

**The Unbinding the Gospel Project**  
(Mainline Evangelism Project II)  
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**Overview**

We're making fascinating and unexpected discoveries during this second year of the Unbinding the Gospel Project grant. This grant is going well!

The purpose of the Unbinding the Gospel Project is twofold: (1) to help 1000 congregations work with the full *Unbinding Series* by means of a cohort coaching process; and (2) to analyze dynamics of congregational leadership and individual and congregational transformation with the help of these 1000 congregations. We have developed a non-traditional coaching model that works well with this material and groups of mainline churches. Our extensive, web-based data-collection process is developed and collecting away. We are only one-third of the way through our grant funds (rather than half way through) at the two and a half-year point, so we should be able to keep going substantially longer than the anticipated four years. We are also well ahead of our target projections for numbers of congregations in coaching. Demand for the coaching is strong and growing, so it is likely that we will be able to use these grants funds to help more than 1000 congregations. *Most* excitingly, the books and the process are working. Clergy, laity and non-Christians are discovering and rediscovering the truth, power and joy of the Christian faith. Churches are pulling out of decline and into growth.

Over 300 churches are in our formal, two-year coaching process (hereinafter "coaching churches"). I'm working with another 500-600 pastors who are beginning to lead initial, small group "test studies" of *Unbinding the Gospel* to see whether this process (and the grant project coaching) might be helpful to them. This preliminary coaching that I do personally lasts anywhere from six to 18 months. I am in various stages of conversation with 40-50 judicatories in 11 denominations (ABC-USA, COB, DOC, Episcopalian, ELCA, PCUSA, PC in Canada, RCA, UCC, United Church of Canada, UMC). The congregations with which we are working span the full continuums of size (20 to 1850 in average worship attendance), geography and theology. The *Unbinding* books are in over 12,000 congregations.

We find that working with the *Unbinding Series* seriously, praying, studying Scripture, and talking about faith is helping mainline churches grow past their typical, reflexive flinch and grimace reaction to evangelism, and move into healthier individual and congregational patterns

of spiritual disciplines, relationality and invitation. The bulk of the coaching churches that follow our admittedly high-commitment process demonstrate significant growth indicators. We identify transformation and growth using both measurable statistical variables and high levels of recurrent anecdotal data. Pastors and lay people report significant increases in:

- amount and depth of prayer
- interaction with Scripture
- depth of relationships between church members
- invitations to worship and church events
- new members
- adult baptisms
- average worship attendance (in addition to reversing historic declines)
- reaching out to people who represent a different demographic than original church members
- new ministries
- youth involvement
- intergenerational involvement
- old members having “first time” faith experiences
- stewardship
- indicia of collaborative/team ministry (between laity & clergy)
- courage in leadership
- energy
- creativity
- joy

Most of our coaching churches are typical mainline churches. Most are stable or have experienced gentle decline for decades. Although we are in very early stages of seeing outcomes of this research, significantly more than half of the churches that work through the *Unbinding* process thoroughly report that not only has the decline halted, but their average worship attendance has increased by 10-15%. The world record holder had experienced consistent, gradual declines in average worship attendance from 275 to 110 over a period of 35 years. A gifted pastoral couple had been in place for 5 years before *Unbinding*, with the same decline trajectory. They entered into the *Unbinding* process prayerfully and well. At the end of the coaching time, their average worship attendance was 165 (January-March average compared to January-March the year before). In the first 5 months of the year, they baptized 11 adults and the young adult group grew from 3 to 25. (See Story 4 in *Unbinding Your Soul*, page 95-97 for details.)

I am encouraged by this substantial and broad-based congregational growth because our figures to date do not include churches that have worked with *Unbinding Your Soul*, the new, actual invitational evangelism book in the *Series*. We anticipate that whole groups of churches working with *Unbinding Your Soul* will increase numbers of congregations that are (a) reversing decline and growing *and* (b) hold congregational patterns of prayer and invitation in place, to fix these factors as a consistent element of congregational understanding and habit. In short, I anticipate that these numbers will improve.

Chris, you mentioned in a phone conversation a couple of weeks ago that you think the *Unbinding* work is “shifting the conversation about evangelism.” I’ve thought about your perception, reviewed the data we’re collecting, looked at web postings and blogs that relate to

the books. I think you may be right. Mainline church leaders, in increasing numbers, seem to utilize the *Unbinding* process and language to talk about evangelism, to move more deeply into prayer, to connect more significantly with each other, and to find ways to talk about their faith with authenticity. They're experiencing motivation and movements of the Spirit to engage in significant conversations about faith with non-church goers.

The books and this coaching *are* helping, but we need to help people maintain a course, to not just grasp a new insight. We need to change habits as well as minds! A sense of urgency drives me. I want to see significant, sustained individual and corporate transformation, not fleeting bits of encouragement. My greatest hope as I wrote these books was that they would help mainline people perceive the grace and activity of God around them, and that they would get in touch with the Holy Spirit and a motivation to share their faith, then *do* it! I'm pleased with results so far. But I'm poised to see what the Spirit can do through all these people and churches *next* year.

### ***Two Major Areas of Inquiry***

We've given much attention in these first two years to developing: (a) our group formation processes (I do most of that myself), (b) sophisticated data collection and dissemination systems, and (c) a quite creative, non-traditional coaching model that we believe supports collaborative congregational efforts into spiritual disciplines, congregational relationships, collaborative leadership, and actual evangelism (*see Attachment A, Coaching Documents*). All three of these systems are in place. Now that we're working with more mature model, I am focusing on what these hundreds of churches are telling us about the heart of congregational transformation/evangelism. Two primary areas inquiry will frame the bulk of this report:

***1. It takes a long time to change these habits, a long runway for "pre-evangelism."*** I think the books have helped thousands of mainline church leaders say the word "evangelism" out loud without blanching. That's a big victory! ***And***, I'm convinced "evangelism" is still the most toxic concept in most mainline churches.

***Stage I resistance:*** Let's call this initial, reflexive reaction "*Stage I resistance.*" Mainline pastors and church people typically veer away from any mention of evangelism. The word makes their skin crawl as they back carefully toward the exit. We might as well be inviting people to experience the thrill of a root canal as ask them to think about evangelism. There are a lot of reasons for our evangelistic caution (*see Unbinding the Gospel*, chapters 2 and 3). I'm clear that this long-entrenched, resistance dynamic deserves major credit for the fact that we're seeing that it takes a good solid year and a half to help most churches fill an experiential gap with what one pastor called "pre-evangelism" (referring to *Unbinding the Gospel* and the all-church saturation experience with *Unbinding Your Heart*. *See Roger Ross interview, www.GraceNet.info/video.aspx*). A majority of church people are praying, delving into Scripture, enthusiastically articulating their faith, thrilled with the internal relationships within the church, starting new ministries in the neighborhood, inviting friends and growing numerically at the end of this first couple of years of *Unbinding* work. That's a huge victory. Then we see:

***Stage II resistance:*** Once the Stage I gap is filled (with prayer, talking with friends about faith experience, thinking hard about faith-sharing and congregational mission), the resistance can kick in again, most frequently articulated as, "GREAT! We've done our E-vent.

We're excited about the prayer and evangelism thing now. So let's do something else," *or* "This has been great. Let's just do some more prayer and let this all sink in, while we rest a bit." We're seeing that even after the all-church saturation study, most church people are happy to back away from actual invitation. We're seeing that it takes a long runway and a lot of support from the pastor and key leadership to not quench the movement the Spirit has started. *Unbinding Your Soul*, the invitational evangelism book in the *Series* is still scary!

The process works, but these are long-engrained, tough habits to change. Helping people practice spiritual disciplines steeped in Scripture, articulate their faith, and think consciously about faith sharing is the method that will get whole churches on a road to transformation and missional health. It requires a long, patient, persistent, gentle, firm stretch of work with these issues to get large numbers of individuals to the point of actual faith-sharing, and congregations to the point of having the motivation to *care* about reaching people outside the church with an experience of the faith.

**2. What kind of leadership helps a congregation navigate this type of profound change?** I'm grappling with a second conceptual cluster that relates to this first dynamic ("evangelism has the charm of a root canal"). What kind of leadership does it take to help a congregation navigate this type of deep change? The *Unbinding* subject matter (developing prayer disciplines, living in Scripture, helping people articulate their faith, and luring them into sensitive listening, faith-sharing, invitation) may be the toughest congregational change to try to lead in one of our beloved churches. I wrote about this leadership issue in the introduction to *Unbinding Your Church* (the "hope pastors" vs. "reality pastors" discussion, page 1-15), and in chapter 8 of *Unbinding the Gospel*, page 105-110). I think both of those sections are right on the nose. And I'm seeing more now. I focus on it in detail later in this report, but to summarize, I sense that very few pastors instinctively know how to inspire and facilitate the type of profound change required to lead a congregation into evangelistic growth. ***Very few of us were trained to lead out of spiritual depth, in close collaboration with key lay leaders and with consistency, persistence and focus on the essentials. We need to learn.***

I see a full spectrum of leadership styles. Strong, bold leaders who charge toward a clear (and often highly accurate) vision on the horizon populate one end of the spectrum. But if they aren't connected deeply enough with the people they're trying to lead, they can look like a guy out alone taking a walk. Highly relational, sensitive, deeply connected pastors are on the other end of the spectrum. They're great at staying with their people, but many of them wait until everyone's ready to move. In essence, they can give frightened people a "blackball" on any important decision.

***Churches that are to thrive need leaders with the strengths from both ends of the spectrum: vision, creativity, independence, spiritual depth, relationality, collaborative skills, love, joy, a sense of the movement of the Spirit, and what the Quakers call a "holy discontent." That's what we're working on with this coaching!***

### ***Discoveries, Key Dynamics***

I want to use this report to focus on several areas of discovery - key dynamics we're seeing, thinking about and grappling with as we get to work with so many gifted people. These issues strike me as most significant. I present my initial ponderings and reports on the dynamics.

I'm not ready to synthesize or draw definitive conclusions. We're still collecting impressions as we continue to gather data. Here are the areas of inquiry:

- A. Typical Changes in Individuals and Churches (Moving through Stage I Resistance)
- B. Congregational Change: Creativity & Conflict
- C. Resistance / Momentum (Moving through Stage II Resistance)
- D. Pastors' Discoveries & Pastoral Leadership
- E. Money - Symbol of Power. Kids - Sign of the Future.

### ***A. Typical Changes in Individual Lives & in Churches (Moving through Stage I Resistance)***

A huge number of pastors and lay leaders report vivid examples of changed lives. The three most typical, powerful changes are shifts in: (1) prayer lives, and (2) relationships within the congregations, and (3) ideas about evangelism/faith-sharing. (Typical people change their minds. Early adopters move into real faith-sharing/invitation.) Here are three typical expressions of these most common changes arising from an initial *Unbinding the Gospel* study:

1. "I've never prayed this way. It's hard, but it's amazing. I'm seeing God really doing things in my life. It's changing the way I see people."<sup>1</sup>
2. "We've never talked this openly with each other in our church. We're so close now. It's wonderful. We don't want this group to stop."
3. "I had really bad feelings about evangelism. I kept thinking about tracts and arguing people into some 'right' position. But this is different. I can do *this!* I'm starting to see opportunities to talk to people normally."

As congregations move from initial studies of *Unbinding the GOSPEL* to the all-congregational saturation experience with *Unbinding Your HEART*, we see a thickening of these three typical responses, a deepening into the fabric of congregational life. More people enter into prayer, into real discussions. They plan and lead others in *their* initial *Unbinding* experiences. Pastors and lay leaders report a growing, common experience; a developing common language, an emerging shared purpose. Many people describe what is happening in their congregations as a "movement." ("It was like a stone thrown into the water with ever expanding concentric circles." *PCUSA pastor*) Almost invariably, new visitors appear and people start new ministries. A pastor provides a rather typical description of this process in a small, New York congregation (also PCUSA, edited for concision):

*In the fall of 2008, the leadership of our church started working with **Unbinding the Gospel**, cautiously, little by little. As the leaders participated in the prayer exercises, I saw incrementally positive changes as they prayed with and for each other. After each session, I*

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<sup>1</sup> Direct quotations in this report come from pastors and lay persons we've been working with. Most are from statements written in response to reflection questions posed as part of the coaching process. A few come from e-mails to me. I have removed names and specific identifiers. Geographic and denominational identifications, where used, are accurate. A few of the most typical quotations (statements I have heard at least 10 times from different sources) are composites. I have edited some statements for brevity and clarity, occasionally without the editorial distraction of ellipses.

would ask them how it felt to pray for each other - especially aloud. They would all say that the more they did it, the easier it became, and the more they liked it. Classic!

During the Lenten season of this year, 80% of the congregation studied **Unbinding Your Heart**. Groups met at church or in a local restaurant to learn about prayer and building relationships, in an effort to evangelize their communities. The results were overwhelming! People started speaking to each other more sincerely; new organizations were started, a meal ministry for people who are ill or unable to cook for themselves; the Youth group was revived; our Deacons developed welcome gift bags to first-time visitors; and two Girl Scout groups connected to the church began serving free lunches once monthly to the community. We have also begun a Shawl Ministry to provide blessed shawls to the sick and/or shut-ins. [Several of the members of this rural, formerly all-Caucasian congregation contacted members of a predominantly African-American church for help starting a once-a-month Gospel choir. The last time I spoke with the pastor, a Chinese couple was on the verge of joining...]

One of the most fun aspects to watch is people's excitement when they're actually doing the "Event," (the all-church saturation study with *Unbinding Your Heart*). Here is a sampling of the e-mails from pastors the week before Easter, 2010:

1. "Yahoo!!! We just finished Unbinding Your Heart!!! And Praise be to God, quite a few seem to have grasped the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; especially a few of our youth. They are actually inviting their friends. Thank you for letting God use you! We are working on a community garden, a cultural history project, and an emergency fund to help people in need." (United Methodist, Missouri)
2. "FYI we had record attendance last night. People are inviting friends and family to worship. I'll get the next book shortly. Easter Blessings. Christ is risen!" (United Church of Christ, Massachusetts)
3. "Yesterday was our Prayer Vigil. People came streaming in all day long. Candles and prayer guides, kneelers and small candles to light signifying special individual prayers. I spent the day in prayer, walking the church outside and in; praying in the sanctuary before the formal hours of the vigil, and then again joining the Vigil later in the day a couple of times. There's a lot of spiritual energy being given to us from the Holy Spirit. Christ's presence is evident in powerful ways." United Methodist, Minnesota)
4. "We just keep getting more and more open and pulling people in. ... a family joined who are not the 'right kind of people.' A year ago people in our church wouldn't even have spoken to them. Now they're members."
5. "The energy and enthusiasm in our congregation is as high as it has ever been in my near nine-year pastorate. Last year, we had one new member join the congregation (an all-time low.) So far this year [late March], we have had six people join, and we have twice that many new folks worshipping with us on a regular basis. Many of these new folks have signed up to participate in Unbinding Your Heart. We hoped to have 85 people participate in UYH; we have about 100 right now, and we hope to add a few more on or before Easter.

A group of members has worked to design an invitational flyer and is scheduling canvassing events where they will go to neighborhoods around the church and around their respective homes to give people a flyer and invite them to church. More importantly, people are already talking about their faith stories with each other and coming to know each other better and love each other more deeply. You more often hear the words "Jesus," "Christ," and "Spirit," walking through our buildings on Sunday morning that you ever would have before. Our Elders gather

*monthly for the sole purpose of prayer and discernment, and most of them actually show up!*

*God is doing great things in our congregation after a long struggle to release old structures and old habits. We are opening to the Spirit making all things new.”* (Disciples of Christ, California)

6. *A coach summarized one group’s current status: “Church A made huge headway on a building accessibility project that needed to happen for a long time. Church B is redesigning how to be in ministry with one another, streamlining things so that people can really engage without all the red tape. Church C just took in 5 new members two weeks ago. Church D reports that people are coming up to the pastor in worship and asking if they can give testimonies in worship. They are no longer afraid of the ‘E-word’ and get why it matters.”* (United Church of Christ, Pennsylvania)

Details differ in these stories, but the feeling of spiritual excitement, relational growth, new things happening, renewed hope, and joy are contagious and blessedly widespread. This is heady stuff for all of us!

### ***B. Congregational Change: Creativity & Conflict***

New life and excitement always bear with them the potential for conflict and resistance. What are we seeing? I’m as excited about what we’re seeing in this area as anything.

The *Unbinding* process is consciously developed to maximize systemic congregational change with minimal conflict. We observe that churches that work with this process thoroughly, maintaining momentum, with a high percentage (80%+) of the average worship attendance engaged in the study of *Unbinding Your Heart*, experience minimal conflict relative to the amount of change. Pastors report that the disagreements that surface tend to be: (a) important to deal with, and (b) resolved well.

We hear repeated examples of churches that attributed healthy navigation through financial crises to their *Unbinding* experience. Pastors tell us stories of lay people who deal sensitively and clearly with fellow church members for whom new developments and faces (often different colored faces) in their formerly predictable church haven’t felt like a blessing! Needless to say, the pastors are thrilled with this development. “[the leaders actually] spoke up at the meeting. That’s a first for us. Generally, they have said nothing and later privately tell us [the pastors] that they disagree.” Many stories that begin with disagreements resolve into accounts of transformation.

Pastors repeatedly describe most of the small amount of conflict we see in terms similar to this Methodist pastor’s, “you know, we really needed to get this out in the open. This was exactly the right time to deal with this stuff that’s been perking under the surface for years. We’re all feeling better. The prayer and all the talking in the *Unbinding* groups helped people see it in perspective and talk honestly. I’m not saying it didn’t scare me at the time (conflict’s my biggest challenge in ministry!), but we needed to get clear that this isn’t a country club. We need to do things for Jesus and we can’t wait forever while someone (and I hate to say it this way) holds us hostage.”

### ***C. Resistance / Momentum (Moving through Stage II Resistance)***

*Unbinding the Gospel & Heart* (the first year and a half of the *Unbinding* process) help churches navigate through Stage I resistance in very exciting ways. It's now critical to keep going so that Stage II resistance doesn't suck the tides of congregational life back to normal. The E-vent is an emotional high. For six weeks virtually everyone in the congregation studies and prays through *Unbinding Your Heart* with a small group; kids are involved; members invite neighbors and co-workers into their small groups; and worship and liturgy are wrapped around the week's study. People describe the Holy Spirit as being at work in their church (*see subsection A, above*). But we see that churches must keep going - not block the Spirit's movements by evaluating the *Unbinding* experience as a great success, then going back to normal. The Stage II root canal dynamic has a chance to stop us at this point! We're hearing signs of resistance in two typical statements:

- "Okay, we've done evangelism and prayer. It was great. We're going to move on to the next thing we need to do now."
- I don't want to push people. They need a rest. We're going to take a break for a while and let this tremendous learning integrate."

*The end of the E-vent presents each congregation with a perilous choice. Will we stop, or will we move the joy and excitement into continued action, ongoing spiritual disciplines, and actual evangelism?* We have to keep reminding ourselves that the vivid *Unbinding* experience arose from a year and a half of preparation and slow study, prayer and planning. If we drop it at this point, the energy fades and life drifts back toward the original status quo!

The new book, *Unbinding Your Soul* (October 2009) provides a framework for significant discussions and prayer with church members and their friends who don't attend church, or who aren't Christians. The model arises out of this research, builds on the initial experience, and is the best next step rather than stopping, or switching to "something else." (*See Attachment B, the Best Practices document.*) Again, we see that with good leadership from the pastor and key lay leaders, the slow, faithful process of transformation continues, usually with numerical growth. It's not magic. This process and sustainable revitalization involve a lot of hard work, faithful prayer, diligent leadership, listening to the Spirit, and patience over a long time. We see changes that have staying power *if* that momentum continues.

1. "I am leading our 2<sup>nd</sup> 'SOUL' group. We have 6 in the group and my Evangelism Team co-chair brought a friend earlier than the process calls for, but the individual is fitting right in and the co-chair is showing everyone just how easy it is to invite someone to Christ's church.

On another front, 8 new members have joined in the last two weeks. The most powerful experience has been the mother and adult son who have joined. They both attended last fall while he was on work release from prison....

The faith sharing is also continuing in worship. A young woman who just joined in early February gave a 'Living Devotion' testimony. And the wife of the couple that just joined Easter Sunday gave a testimony 3 weeks before she even joined. It was about the pain she and her husband felt in the loss of a baby and how their faith pulled them through those dark times. This church is finding ways to share their faith while supporting and loving one another." (*Disciples of Christ pastor, Illinois*)

2. *A pastor described a shy, single woman who “has a difficult time putting faith into words. She got connected with a women’s shelter. She called 42 moms and daughters and invited them to an outreach Mother/Daughter Event.” (United Methodist, Missouri)*

3. *“I met a young woman at worship this morning. A member invited her into an Unbinding Your Soul group. I asked ‘how long have you known Jessica?’ I figured they probably grew up together or their children knew each other. To my surprise, she answered, ‘Oh, we just met yesterday while our kids were rehearsing for the school play.’ And of course, why **wouldn’t** you invite someone you just met to join you for church the next morning? I’m excited that evangelism is becoming a habit for our members.” (Presbyterian pastor, New York)*

**“...evangelism is becoming a habit for our members.”** THAT’s what we’re going for! My response to these types of reports is a heartfelt, **“Yes! Keep going! May your tribe increase.”**

#### ***D. Pastors’ Discoveries & Pastoral Leadership***

We are privileged to work with great pastors in this project. They’re discovering and teaching us much. Pastors report significant developments in their own lives and in their ministries. This, more than any other section of this report, feels collaboratively written. The pastors are living this stuff, figuring it out, individually, with their congregants, and collectively in their groups. I hope I’m hearing accurately. I want to focus on three main shifts in this report:

- New awareness & practices in pastors’ spiritual lives
- Renewal of joy & creativity in ministry
- Rethinking leadership & modes of *doing* ministry

This Project has increased my already acute appreciation of the importance of vibrant pastoral leadership in congregational transformation/revitalization. We are seeing that the primary path to an engaged, creative laity emerges when pastor inspire and sustain relationality, creativity, and in its broadest sense, theological depth.

Many pastors who are contributing to the Project describe a subtle and complex shift in their spiritual lives, coupled with a new sense of what is possible for their parishioners. These insights/experiences/hopes seem to spark creative insights into ministry and leadership. We’re seeing renewed energy for ministry (pastors not leaving a congregation when they thought they had done all they could do, pastors choosing to postpone retirement because of a burst of new life in the congregation, pastors reporting a clearer sense of direction, excitement, creativity).

This matrix of insights and changes is widely reported. Many pastors are sensitive to God and want to be usable by the Spirit. Their faithfulness and their gifts are, in many cases, impressive. They tend to integrate new insights from one area of their lives into other areas quickly. One able and beautifully transparent east coast pastor’s e-mail demonstrates the shifts in his ministry that are beginning to arise from his renewed spiritual life. His experience is quite normal among pastors in our coaching groups:

*“I wanted to let you know how grateful I am. We have just completed our initial group of 8 people. How powerful and transformative these past 8 weeks have been! Certainly I have seen this from those who gathered with me from week to week, but personally I have had a spiritual ‘awakening.’ I feel a slight bit awkward saying that as we look at pastors*

*as the 'spiritual leaders' of the congregation and my admission makes it seem that I have failed in that. But, way too often I found myself caught up in the process...the administration....the physical preparation....the meetings....the organizing and have lost my center. I had myself cut off from the source that feeds everything else in my life, my prayer life, my relationship with God. In these past 8 weeks, I have become more prayer centered, more attentive to my spiritual needs and in the process been transformed. People have commented that they have noticed a difference in different aspects of my life. My UBG group even had the nerve to say that my sermons were better. Is that a compliment or a criticism? I am certainly in a better place. Thank you!"*

***Does transformation start with Pastors? Yes.  
Does transformation start with lay leaders? Yes.  
Start work with both!***

I've assumed for years that working with pastors in colleague peer groups will have a "trickle-down," transformative effect on those pastors' congregations. We are discovering that unless lay leaders are incorporated into a transformational process immediately, pastors are temporarily encouraged and renewed, but renewal stops with them. We see minimal effect in the congregations. ***I am becoming firmly convinced that unless interventions into congregational systems begin with both pastors and laity virtually simultaneously, unless the pastors discover renewal within the context of their ministries, the congregations don't change.***

We've discovered a very curious dynamic as I've worked personally with 78 groups of pastors in our coaching group formation process. Pastors who participate in a first study within the context of the congregations they're serving demonstrate a dramatically higher rate of leading their congregation through a full *Unbinding* process than do pastors who begin by studying *Unbinding the Gospel* with a peer group of other pastors, with the avowed intention of studying it first with each other so that they could lead a first study in their church more effectively. The surprising fact is that both groups of pastors describe the study in virtually identical, enthusiastic terms. What's this about? Why would pastors who have loved the study **not** take it to their congregations?

We're finally getting an answer, after lots of phone calls and asking hundreds of probing questions. Roughly 80% of pastors who experience a first study of *Unbinding the Gospel* with a group of pastoral colleagues **don't** lead a study with their lay leaders. One of these pastors described driving four hours during Holy Week to meet with his "pastors first" group for their two-hour weekly meeting. No one wanted to miss. He said "I haven't been this excited about ministry or my relationship with God since seminary. We're all feeling this way. It's *amazing!*" I asked him why only 2 of the 11 of them had followed up to lead a study in their churches of what he described as a transformative book. He admitted, more in anger than sorrow, "I don't want the people in my church to shoot this down. It's mattered too much to me. I don't want them to ruin it." This is the typical answer when we get to the bottom of it. So, 80% of these pastors' lay people never hear of *Unbinding the Gospel*, let alone have the chance for an all-congregational saturation study with *Unbinding Your Heart*, the "E-vent."

The statistics are almost precisely inverted for groups of pastors who first study *GOSPEL* with their lay people! Almost 80% of pastors within groups with which I have the same introductory phone conference call as with the "pastors only" groups actually lead a study in their churches within a year. More than 65% of *those* churches continue on to do an E-vent, the

all-congregational study of *Unbinding Your Heart!* These vastly different efficacy rates are stunning.<sup>2</sup>

***Pastors-only Groups? Effective modality for revitalization? I'm beginning to wonder.***

I'm beginning to question the efficacy of a transformation modality into which many of us have put a great deal of trust for years: the pastoral pull-out model. I am beginning to wonder if we're correct in trusting to an assumption similar to the economic trickle-down theory, the idea that "what's good for GM is good for the nation." I don't think we can ask the pastors to find out.

I discovered during the 1200 interviews and the statistical survey Jackie Wenger and I did for the Mainline Evangelism Project research (2002-2006) that great pastoral leaders do a poor job describing *why* their leadership works, or pointing out what they're doing that's helpful and effective. (They are usually unconscious of the key factors of their leadership. Their first instinct was to talk about programs and *activities* they were doing as the significant change factors. I was impressed during that research with the fact that it's easier for an outside observer with perspective to grasp what's working well, or what's different about a particular pastor's leadership within its specific setting.)

The pastors of the highly statistically effective, mainline evangelistic churches we surveyed were also more out of touch with the perspectives and ideas of new members and new

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<sup>2</sup> These statistics arise from 78 groups of pastors (6-12 per group, between 550 and 600 pastors) from 9 denominations with whom I personally have conducted both initial and 1 to 4 follow-up phone calls within the a total time frame per group of 6 to 20 months. The purpose of the calls was to help pastors use the best practices for starting an initial study of *Unbinding the Gospel* in the congregations they served. 17 of the 78 groups of pastors chose to study the book by themselves first, (with or without a judicatory minister), with the idea that this would help them leading a first small group study of *Unbinding the Gospel* more effectively in their churches. Pastors in these 17 groups responded to their experience of *Unbinding the Gospel* with expressions of joy/renewal/intellectual verve/reinvigoration of ministry virtually identical to the pastors of 58 of the remaining 61 groups for which I have sufficient data to theorize. As of the last follow-up phone calls, roughly 20% of each "pastors-first/only" group had begun an initial study of *Unbinding the Gospel* with their congregations. The model where pastors began the study with lay people immediately was strikingly more effective. Almost 80% of the pastors in the other 58 groups for which I have data took the study directly to their people. Over 65% of these churches continued with some type of all-church study of *Unbinding Your Heart*. 19 of the 56 groups continued into the full, two-year *Unbinding the Gospel* Project coaching. Since I did all these calls, I'm clear about the content. I was doing the same type of coaching. I see no significant differences between these pastors in terms of range of theology; geography; pastoral gender; congregational size, polity or health. The only differentiating factor I see is whether the pastors experienced their first contact with this material with pastoral colleagues, or with the people they're serving. The pastors seemed the same on during the first phone calls. But post-study interviews were different. Pastors in the "pastors-first/only" groups demonstrated many statements indicative of senses of separation / resentment / distrust / anger between pastor and laity. These sentiments are very different among pastors who experienced their first taste of *Unbinding with their people*. Pastors interviewed after a first study in the congregational context were overwhelmingly more likely to express awe, appreciation, or love of the people they're serving. I think this dynamic deserves further, significant scrutiny.

Christians than anyone else in the system. (We asked senior pastors, associate pastors, key lay leaders, newer members with a Christian background and new Christian members a series of questions relating to what the new members and new Christians thought. Using the new Christians' answers (which were striking consistent across congregations) as the baseline, responses drifted away from accurately knowing what the new Christians thought as one moved further "up" the congregational ladder. New Christians answered. Other new members *with* a church background most closely predicted what unchurched people or new Christians were thinking. Long-time lay members were next, then associate pastors, then senior pastors, most of whose answers were pretty much in left field!

We discovered that the inverse of the foregoing dynamic was also true. Senior pastors leading the most statistically successful, mainline evangelistic congregations in the country were most clear on the mission and direction of the congregation and thought that everyone was following them and on board. Their associate ministers tended to have a similar (although less sharply honed) sense of focus. Key lay leaders were in the ballpark, but hazier. Members of the congregation often had very little sense of congregational foci leaders had been working on for years and felt they had articulated publically *ad nauseum!* I think we must be cautious about claims of congregational change based on pastors' feelings and perceptions that are not supported by statistically verifiable results.

The Bethany Project (1996-2000), the first Endowment-supported project I directed, was premised upon congregational revitalization and evangelistic growth emerging from this "pastors pull-out," or "pastors-first" model. The four-year project generated enormous enthusiasm and loyalty among participating pastors and DOC regional ministers (many of the groups are still meeting). It helped the pastors do ministry longer, with more enthusiasm, but I sensed and reported a disconnect in terms of integrating pastors' new ideas, discoveries and enthusiasms into the life of the congregation. I suspect that a putative "pastors-first" model is likely to turn into a "pastors-only" experience.

These new Unbinding the Gospel Project rather accidental "pastors-first" findings suggest that we may be dealing with a dynamic we haven't identified. I'm hesitant to discount this data - we're talking about a dramatic pattern emerging spontaneously from 78 discrete groups totally about 600 pastors. Do pastors hit an invisible force field when they leave the comfort and excitement of a peer retreat and try to re-integrate into the congregation? Under what conditions might pastors-only groups reinforce resentments, misunderstandings and barriers between pastors and congregants?

I have more questions than answers at this point, arising out of 15 years of full-time work directing Endowment-funded, major national congregational transformation/evangelism projects. Here are some of my tentative formulations related to these issues:

1. Pastors can describe what feels good, healing, healthy and hopeful to them. They (and the rest of us working with them) may assume these shifts are moving into the congregation. I think we need to be more serious about statistical indicia of congregational change.
2. Great pastoral leadership is crucially important and irreplaceable. We're seeing that the best leadership is inspirational and collaborative, with the pastor

serving/training/cheering on vibrant lay ministries. Congregations are *why* we pastors are important.

3. Pastors need to reflect on ministry with peers. But I am becoming convinced that the “pastors’ first” renewal movements should be embedded in the congregation from the beginning, if we hope the transformation will significantly affect the fabric of congregational life. We’re gearing our coaching model to this assumption.

Ministry is hard these days. Many congregations are tough to lead. Pastors may be bludgeoned with discouragements and disappointments. Nothing can *undo* those experiences now. However we are seeing many pastors move to a deeper love of their churches and hope in what God can do through them when they start this exciting spiritual process with their people. ***Here’s our advice to pastors:*** START studying *Unbinding the Gospel* ***with*** a small group (8-10) of your quickest-adaptor lay leaders. Start with the people you think will take to it best! Do the study for real with the congregants with whom it sounds like fun to go on an adventure! Reflect on your leadership with pastoral colleagues who are leading simultaneous studies, but let your primary, initial experience of *GOSPEL* be with your people.

A strong desire to be used by God for the church drives many of the pastors working with us in the Project. They think so hard and work so hard for their congregations. The gifted pastor of a large Southern church wrote to a colleague after a first study of *Unbinding the Gospel*:

*“The church is doing well but the damage from the past minister, and the first year or two of clean up for me, has resulted in a church that is a mile wide and inch deep. I have tried a couple of other ways to go deeper (e.g, a year of the Bible, some targeted Bible studies, etc.) but the results were very limited and localized. Right now, this Unbinding is PERFECT for us, as it has become a venue to go deeper. I was getting very tired, but now I am as excited as when I first graduated from seminary. The leadership group is eating this spiritual fruit like they were starving to death. It is wonderful to see the growth and I pray that it is contagious. (PCUSA)*

And, from New England:

*We’re about to complete our all-church study of Heart. The responses have been nothing short of mind-blowing. The connections with one another and the deepening of our faith and spiritual lives have been miraculous. We are sharing our faith and talking more openly about what we find life-giving in Christ and our church.*

*We have long been a strong congregation so we started this program from a healthier place than some of our sister churches. I'm blessed to be in year 16 here and after this study believe I could and should stay a while longer. The Holy Spirit is alive and moving in us in so many wonderful ways. Everyone is asking "What's next?" We already have prayer teams committed to continuing after the Series is over. One of the best things was to suspend Board meetings (and mind you ours aren't bad) and to focus on what being the church is really about.*

***What does transformed pastoral leadership look like?*** What are we seeing as a result of these pastors’ reinvigorations? Some of these pastors plow their renewed energy into figuring out new and more effective ways of leading. The pastors’ coaching groups focus frequently on spiritual leadership. What does that look like? The pastors themselves identify these elements as crucial to effective leadership:

- Consistency, persistence, patience (keep at it!)

- Continuing to pray, to seek God’s will rather than their own
- To support the laity’s new creativity (“Sometimes I just need to get out of the way.”)
- Listening *and* leading (not just one or the other)
- Transparency (some fine line between openness and not spilling your guts)
- Not being so controlling
- Small groups “help with relationships and help keep the focus on Christ, not me or the church as a social club.”
- Courage
- Live more as Christ intends for us, so others can see him in our behavior.
- Developing parts of myself I’ve been scared of (“I am stepping out of my careful/cautious/safe mode and boldly exhibiting a fly-by-the-Spirit mode. I’m doing more of what comes naturally.”)
- “I’ve got to put my money where my mouth is, not ‘you and him go fight,’ or ‘this is the way to do it,’ but instead, ‘let’s pray, then see where we think the Spirit’s leading...’”
- Get organized and work really hard after God tells us, “Go!”

One UCC large church pastor described a pivotal shift in his ministry: “I’ve loved ministry for 30 years, and we’ve done exciting and important work in all the churches I’ve served - in congregational growth, buildings, church structure, social action ministries. But I’m having to re-invent myself at age 60! Before, it was my ideas that everyone got behind. Now there are so many creative ideas about ministry cropping up around here that my job is to help them organize it and keep it on the rails.”

### ***E. Money - Symbol of Power. Kids - Sign of the Future.***

Let’s end with two aspects of our work that glimmer with hope - money and children. Both present potent archetypal symbols. We see exciting, unanticipated developments in relation to both.

**Money.** Here are my assumptions: I’m presuming that money is the most important symbol of power and security in our culture. I’m presuming that relinquishing rigid control of money can indicate trust in something deeper than money, that primary cultural symbol of safety. We didn’t set out to deal with money or stewardship in this Project. But we’re seeing vivid examples of death grips on personal resources, church budgets and endowment funds loosening as people begin to pray and talk with each other (i.e., trust God and other people in the church). I think this is significant evidence of people and churches stepping into deeper faith.

The primary pattern we’ve seen is that fall E-events often conflicted with normal fall stewardship campaigns. During the 2008-09 recession, pastors sent us scores of gratuitous e-mails, reports or calls from pastors describing two basic scenarios:

- (1) “We didn’t have time for our stewardship campaign, so we just asked a long-time member to give a testimony about giving one week, asked people to pray about their pledge, then took up an offering of pledge cards the next week. Our giving was way up over last year, despite the economy and many of our people losing jobs.”

- (2) “We’ve never had the economic tension of the last year - we had to make brutal cuts to the budget (unemployment in our area is still 15%). But we were all stunned by the fact that the board made the cuts *with prayer*. It was *discerned*, not a fight. Thank you. This is a completely different pattern for our church.”

See *Unbinding Your Soul*, pp. 156-58 for a great story from the largest United Methodist church in Illinois. An Ohio Disciples pastor wrote to the congregation he serves:

*“Last night at the first Executive Board meeting of the New Year we voted on the proposed budget for 2010. Because of our 40 day all-church study of Unbinding Your Heart in the early fall (and the corresponding sabbatical from regular church business), our annual stewardship program was pushed back. It is also partially due to Unbinding Your Heart that our approach to giving/spending in the coming year has been reevaluated.*

*For the past several years, our church has been blessed to be able to meet its fixed expenses (not budgeted expenses) and finish out the financial year without a deficit. What our budget didn’t include was a line item for our Denominational Mission Fund. We hoped to contribute to the mission fund of the larger church from our regular operating expenses, but at the end of the year the money simply wasn’t there. I’m proud to say that our Stewardship Ministry and Executive Board have chosen to take a step of faith in our approach to the “family checkbook.” Instead of waiting till the end of the year to see what is left, our giving to our Denominational Mission Fund will be the first check written at the beginning of each month – starting right now.*

*Of course, this comes at a time of great economic uncertainty and fear. Many of our members and friends have seen their ability to give diminished in the recent past. For another year, we were unable to offer our staff even a cost of living adjustment. “Belt-tightening” is being done at every level. The Bible has promised those who put the Kingdom first will experience blessings beyond what they might have imagined possible – and many of us have experienced this personally. Now it is time to put this faith into practice as a community. I’m proud to be your pastor.”*

Pastors and lay people described the horrific economic pressures their churches faced in 2009, with substantial hits both to parishioner employment and endowment funds. Yet they said they found a more tangible fortress in God than in the financial bulwark of cached memorial funds as they practiced corporate prayer, deepened community, and thought about reaching out beyond church walls.

**Kids.** We’re seeing another shift in churches that I’m interpreting as a sign of hope, joy and new life. When churches start cooking with this process, great stories about children and youth start to emerge. Sometimes hardly know how it starts, but kids appear in the stories and reports. Sharon, an 86-year-old in Illinois said, “I’ve got to invite two little boys downstairs in my apartment complex to Vacation Bible School.” She did. Sharon’s pastor said, “She’s never done that before. And it’s amazing - people all over this church are inviting children.”

An Alabama congregation filled with elderly people started praying for kids and suddenly connected the dots - they realize that children were already playing baseball in their parking lot. Another man told me, “I don’t think any of us would have actually said it before we started praying to reach young people, but if we’d heard that baseball smacking against the church wall I can guarantee that some of us would have been thinking, ‘that kid’s going put that baseball through the window of my Buick.’ Now we heard the sound of that baseball as an answer to prayer and a miracle.”

Children are leading the way in prayer. A United Methodist pastor wrote, “The Sunday School kids all came during their classes to place their prayers on the prayer wall (one of the funniest was a child's handwriting which read ‘My brother made #2 in the potty!’ We all laughed about that one!), so by the time worship came around, the kids had already set the pace. And the people came. And came. And came. Week after week they came, people who were deeply involved in small groups and people who were not involved in Unbinding in any other way, and first-time visitors - they all came. We ended up making a new section’ to the wall - for ‘Answered Prayers’ and encouraging people to move their post-it notes over to the ‘answered’ side when they wanted to celebrate that! The Prayer Wall turned out to be one of the most powerful parts of the experience for us.”

A UCC church in Pennsylvania matched up mentoring pairs of elders with children - they hadn't interacted significantly before. A Midwestern Disciples pastor reported, “Emma, an 11-year-old joined our evangelism team. She wrote a kid's newsletter about evangelism. Then Emma invited her friend Kate to church and Kate's in the youth mentoring process moving toward membership. Kate's mom has been through our Newcomer's Class and will join when her daughter is baptized. All of this is because of an 11-year-old. Emma is building up the courage to ask her schoolteacher to join our “Soul” group. It is fantastic that one her age really ‘gets’ evangelism.”

If you want to see something really exciting, look at the video created by First Presbyterian Church, Gainesville, FL's college ministry group. (*See [www.GraceNet.info/video.aspx](http://www.GraceNet.info/video.aspx)*). Young people raised in our churches have the same trepidations about evangelism as everyone else. But, like the rest of us, they're getting past it, with beautiful results.

I'm sensing a chicken-and-egg dynamic in relation to children and this work. Churches that pray and start coming alive seek out children. Children already in congregations love the *Unbinding* prayer, talking and activities. When the kids get excited and involved in worship and intergenerational activities, *everyone* has fun. Little children are leading - literally. Adults with renewed faith discover new hope. They loop in children. We love watching these patterns emerge. If we're beginning to loosen our grip on decisions, money, time and the tidiness of our fellowship halls, if cookie crumbs ground into the carpet are no longer of ultimate concern, who can imagine what the Spirit can do through us?

### ***Final Thoughts***

I'm reading two books right now: Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1816), and Eugene Sledge's *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981). I've always loved *Persuasion*, my all-time second favorite Jane Austen novel. Russ and I watched all 10 episodes of Spielberg & Hanks' *The Pacific* (about the Pacific Theater in World War II) so quickly a couple of weeks ago that I've been forced to read one of the autobiographies upon which it was based as an antidote to HBO series withdrawal symptoms. Both books shed light on the pastoral leadership musings in this report. How, you ask?

Anne Elliot, heroine of *Persuasion*, brilliant, virtuous, decorous, gentle of spirit, has been relied upon, discounted and taken for granted by family and suitors for years. *Persuasion* is the felicitous account of her patience, her wisdom and her redemption. *That's* what I want and

believe for the mainline churches - that the wisdom and truth of the faith we hold dear will be finally recognized after years of patient and virtuous service. God will somehow reward and give meaning to prayer and faithfulness. We believe these dry bones *will* be clothed with sinews, and flesh, and breathe, and move with the Spirit. God can do this. Our part is to wait, to be patient, to remember that all is in God's hands and in God's perfect timing.

*And*, the church, like the first Marine division, has landed on an exposed, rocky beach. We're being pounded by enemy fire. If membership and attendance trend lines continue in the same trajectory they've held without wavering for the last 40 years, each of the seven mainline denominations in the original Mainline Evangelism Project study will approach zero within the next 35 or 40 years. My native sense of urgency may not be misplaced here. We need more praying Marines in ministry. We need to get off the darned beach! Let's move! Let's try stuff! God's turning some things around - let's cooperate! Keep going! God will somehow reward and give meaning to prayer, faithfulness, guts and hard work. We believe that these dry bones *will* be clothed with sinews, and flesh, and breathe and start moving again with the Spirit. God can get us off this beach if we ask Christ to lead us, if we'll work and keep moving.

So, exhibiting this kind of wild thinking, it's probably good that I'm starting some sabbatical time next week. I'm going to go calm down, and ask for more energy and wait for God to reveal new directions. I can't wait to see where this adventure takes us next!