signs of significant shifts are very exciting.)

Chris, I'd like to walk you through the data-collection portion of the web site, so you can see what we've developed. We are collecting congregational statistics, before and after coaching. We're also asking pastors reflection questions before and after each phone call. The site is the repository for coaches' reflections, stories from congregations, saved e-mails, etc. We will be able to encode all entries with research category codes and do comparisons of all sorts of variables. If our experience to date continues, we'll be able to manage and make sense of the 200,000 items of data we're on target to collect.

### ***What We're Learning***

**The books work well.** The full, sequential process with the **Series** over 12-18 months helps churches make significant, transformational shifts.

**Challenges.** Our primary challenge stems from the fact that our churches aren't used to doing the major, saturation process we're convinced is necessary to give churches a viable shot at real change. They do book studies. They run nice, educational programs. We're seeing impressive inertia that militates against doing an intensive process that requires (a) prayer, (b) significant, ongoing organization, (c) long-term focus, (d) rigorous questioning of assumptions, and (e) trust in the Spirit. That's before somebody slips and mentions the dreaded, toxic word, *evangelism!*

At the onset of coaching, the typical pastor entering this process prays less than 10 minutes a day. The typical pastor estimates that 90% of his church's lay people are "evangelism cautious." Eighty percent (80%) of them say that they themselves are "evangelism cautious!" (And these are the pastors who are signing up for a year of coaching, paying money, piloting resolutions through the church board, covenanting to pray personally 30 minutes a day, and to lead an all-church evangelism process!) Some pastors lead their churches fluidly, brilliantly and intuitively. Many are tired, discouraged and aren't really conscious of how much hope and creativity they've lost over the years. Some pastors are beautifully organized. Many are scrambling to keep church machinery from grinding to a halt or squashing them.

**Coaching Helps.** We see that the accountability of a coaching group helps most pastors. Buddies along the journey encourage even the best and brightest who could manage the process by themselves.

The Unbinding the Gospel Project asks pastors and churches to commit more time, energy, prayer and focus than the typical capital campaign. Capital campaigns are the only process in most churches' memories comparable in thoroughness to the Unbinding Project. We're adding a significant spiritual component to that degree of saturation and organization capital campaigns demand. The Unbinding the Gospel Project offers churches entre into a new, threatening, exciting world.

The pilot groups taught us a huge amount. Primary learnings are:

1. ***It's almost impossible to overestimate the grim impact of the word "evangelism" upon most mainline people and pastors.***
2. ***Key factors of this process are its length and its intensity.*** If we sacrifice preparation or intensity, we lose impact. As an example, most attempts to study ***Unbinding the Gospel*** with church boards, once a month, have produced disappointing results. They have a nice book study that doesn't change much. Similar results occur if people don't do the 40 days of prayer: Nice study, no real changes. We need weekly immersion for eight weeks, doing the exercises, not just discussing ideas, to produce significant change. These dynamics also apply to the all-congregational study of ***Unbinding Your Heart***.
3. ***The process works better if we involve lay people much earlier in the coaching.*** We now include lay people from the second phone call. A handful of coaching churches have done the process solely with lay leadership (with and without an interim pastor). Those congregations, although unusual, have worked beautifully (85-95% of average worship attendance participation in ***Heart*** small groups).
4. ***This process demands a long runway, then high initial commitments to enter the coaching process.*** I am now working personally with pastors and judicatory ministers for 6-12 months ***before*** formal coaching starts. We now ask that senior pastors lead one small group study of ***Unbinding the Gospel*** before coaching, and that the church board commit to doing the full, all-church study with 85% of their worship attendance. (We ask that they calculate and sign off on the book bill as part of the *Congregational Covenant*, attached.) And we ask that pastors pray 30 minutes a day for the duration of the coaching (*Pastor's Covenant*, attached).
5. ***We believe that lengthening the preparation process for coaching and raising the entry bar are important factors in the increase in congregational saturation percentages*** (These numbers are still a little rough, but we have moved from 35-40% participation in the all-church study of ***Unbinding Your Heart*** (the "E-vent") in the pilot group churches to about 85% in the second set of coaching groups. Churches from pilot groups that have stayed in coaching for a year and a half, doing E-vents in

Lent '09 rather than fall '08, exhibit much higher percentages. I'm counting them in with the 85%, Lent '09 E-vent groups. The record so far is 130% of average worship attendance involved in small group studies of *Heart*.

6. ***Churches with higher saturation percentages for the E-vent report more indicators of significant congregational changes*** (increased attendance, more visitors, new members, old members praying and articulating their faith much more comfortably, stories of members beginning to stop conflict before it can get started or navigating conflict much more smoothly, members spontaneously starting new ministries, examples of great creativity, many more children showing up, growing young adult groups, adult baptisms, boards and committees meeting using “Unbinding” practices. And they talk about joy. Many pastors are having fun in their ministries. A pastor spoke with Ellie Campbell yesterday about putting off his planned retirement for 6 months so that he can see his church through this process because it's so different and so exciting. We are seeing many churches that have been in sustained patterns of stagnation or decline, begin to grow numerically. Two churches that had 35 and 35 people in worship for decades doubled!
7. ***The economic downturn has thrown churches and judicatories for a loop.*** Less money and higher anxiety levels make it hard for churches to commit to a high intensity process like this, even those who articulate that this is exactly the time they need to reach out to people outside the church. A countervailing factor to this anxiety is emerging. As more churches gain experience with the process, they are beginning to talk with their friends. Judicatories that have worked with one coaching group are forming second and third groups to reach more of their congregations.

### ***Specific Examples***

I thought it might be helpful to include a few examples of some of the shifts we're seeing, and of the excitement the *Unbinding* process is generating. All of these examples came from e-mails I received today. Granted, this is Lent and many churches are doing all-church *Heart* studies. We're at the end of the process with many of these people, so we're hearing end results, not early glitches and predicaments. It's a good day for e-mail, but we've had many good days!

We see excitement, joy and wonder from normal, mainline people. We can almost presume that mainline church people will be faithful, thoughtful and have a desire to serve their communities. But the coaches and I see an additional element, a “Whoa! Look what God can *do!!!*” character to the communications from most of the coaching churches. Most of these people are typical mainline folks – a large percentage of them are extremely progressive theologically. This is not the way they normally talk.

I received 20+ e-mails from churches or coaches today (March 19<sup>th</sup>). I could have used 15 of them to show these types of stories. Four of the e-mails today came from pastors and churches I'd never heard of before. One of these came from a thoughtful, progressive UMC pastor who sent me a video of his church choir, soloist and 3 instrumentalists singing an

***Unbinding Your Heart*** anthem composed by a 20 year old in the congregation. An Iowa pastor with whom we'd had no prior contact described his church's E-vent – 115 people participating in small groups, 100 in average worship attendance before they started. They're trying a virtual group for people who are traveling, but it hasn't worked as well as the face-to-face group, he says (yes - everyone's experience – see the intensity issue in paragraph 2, page 5). Here's an e-mail from a coaching pastor in its entirety: "Greetings – I don't have time to share it all. Please note the Holy Spirit is moving in big ways at \_\_\_\_ Church in \_\_\_\_ MN. Please keep praying for us. Big things are happening!"

Another coaching pastor has served a Disciples church in an area of shrinking demographics. The church has steady numerical decline (205 average worship attendance in 1991, 132 in 2008). The current pastors have served the church for five years. Her e-mail described the growth in their youth and young adult groups. She attributes the growth largely to what God is doing through their ***Unbinding Your Heart*** work over the last 15 months. The youth group has grown from 3 to 22. The young adults' group has grown from 4 to 21, mostly with people who had never had a church connection. They're now studying ***Unbinding Your Heart*** and are in the middle of their E-vent. "Our young adult group continues to amaze us. We had 2 young women (20 somethings) come forward to give their lives to Christ. They were invited to come to "Unbinding" by the young woman that gave her life to Christ last week (March 8). All three want to be baptized. And I heard from the facilitator for the young adults today that she believes there might be 2-3 others from that group that will come forward and will desire baptism!!! We are just thrilled!

"Also, we have been looking and looking for a Choir Director and not finding anyone. We interviewed a vivacious and strong candidate for the position last week and we think that we will offer the position to him. He is 23 years old! It is very exciting to see our groups praying together and growing. Not all groups are as strong as the young adult group...but I do think the Holy Spirit is at work and changing people's lives." The church began coaching with an average worship attendance of 132. 162 people are participating in ***Unbinding Your Heart*** small groups. I believe that their worship attendance is in the 180 range.

A coach sent me the following notes from three conversations with different pastors today. These are fairly typical of the entries stored in our data banks. The churches are Presbyterian and Methodist, located in the northeast.

***Church A:*** GREAT things happening in Church A. People saying "Can't you feel the Holy Spirit? Something's happening here!"

*Last Sunday they had 4 benches of children for the children's sermon. Usually there is 1. New people are showing up for worship. The scouts use the church for meeting space but now they are showing up for worship.*

*Pastor A said, "We aren't going to have a session meeting but we are going to study the book." 15 out of 16 people came anyway and loved it. People are really showing up for things. Their food pantry is cranking. People are connecting to mission and purpose.*

*Bottom line: "Our church is changing!"*

**Church B:** 100% of attendance in E-vent groups.

Pastor's leading the Sunday school group, with great participation. Kids who don't usually show up are coming. Feels very exciting.

Adult groups -- people talking and sharing. People who know one another by sight but have never talked about their lives.

New -- using language of prayer. "We'll pray for you."

Have had people say, "This is going to be a different church."

Women's group and Men's group having a ball.

Pastor C said, "Oh my gosh I can't believe its half over."

**GREAT STORY** -- Very white congregation. Older white man in congregation goes into town to get blood pressure checked. Invites a young African American man to "resale" and the young man comes. Pastor put an Unb. Your Heart in his hand and invited him to men's group. Young man came to study group. Then came to worship! That was last week. "Spirit of prayer making a difference. You can feel it."

Now there is something to invite people to: Prayer plus an entryway into the congregation.

They are making invitation cards for Easter for folks to hand out.

"This is making a big impact on us." Several people saying that we need to do something like this every Lent.

**Church C:** AMAZING things are happening at Church C. It is so incredible to be a part of it. I spoke with the pastor and I was just blown away. They are running 5 groups and "people are having a great time." They come out of their groups excited and talking. "New soil is being turned over." They are having people witness every Sunday in worship during this Lent.

A few stories:

1. Pastor C preached on the Woman at the Well and being dry. That day in worship, different people in the congregation stood up at different times in the service and spoke of being dry and longing for God's water. Pastor D then had a woman come up after worship and speak honestly about feeling dry. Very new for this woman. Real honesty and thirsting for God.

2. A core leader was feeling a little iffy about the UTG process. It was his wife, not a member of the congregation, who pressed him to really participate, to do the exercises. This process is drawing in and speaking to people on the periphery. [mgr note: this is very typical]

3. Prayer is great. This congregation has always been a praying church and UTG is just cranking that up a notch. They are "having great fun with the prayer wall." This past Sat. night they had a prayer vigil.

4. Best story ever! -- Mary, member of congregation with autistic son, was crying after worship. She came up to Pastor C and told her how much her son with autism, Josh, wants a friend. His older brother has a friend but he doesn't. The pastor prayed with her and then told her people in the congregation would pray for her. REALLY a few weeks later a new family moves into the neighborhood. The mom sees Josh outside and she can see by his behaviors that he is autistic. She, the mother, comes to Mary and says, "My son is autistic. Do you think your son would like to be his friend?"

**GREAT things happening.** Like all the pastors, Pastor C's question to me was, "What comes next?" I re-sent the Unbinding the Future Retreat to them. They are excited and the pastors are talking about doing the retreat TOGETHER -- all 6 churches -- because they feel so connected. Time together and time to break out to work as individual churches. This is WONDERFUL!

Chris, you might want to go to [www.GraceNet.info](http://www.GraceNet.info) (click on Multimedia / videos) and watch the video interviews of Roger Ross (pastor of 1<sup>st</sup> UMC, Springfield, UMC megachurch in Illinois), and Bruce Dobyns (pastor of 1<sup>st</sup> Christian Church, Peoria, IL). We are seeing real shifts taking place.

### ***Next Steps and Final Thoughts***

Next – I’m writing *Unbinding Your Soul* to help the churches that have started stirring to keep moving. The book will continue aspects of the Unbinding model that have proven to be particularly effective: 40 days of prayer, group discussion and exercises for small groups. The new book takes things a step further.

*Unbinding the Gospel* and *Unbinding Your Heart* help mainline people deepen their faith, learn to articulate it, and ignite motivation to share their faith. *Unbinding Your Soul* will help small groups in churches take specific steps to incorporate new people into a Christian small group, relational prayer experience. A group from the church will work, think and pray together for 4 weeks (praying through the first 3 weeks of the individual prayer journals). Then each group member will invite an unchurched friend who’s interested in spirituality to join the group. They’ll meet in homes, continue to talk about key faith ideas as well as do 3 weeks of the individual prayer journals. I have finished the first draft. The book will be released in September. We think it’s going to work well.

I’m also working with groups pastors and judicatories to help churches get ready to participate in our fourth set of coaching groups, scheduled to begin in September.

I’m thinking a lot these days about the problem that plagued Jonathan Edwards, the revival/renewal issues he never answered completely successfully. The predicament we face is that churches are slowly drifting into oblivion. How can we help them turn around and start coming alive again? The Unbinding process emphasizes a combination of sustained, experiential individual and group thinking about systemic issues of faith and faith sharing. It seems to help a significant percentage of the churches that are doing the process as we recommend.

Everything we’re seeing leads me to concur with Jonathan Edwards and the pillars of the Great Awakening. Most people, and most churches seem to need a “jump-start,” an intense experience to move into a more living faith. (“The nature of human beings is to be inactive unless influenced by some affection: love, hatred, desire, hope, fear. These affections are the “spring of action, the things that set us moving in our lives, that move us to engage in activities...” J. Edwards, *Religious Affections*.) Edwards understood that most people seem to need some vivid experience of the divine to understand that God is real, to move from inactivity into a living faith. His frustration lay in the fact that after each wave of the Great Awakening, most people went back to normal after the excitement subsided. They woke up, danced around while the music played, then rolled over and went back to snoozing.

We’re getting things started. Churches are praying, individuals are offering themselves to God to be changed and used. People are developing deeper relationships, inside and outside the church. They’re waking up. The Spirit is moving palpably in many of these churches. Now

we're facing the next predicament. The quick adapter churches see it themselves. They put the question in Josiah Bartlet's words: "What's next?"

We can't let them go back to normal. How can we establish practices that will help refresh memories of this year of prayer, talking deeply about faith issues, intense thinking and discovery? How can we help them continue to move forward into deepened spiritual practices, continually enriched relationships and sharing the gospel with people outside the faith? The leaders have now done a total of 80 days of prayer exercises. What now? We can't let them clot, or they'll start reveling, frolicking, tavern haunting and firing their pastors.

We just began working with a group of New Jersey Reformed Church in America congregations. These are small congregations with very thoughtful, bright pastors. I was ruminating on my current Jonathan Edwards issue: "how-do-you-harness-this-energy-and-keep-people-moving-forward?" as I sat in the sun last week, on the Stone-Campbell-Scott bench in front of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville. I checked my e-mail on my Palm pilot. An e-mail exchange between several of the RCA pastors and their coach popped up. The pastors spoke about the people they serve with enormous affection and respect. They frequently mentioned how hard it was for these faithful, conscientious people to articulate their faith. As I read the exchange notes, I thought, "*Exactly!* This is what we're seeing all over the place. It's the same thing: Great Awakenings 'God has no grandchildren' stuff." Then one of the pastors mentioned that Theodore Frelinghuysen founded her congregation in 1719.

I sat riveted to the Alexander Campbell side of the Stone-Campbell bench, swooping through this time warp. We're working with the church that called Frelinghuysen to come from Holland to New Jersey in 1719. We're trying to help God renew the church that tried to ship one of the fathers of the Great Awakening *back* to the Netherlands because he refused to serve communion to one of the families.

This Unbinding the Gospel Project work is a lot like doing laundry and mopping the kitchen floor. You do it and it feels great. You look around the house and everything's perfect! Then the dog bounds through and kids scatter soccer shoes and math books across available surfaces. Two days later, you're hauling the mop out of the closet again.

So, like I said, I'm going to go revise the first draft of *Unbinding Your Soul* now. It's what's next: more prayer exercises, more small group stuff, the next little steps in practical ways to help new people begin to discover, to articulate, and to begin to live into the faith. Again.