

UNBINDING
your
SOUL

The Unbinding the Gospel Series

by Martha Grace Reese

*In more than
12,000 congregations in
50 states, 49 denominations,
8 countries...*

*“Evangelism” is anything you do to help someone move
closer to a relationship with God, or into Christian Community*

What’s Your Church’s Question? *WHY*, or *HOW*?

Evangelism books presume everyone *wants* to do evangelism, so they tell you *how* to do it. Six years of national, Lilly Endowment-funded research in nine denominations have demonstrated conclusively that most people would rather get a root canal than think about evangelism. You can tell people to “go be missional” until the cows come home. They just won’t do it until they *want* to.

If we answer the “WHY share my faith” question, we’ll start wanting to know “HOW can God use me to help people move into faith?” Our churches can’t share their faith until they’re loving, relational communities where people (1) pray, and (2) talk comfortably with each other about their own faith experiences. Once our churches make this shift, we’ll want to know *HOW* to share our faith. The *Unbinding the Gospel Series* addresses both the *Why* and the *How*.

Take a Quiz. You decide where *your* church should start. Think about your congregation. Imagine that your great leaders – the 20% who do all the work – aren’t there. Take this quiz as if you’re answering for the other 80%. Check all statements that apply:

- You** do evangelism! I’m going to alphabetize the Sunday School closet.
- Evangelism’s why I left my old church. I don’t want to embarrass friends.
- Nobody’s going to make **me** pass out tracts.
- Evangelism is theologically inappropriate. It’s not our ethos.
- Whoa! God’s doing exciting things in my life and through our church! How can I help my friends connect with this?

WHY churches check boxes 1-4. *HOW* churches check only box 5. So, are you a *WHY* church, or a *HOW* church? [Martha Grace Reese, author of the *Series* and director of the *Mainline Evangelism Project* and the *Unbinding the Gospel Project* (the Lilly studies), estimates that 90–95% of U.S. churches are *WHY* churches!]

WHY churches can become *HOW* churches if they start with *Unbinding the Gospel*, then do an all-church saturation study with *Unbinding Your Heart*. *HOW* churches can move into joyful faith sharing with *Unbinding Your Soul*.

“WHY” Churches START with GOSPEL/HEART

STEP ONE— Church Leader’s Study: *Unbinding the GOSPEL* (red ribbon). Start with a “test” small group study with leaders who you think will like it best. Optimal group size: 8-10 members, pastor leads. (*DON’T preach or write newsletter articles – you’ll only create resistance! Remember: In people’s heads, “Evangelism” = “Root Canal”.*) Pastor: read the introduction and chapters 1 & 4 of *Unbinding Your Church* and skim *Unbinding Your Soul* now. They will help you lead your *GOSPEL* studies effectively.

- **Study GOSPEL** in small groups over eight weekly sessions
- **Do the exercises** at the ends of the chapters
- **Pray** with 40-day prayer journal after discussing chapter 3

If *Gospel* helps, keep going! Move on to more small-group studies of *GOSPEL* with your church leaders and teachers (20% of your worship attendance).

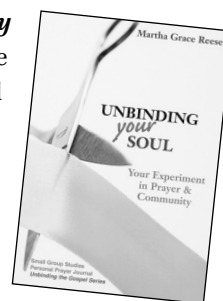
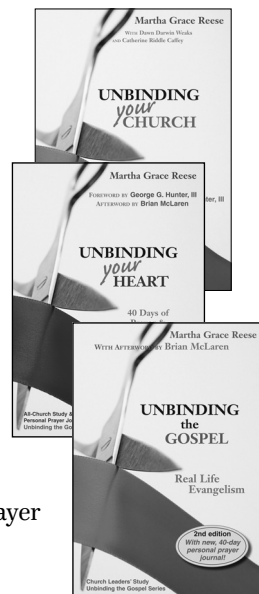
STEP TWO—All-Church Saturation Study: *Unbinding Your HEART* (purple ribbon) is a six-week version of *Unbinding the Gospel* with a different individual prayer journal. We see significant changes in churches that bring the “unbinding” experience to at least 85% of worship attendance. Each week, for 40 days, people will:

- **Pray** each day’s scripture and prayer exercise & work with a prayer partner
- **Study** a chapter with their small group
- **Worship** – sermon, music & prayers centered on the week’s chapter

SUPPORT FOR STEPS ONE & TWO—Pastor’s and Leaders’ Guide: *Unbinding Your CHURCH* (green ribbon). *Unbinding Your Church* offers “best practices” for small group leaders, prayer teams, youth leaders, pastors. It provides comprehensive organizational aids, coordinated resources for children and youth, worship, full music plans in four styles & 7 sample sermons.

“HOW” Churches Move to SOUL

Unbinding Your SOUL: Your Experiment in Prayer & Community (yellow ribbon). Many people who aren’t connected with a church would love to try a no-obligation experience of substantial spiritual discussion, prayer and community. *Unbinding Your Soul* prepares church members to invite their friends into a 4-week small group experience with short study chapters, an individual prayer journal, prayer partner activities & group exercises. Groups could opt to continue for additional four-week segments. Groups should double. Some may double again. (Divide to maintain small group dynamics.) **Includes facilitators’ and pastors’ guides.**



Thinking of using the Series? Review all four books at the beginning. *Unbinding Your Soul* will help **WHY** churches see a trajectory toward becoming a **HOW** church. **SOUL** is laced with 70 stories and direct quotes from a huge range of churches that have worked with the Series. See www.GraceNet.info for more info & resources.

To Grandmother and Grandad

Martha Grace Miller Reese

and

Everett David Reese

UNBINDING *your* SOUL

Your Experiment in
Prayer & Community

Small Group Studies &
Personal Prayer Journal

Martha Grace Reese



CHALICE
PRESS

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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NOTE: *Who reads what?* Experiment Groups study the pages with the gray band during their first four weeks. Church Groups read the unmarked pages during their “warm-up” phase.

Acknowledgments

Unbinding Your Soul arises out of the efforts, stories and generosity of thousands of people. Research underlying *Unbinding the Gospel*, the cornerstone book of the *Unbinding Series*, involved hundreds of congregations across the country, as well as 1200 personal interviews. Thank you to each of you, many of whom I've only "met" on the phone. Your voices still resonate in me. Your accumulated wisdom has helped tens of thousands of people and churches across the country.

Many of the people who have used *Unbinding the Gospel* and *Unbinding Your Heart* over the last two years have reflected on their and their churches' experiences with the process. You've taught us much. Your learnings, your words and your stories undergird *Unbinding Your Soul*. Thank you to those who have called me, sent me e-mails, and particularly those who have been part of the new *Unbinding the Gospel Project*. You have reflected, written answers to questions and collected statistics for us. I suspect that all your effort, some of which is reflected in this book, will help many people. Thank you!!!

I've worked with about 100 large groups of pastors and lay leaders in person over the last two years. It was terrific to see you in person and to hear your thoughts and reactions. You've taught me so much. You've shaped this book.

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Thank you also to the heads of denominations and key national church leaders who helped the Mainline Evangelism Project get started, supported it through the research phase, helped launch *Unbinding the Gospel*: Jim Griffith, Dick Hamm, George Hunter, Cliff Kirkpatrick, Brian McLaren, Roy Medley, Stan Noffsinger, Richard Peace, John Thomas and Sharon Watkins.

The *Unbinding the Gospel Project* exists for two reasons: (1) to help 1000 congregations begin to pray, develop deeper faith and to share that faith by working through an all-congregational saturation experience with *Unbinding the Gospel* and *Unbinding Your Heart*; and (2) to gather stories and data from those churches so that we can help more churches start moving. The Project rests on a team.

First and foremost is Elinor ("Ellie") Campbell, our Project Administrator. Her spirit, graciousness, and spiritual, literary, and organizational gifts underpin all we're doing. If we meet our grant's goal, it will be because diminutive Ellie Campbell is carrying us all on her shoulders, like Hercules and the World. Thank you, Ellie, from all who are blessed to work with you.

Unbinding Your Soul

Thank you, wonderful coaches, who have given so much time, thought and skill to developing our coaching model and serving your churches: Pamela Dolan, Nancy Lee Gauche, Jeff Gill, Paul Nickerson, Cathy Townley, and Nancy Wood. Your creativity, insight, skill and persistence as we've developed this model inspire me. It's an honor and just plain fun to work together. Thank you so much.

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Dave Yankowiak is our brilliant web guy. The visible parts of *www.GraceNet.info* are but the tip of the iceberg. Hidden in the depths are data collection, information dissemination and coaching support systems that would awe NASA. We are utterly cool.

Dear friends and colleagues have read this manuscript in various stages. Thank you, each of you, for your sage advice, suggestions and fabulous kindness! Ann Azdell, Ellen McNeary Briggs, Liz Bowman, Ellie Campbell, Hilary Chittick, Laura Durfey Cuaz, Anne DeFuria, Andrea Hammerschmidt Felkins, MJ Fitch, Nancy Lee Gauche, Jeff Gill, Elizabeth Harman, Steve Hayner, Ray Jones, Tryna Loos, Nikki MacMillan, Helen Haskell McCallum, Gil Reese, Jim Riley, Don Schutt, Jackie Solem, Viv Jones Stretten, Cathy Townley, Sharon Tutko, Russ White and Sarah White.

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Russ White—prayer partner, dearest friend, beloved husband—none of this would be possible without you, for so many reasons. Really.

MGR
Marcell, Minnesota

Introduction

How to Use This Book

I've spent the last 15 years leading national research projects focused on faith, spirituality and the transformation of Christian communities. I've interviewed or spoken in depth with about two thousand people during this time. Some of them have no connection with organized religion. Many more are Christians—pastors, church leaders, and new and old Christians across the country.¹

I hear one message clearly: ***Most people want real friends.*** Most people want to be able to talk honestly about their lives and about significant life issues. Most people have some kind of a spiritual life. Millions of people in and out of churches would love to try an authentic test of a faith community—a confidential, loving, hopeful, real group of people. They'd like to explore, to think about, to talk with other people about God, about Jesus, about what's possible in a human life. Loads of people would like to work with some ancient prayer practices. Christian prayer and community are extraordinary and can be life changing.

I hear something else: ***No one wants to be trapped.*** We wouldn't buy a car sight unseen. We'd test-drive it. Loads of people who don't go to church would love to try a short, non-obligating, "test-drive" of Christianity—as long as they didn't get stuck. They'd like something short term, intense, and not watered down. A lot of Christians feel the same way. They'd like to try something more "real," more substantial than just dropping by church most Sundays—as long as it wasn't weird, or they didn't commit themselves for too long. So loads of people would like to try the same thing—an experiment in a more substantial type of faith and spirituality, and talking about what's really going on in their lives.

The predicament: Hideous cartoons of evangelism lurk in our heads. I've led the only major, national study of evangelism in the seven specific denominations called "Mainline Churches." I can tell you for a fact, after four years of intensive research, that people who don't go to church cringe at the idea of strangers harassing them with humiliating, condescending questions about whether they're saved. But that's ***nothing*** compared to the horror with which members of churches hear the word "evangelism." The word hits the eardrum. Christians break out in a cold sweat and start lacing on their Adidas.TM

Recap: Most people want to have friends they can trust. They want to talk about significant life and faith issues and to try some classic Christian prayer disciplines. But ***no one*** wants to sound like a honey-crusted nut bar.² No one wants to be stuck in a room with a bunch of loonies. No one wants to embarrass a friend.

A Solution: Unbinding Your Soul can provide the foundation for a four-week "test-drive" of Christian friendship, discussion, community, and classic prayer disciplines. I'm going to

call it “Your Experiment in Prayer & Community.” Use it as a test. See if you like it. Give it your best efforts for four weeks. At the end of the four weeks, you’re done. No one will bug you. No one will expect you to stay. After four meetings and three weeks of working with different types of prayer, you’ll have a good idea whether this is any kind of fit for you. ***The Experiment is Part One of this book.***

Church People—I know this is hard. People have told you not to be pushy or rude your whole Christian life. (Or they may ***have*** told you to be pushy and rude, but you’ve covered in corners or wanted to come out swinging.) One way or the other, Christians all over the country are walking around, quietly traumatized by horrific visions of arguing people into bumper sticker truth and forcing pamphlets into the hands of frantically reluctant strangers. Unfortunately, those bad cartoons have stopped many of us from mentioning to our best friends that we love the church we’re part of, and that our faith is the core of our lives. I think that’s problematic. We don’t have to be ***quite*** such timid woodland creatures. So here’s the deal:

1. You don’t have to do anything embarrassing.
2. Invite ***one*** person you really like to be part of the Experiment. Who’s a real friend? Who has an interesting life and fascinating ideas on other subjects? With whom do you want to spend some significant time? With whom would ***you*** like to talk about faith issues and about ***your*** life? ***That’s*** the person you invite into the Experiment. You can invite your whole golf foursome or your string quartet if you want.
3. I’m giving you all an extra, four-week, pre-Experiment, Warm-Up to help you garner the courage to ask your best friends if they’d like to try the Experiment with you.

Church groups: Start at Part TWO of this book for your Warm-Up.

A Level Playing Field: Friends of these Christians—thank you for considering being part of The Experiment. You may have had some horrible experience of someone haranguing you with biblical proof-texts or humiliating questions. This group isn’t about that. You’re not the guinea pig. It’s YOUR experiment!

The purpose of this group is to create a fun, safe place for everyone to have significant conversations. The purpose of the group is to think a bit about some big questions—Is there a God? How can I know? How do you pray? What’s true about the world? How can we live together best? How should I spend my life? How can I walk with God, every day, learning and not clotting? The purpose of the group is to talk about what ***you*** want to talk about! What’s happening in your life? It will be a new experience for everyone—people who go to church each week, people who don’t. This is a level playing field.

No one is selling anything. No one will try to convert or manipulate you.

However, I can’t imagine a group of eight or ten people not changing a little if they talk honestly for four meetings, and pray in between. Let me be as honest as I can be about my presuppositions and worldview: I’m a Christian, I believe that God exists, loves us, and wants us to become much more spiritually aware, more hopeful, more deeply connected with other

people, more joy-filled, more committed to living a life that's rich with serving other people. (I also believe all that's possible!)

My hope for the outcome of this month together is that you'll get to know each other better and that you will take whatever "next steps" God would like you to take. God can, and will, do amazing things *in our lives* and *through us* if we'll just pay attention and follow.

This is a pretty humble process. It isn't rocket science. It's spiritual growth. We trust that God will bless our lives and take us to the next deeper level if we'll talk honestly with each other, listen carefully and respectfully to each other, study bits of the Bible and pray. Four weeks isn't very long, so let's not tiptoe around the main point or fuss around with leading up to it gently. You all are interested enough to agree to meet four times and to pray for three weeks. Let's get started!

¹The Mainline Evangelism Project was a major, four-year study of highly effective evangelism in seven denominations, made possible by a grant from the Lilly Endowment (Martha Grace Reese, Project Director). Congregations studied were affiliated with the American Baptist Churches, USA, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church USA, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ and The United Methodist Church. See *Unbinding the Gospel*, 2nd ed. by Martha Grace Reese (Chalice Press, 2008), the cornerstone book of the *Unbinding the Gospel Series*. The first two pages of this book describe the Series. More information is available at the very end of this book, at *Next Steps*. Look at www.GraceNet.info for general information on the Lilly Endowment-funded grants, the purposes of the studies and the current *Unbinding the Gospel Project* grant. A full Wenger-Reese sociological report detailing the statistical results of the *Mainline Evangelism Project* is available at www.GraceNet.info / Download Resources.

²Aaron Sorkin, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, 2007.

Research Basis of *Unbinding Your Soul*

Quotes & Stories Cited

Unbinding Your Soul arises from, reflects findings of, and projects courses of action premised upon two national research projects, both funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. and directed by Martha Grace Reese: the *Mainline Evangelism Project* (2002-2007) and the *Unbinding the Gospel Project* (2008-). Primary findings of the *Mainline Evangelism Project* may be found in *Unbinding the Gospel, 2nd ed.* (Reese, Chalice Press, 2008), as well as in a sociological report on the primary quantitative data of the Mainline Evangelism Research Project by Jacqueline E. Wenger, Ph.D of Catholic University and Martha Grace Reese, J.D., M.Div. (download from www.GraceNet.info / *Download Resources* / *Public Downloads*).

Unbinding Your Soul is laced with about 70 stories and direct quotes arising from the first 18 months of the second research grant, the *Unbinding the Gospel Project*. This newest research has influenced the scope, character and trajectory of this book. In simplest terms, *Unbinding Your Soul* should help typical congregations move fluidly and organically into the transformative shifts that arise spontaneously with the Spirit in “quick adapter” congregations using the *Unbinding the Gospel/Heart* process most effectively. In SAT terms, Jim Collins’

*Built to Last*¹ is to *Unbinding the Gospel* as
*Good to Great*² is to *Unbinding Your Soul*

The stories and quotations in *Unbinding Your Soul* come from persons involved with the *Unbinding the Gospel Project*. The purpose of the grant is to provide both coaching for 1000 congregations and ongoing research on congregational transformation and faith sharing. Groups of congregations formally admitted into the grant process work through an all-church saturation study of *Unbinding the Gospel* and *Unbinding Your Heart*. (See “Next Steps,” page 151 and www.GraceNet.info for more information.)

Stories and quotations used in this book (within the context of chapters, as sidebar quotations, as foundations for author statements, and in stand-alone quotes at the beginnings of chapters), unless otherwise attributed, come from interviews, reports or written statements by people connected with the *Unbinding the Gospel Project*. Unattributed sidebar quotes in quotation marks are from participants in the *Unbinding the Gospel Project*. Sidebar quotes without quotation marks are by Martha Grace Reese.

In accordance with our agreement with participants, all contributed writings and stories are used without attribution, and with details disguised for purposes of confidentiality. A few of the most typical quotes are composites. Full names, denominational indicators, and physical

locations of churches, where given, are accurate and used with permission. Use of a first name alone is pseudonymic. Some quotations have been edited for brevity and clarity.

Thank you to each of you who has talked with us or written one of these powerful, personal reflections. You are in our prayers. You inspire us, and we're pretty sure you're going to inspire others. Keep those cards and letters coming!

¹Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: HarperBusiness Essentials, 2002).

²Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't* (New York: CollinsBusiness, 2001).

Experiment Group Reading Assignment

*Read Introduction, chapter 1 and Using Your Prayer Journal
(pages xi–10 & 123–131) before your first group meeting.*

*Start Week A of your Prayer Journal the
day after your first group meeting.*

The gray-tipped pages are for you!

Unbinding Your Soul

PART ONE The Experiment

Four Weeks of Prayer & Community

■ PART ONE

The Experiment in Prayer & Community
(Experiment Group = Church Group + Friends)

■ PART TWO

Faith & Courage
Pre-Experiment Warm-Up (Church Groups)

■ PART THREE

Resources to Help with the Unbinding

- Using Your Prayer Journal
- Facilitators' & Pastors' Guides
- Next Steps

*...those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.
(Isaiah 40:31)*

Life turns on a dime...

The Oxford Project is a study in photos and stories of people in Oxford, Iowa (pop. 676). Peter Feldstein took photographic portraits of almost everyone in town in 1984. Twenty years later, he went back to Oxford with his camera, and with Stephen Bloom, a writer. The book astounds with powerful images and stories of people's lives. Why would small town Iowans talk so openly with two East Coast strangers? One woman responded:

"He said, 'Tell me about your life.' How often does somebody ask you that: Tell me about your life?"

"I walked away from this knowing that life turns on a dime," Bloom said. "I realized that life is really dependent on moments, and you don't know when those moments are going to take place when you wake up. And sometimes when you go to sleep at night, you don't realize those moments have taken place."¹

Get Started

I grew up in central Ohio. Pretty much everyone went to church. The church we *didn't* attend was Presbyterian. We didn't go on Christmas. We didn't go on Easter. My grandparents lived next door. Granddad went to church every Sunday. He was a banker, a philanthropist who helped thousands of people during the course of his life, and a Welsh Presbyterian. My Grandmother also made everybody's life way more wonderful, but she did *not* go to church.

Grandmother was fascinating! She could simultaneously knit with two strands of yarn, jingle her gold grandmother's charm bracelet, keep an eye on the roast and the potatoes in the oven, flip her shoe on the end of her foot, and read *Little Lord Fauntleroy*² out loud to me for the fourteenth time. We loved Grandmother. I was the oldest and got to be named Martha Grace Reese after her. She taught me everything—how to knit, to bake bread, and to recite the kings and queens of England from Ethelred the Unready to Elizabeth II.

Grandmother said that religion was for people who didn't have Other Resources. She demonstrated, with vivid examples, how leaders had used simple people's faith to manipulate them into wars and into submission. She stressed (bracelet clanking as she knit a snowsuit for someone's daughter's second twin) that every army that had marched through Europe since Genghis Khan had carried the banner of Jesus in the vanguard of the battle. "Well-educated people," she articulated, knitting needles clicking furiously, "should *know* about religion, but no one who has the sense God gave a *goat* would believe it." That was my beloved, sainted grandmother! We adored her.

Unbinding Your Soul

I emerged from my childhood with a firm grasp on history, literature, music, knitting, the kings and queens of England, how to turn cables in a sweater, and when to flip the potatoes under the roast. A *couple* of gaps remained. Like, for instance, I thought *Amazing Grace* was a Judy Collins song.

I spent my junior year in college at the University of Madrid. I met Hilary, who was

- a. a Christian
- b. smart (she's a judge now), and
- c. talked about Jesus as if there actually *were* one!

Most people want to have friends they can trust. They want to talk about significant life and faith issues and to try some classic Christian prayer disciplines. But *no one* wants to sound like a honey-crusted nut bar. No one wants to be stuck in a room with a bunch of loonies. No one wants to embarrass a friend.

It was a whole new world. I hadn't known that there were smart Christians. I know *now* that I knew lots of Christians, many of whom were very bright. Some of them probably had significant spiritual lives. They just never talked about them to me.

Heavens, my *Grandad* was a brilliant man, immensely articulate, and a devoted Christian. I learned as an adult that his faith motivated a huge amount of his service to people. He and I took hundreds of long walks over the years, just the two of us. We talked about people, business, banking, education, community development, service to people, racism, other countries, international relations, doing things that matter with your life, *but he never mentioned his faith.*

I thought Grandad helped revitalize redlined neighborhoods, raised money for Ohio State, worked so hard with developing nations' national banking systems, and was one of the most amazing people on earth because he was *Welsh*. I didn't realize that a lot of it also could have been because he was a Welsh *Presbyterian*. How many of his firmly held, innovative, and courageous ideas were forged in his deeply private, religious convictions? I don't know. As far as I knew, he never talked about church, faith or God. Grandmother had all the airspace on the subject.

But Hilary, in Spain, talked with me about what she believed and what she had experienced as a Christian. I read Spanish religious writers in class at school. I read existentialists too long and late at night. Hilary and I talked about what I thought and about what she believed. I was thrown for a loop to consider all these intangible, invisible possibilities for the way the world might be.

After a particularly intense talk one day on the way home from school, she handed me her Bible, with slips of paper marking two spots: Ecclesiastes and the Gospel of John. Then she left. Ecclesiastes

and John toppled me into a powerful conversion experience. I realized over the course of an afternoon that there really *is* a God, and that God can come to us through a vividly living Christ. I saw in an almost mystical flash of insight that God's life and power dissolve death. I sensed that I could live the rest of my life "within" God. The recognition that Christianity was *true* floored me. I took a step toward God that day. That step, and miles of walking since that day, have set the trajectory of my life on a profoundly different course than I might have taken otherwise.

I move more consciously with God. Prayer plays a significant part in my life. It feels like a lifeline to God. Talking with other people about faith is a gift and a joy. Churches amaze me. They can be communities of learning, of spirituality—stunning focal points of serving others. Sometimes churches drive me a little nuts, because it's so easy for them to drift like rowboats on a pond, bobbing in eddies of muted niceness and respectability, rather than heeling in the wind like clipper ships cutting through waves, sailing into mysteries of ever-deepening layers of reality.

But I get over it. I love the potential churches embody. And oh, I have *so* much respect for what God can do with groups of people who are willing to take some steps toward letting God use them. That's when people and churches are at our best!

I know one thing: God exists. Walking through my life with God and with other Christians has been an adventure for 30 years. It's available to everyone if we'll do a couple of simple things: talk with some other people about what really matters in our lives; pray; explore faith traditions, writings and ideas; and be willing to see new things.

Who knows what can happen next if we'll do three simple things:

- talk for real
- pray
- explore new ideas

If you choose, you can make the next four weeks your experiment in Christian prayer and community. Here's the choice: Are you willing to talk about the things that matter in your life? Will you try some different ways of praying? Will you work with a few readings from the Bible? Will you talk with a small group of other people about what you think and are learning about your life? ...God? ...your

"Yes, I remember that conversation with you. It was fun and interesting and challenging. I was surprised when you told me later of your personal encounter with God. Whenever I read that passage in 1st Corinthians about Paul planting, Apollos watering but God giving the growth, I always think of you. I may have planted, but God definitely gave the growth, since I was totally surprised to see it. I remember thinking it was a conversion from intellectual curiosity to personal understanding."

—Hilary's 2009
recollection of talking
with Martha Grace
about faith in Spain

hopes? ...faith? (Whatever these things are to you?) This process works best when the participants have very different backgrounds and spiritual experiences.

Telling the truth and talking for real can be scary. Sometimes you wonder if it isn't better *not* to talk about the things that bother you, or that you wonder about. A lot of us assume it's better to "let sleeping dogs lie." It's a little risky to let people get to know you. And yet, sometimes it's better to talk honestly if the setting is safe and people all agree to hold the conversations in confidence.

We Live in Invisible Currents:

A woman packages the tools and equipment needed for surgeries at Emory University Hospital. She looks at the patients' names, packs the instruments the surgical teams may need, and prays for them and their surgeries. She told a chaplain that she had established this routine 40 years ago. The chaplain interviewed hospital employees and discovered that most of them did the same thing. No one knew.³

Many parts of the Bible resonate with depth and truth. If I had to pick one of the most important spots in the Bible, it might be the time when Jesus told his followers, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8:31–32) There's another spot where one of the greatest writers of the New Testament, Paul of Tarsus, talks about "speaking the truth in love." (Ephesians 4:15)

Those are my assumptions about this group. We need to speak the truth, in love—gently, clearly, knowing that none of us ever has the whole picture about anything. We understand so little about even our *own* lives. The *unconscious* parts must be like the *big, hidden* part of the iceberg! Even our "truest," most deeply held beliefs, ideas, and feelings don't encompass the whole truth. So we need to speak with each other "in love," as Paul says. We must listen to each other, knowing that no matter how right we are, we each only understand a small part of what's real and true. This isn't relativism; it's the reality of the human situation. When we recognize how limited we all are, it's easier to speak humbly and kindly with each other.

People who have studied *Unbinding the Gospel* together have discovered that God will move them into deeper layers of understanding and truth if they speak honestly and kindly, pray, and try to take just one or two "next steps" in spiritual growth. In Jesus' words, the "truth will set you free."

If *your* group chooses, these presuppositions can become the foundation upon which your group is based. Speak honestly. Speak and listen in love. Be open when the Spirit prompts you to be. God will bring about the right results.

If you don't usually connect with a church, THANK YOU for your courage and willingness to explore something new. Each chapter gives you a short bit to read and think about before you meet with your group. *Unbinding Your Soul* also includes a personal prayer journal,

with daily prayer exercises for three weeks. You and the person who invited you to be part of the group might choose to be prayer partners during these next weeks.

Those of you who are connected with a church—THANK YOU for your courage and willingness to be open to something new ***and to talk about it!*** You're willing to talk out loud about something that you've probably been warned to keep private. Grandad ***lived*** his faith beautifully, but when I was a girl, I didn't know what motivated him. Had Hilary not arrived on the scene and actually spoken out loud about Christianity, I might have missed it. I wish Grandad had told me what he thought about this one area where he was silent.

The thing is, I didn't ask Grandad, either! I would give anything to be able to talk with him about his faith now. I missed it. It's so odd, because I've spoken one-on-one with probably 2,000 people about their faith—people with all ***types*** of faith experiences. I've learned so much from each one. Millions of people believe what Grandmother Reese thought. Millions more are like Grandad. Lots are somewhere in the middle. It's wonderful when people can get past the “don't talk about sex, money, politics or religion” taboo. We all live in deep places in our souls. It ***matters*** that we share the quiet, hidden, motivating forces and wonderings with other people. Whatever we believe, it matters that we talk! Why wait for someone fascinating to bring it up? We could ask.

My husband's father was a quiet man, a Marine captain, a Pilgrim descendant, raised in flinty New England. He used to quote, “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.”⁴ Most Christians ignore this advice in every area of their lives ***except*** the religious sphere. I ***urge*** you to disregard it during your group's meetings. (Younger readers: scratch out ~~disregard it~~, insert “blow it off.”) Give yourself a pass! Just blurt stuff right out there. Everybody'll be doing it.

“A friend at church once commented, ‘What I want the most is to be truly known, but that's what I fear the most too.’ She and another woman are probably the only people at church I would tell about what is really going on in my life, which probably says more about me than my church. But, still, what good is this faith community stuff otherwise?”

¹Stephen G. Bloom and Peter Feldstein, *The Oxford Project* (New York: Welcome Books, 2008). Quotes from Oxford Project story, CNN.com, October 28, 2008.

²Frances Hodgson Burnett, *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (New York: Scribners, 1886).

³Janet Lutz, Story Corps account of hospital-wide interviews conducted while she was chaplain at Emory University Hospital, reported on CNN.com, December 18, 2008.

⁴Russ' dad used to attribute the quote to Abraham Lincoln, but Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain, George Eliot and the Bible (Proverbs 17) are also suspects. Whoever said it first, it has stuck in the culture of our churches!

GROUP DISCUSSION _____

1. Introduce yourselves. Talk a bit. Why are you here? What do you hope to get out of this time?
2. Talk about the group and what you want this process to be. Review the covenant, page 10, stressing the importance of confidentiality.
3. What did you think about chapter 1, *Get Started*?
4. What's your reaction to the thought of talking about faith issues? Check all the statements that you are saying inside your head:

Your Group's Foundations:

- Speak honestly.
- Speak and listen in love.
- Explore new ideas.
- Maintain confidentiality.

- I'm feeling a little queasy. I'm considering bolting for that side door right about now.
- My beloved spouse makes me talk and pray every once in awhile. It's part of marriage, like apologizing.
- I'm with Grandmother Reese. I don't buy this Christianity thing.
- I've been in church all my life. I love God, but I don't want to look pushy or offend anyone.
- I'm not sure there *is* a God.
- I've always wondered about spiritual things.
- Wow, did I get burned by a church. It's a horrible story!
- I'm cautiously optimistic.
- I'm so excited. I have been looking for a place to be able to talk absolutely bluntly about the things that really matter in my life. I'm in!

So, talk a little! Talk a lot. What do you think?

TRY SOME PRAYER _____**Pass out prayer candles**

Give each person a prayer candle. (See description at the end of chapter 5, page 66.)

Test out a prayer exercise

Take a look at the prayer journals. Go over the key points of *Using Your Prayer Journal* (pages 123–131). Decide who will work together as prayer partners. I suggest being a prayer partner with the

person who invited you into the group, but adjust as needed for your group. Arrange your chairs so that you and your prayer partner are sitting close to another couple of prayer partners.

Do the first prayer day (Week A, Day 1, [page 12]) together as a group. Help each other find the places in your Bibles. Tomorrow when you do this same exercise, you'll read it by yourself and do it in your own house. Today, read the scripture by yourselves, silently. Then let your facilitator guide your whole group through the exercise. Follow along with the Bible passage by reading it as the facilitator reads it or just listen. Do whatever helps you absorb it most clearly.

DISCUSSION _____

In groups of four (*two pairs of prayer partners*):

Say something about what the prayer was like. Did any light bulbs go on? Which parts inspired you? ...frustrated you? Did any surprises or realizations emerge during the readings? ...during the silence? What are you going to think about now?

Re-gather in the full group

Discuss how the prayer went, what you learned. What do you wonder about? Did anyone's comments surprise you?

Questions? Everyone ready to start on Week A, Day 1 of the prayers tomorrow? Exchange phone numbers so you can call someone if you get a great idea and want to talk.

Close in prayer

Ask God to bless each of you, your families, this time together and your times of prayer this week.

A CHALLENGE _____

I'd like to throw out a little challenge to you. How would you like to interview someone fascinating within the next two weeks? I'd love to be able to ask Grandmother *and* Grandad about their ideas and perceptions of God, now that I'm an adult. What if you were to talk with someone you love, or someone you admire, and asked them what they thought about faith issues? My experience with thousands of people is that we all love to be asked to talk about our lives, what we think, what we've experienced. People are honored to be asked. Wouldn't you be? You'll find a suggested form for these interviews (different forms for people who normally don't

This is a pretty humble process. It isn't rocket science. It's spiritual growth. We trust that God will bless our lives and take us to the next deeper level if we'll talk honestly with each other, listen carefully and respectfully to each other, study bits of the Bible and pray.

go to church and those who do) at www.GraceNet.info / Download Resources / Public Downloads / Interviews. (Facilitators, download it for everyone, will you?)

Okay! Good job, everybody! Now go get ice cream or something. Have a great week. Enjoy the prayer exercises. If something isn't clear, or if you just want to talk about something, call your prayer partner or someone else in the group who looked nice. See you back soon!

"I haven't talked with anyone about what I really believe. I've gone to church sometimes but I've never talked about what I think is bogus, or what I really wonder about. What have I been waiting for?"

—man invited to join an
Unbinding Your Heart
group

GROUP COVENANT

1. **Confidentiality.** I agree to hold everything said in this group in confidence. I will not repeat anything personal another group member says in the group, or during a private conversation outside the group. I can, of course, talk with people outside the group about how my experience of the group is affecting me, but will talk about it in ways that won't reveal another group member's confidence.
2. **Participation.** I'll participate in the four group meetings and arrive on time.
3. **Preparation.** I'll read the chapter before we meet and do the prayer exercises each day. If a prayer exercise seems annoying or stupid one day, I'll think about why it bothers me, write down why, and pray some other way. (Or just try it!)

Notes



The Main Point

Scripture: Isaiah 40:28–31

Are you sitting in your chair, with Bible, pen, candle and matches at hand? All right! Light your candle if you want to. Sit quietly and calm down a little. Take a few deep breaths and relax. When you exhale, imagine that you're letting go of all the things you're thinking about. Now read the Scripture passage. What phrases or words strike you as important? Which ones do you like? Write them down here or underline them in your Bible.

Isaiah was a prophet for about 40 years (about 740 to 700 B.C.) Prophets tell people what's true about the world. They make the spiritual equivalent of that “ah..eh..eh..eh.. eeeehhhhhhhh” noise when someone gets out of line. Isaiah lived with a vivid sense of God's power, love and mercy. He stressed how safe we are when we trust God. Think about what Isaiah says here about two things:

- (1) What's God like?
- (2) What are people like when we rely on God?

Read the passage again. Do you see answers to these two questions?

Read Isaiah's words one more time. If you're alone, read them out loud. What phrases seem most important this time as you hear them? Write down the words that “grab” you. What trains of thought are you starting on as you think about these important words or images? Do you believe that God exists? How does Isaiah's picture of God seem? Has God ever given you power when you felt weak? Can you imagine God renewing your strength so that you can mount up with wings, like eagles? Write your reactions to the passage here. What do you wonder about? Is there anything in yourself or your life that you'd like to change?

Notes, drawings, thoughts:

If you'd like to say a prayer, try this (say it out loud, whisper it, or “think” it in your head):

God, I can't imagine what you are like, but please help me get a better sense of you during these next four weeks. Thank you for the other people in this group. Will you please give each of us what we need during these four weeks together? Thank you. Amen.

Everybody Has a Story

Scripture: *John 8:1–11*

Light your candle. Get calm. Take a few deep breaths. When you exhale, imagine that you're letting go of all the normal things you think about. Now read the scripture passage for today, slowly. Do you get the picture? A woman had an affair. The Jewish law (the "law of Moses") dictated a mandatory minimum sentence: death by stoning. A group of by-the-book literalists ("scribes and Pharisees") tried to trick Jesus by saying, "Jesus, the Bible says she should be stoned, but what do *you* think?" Perhaps they thought he'd say not to punish her. Then they could hold press conferences accusing him of being soft on crime. Jesus didn't answer directly. He acknowledged the punishment. In essence, he said "Go ahead, stone her. She earned it. Anyone who hasn't sinned can throw the first stone."

Look what happened. *They* all had a story, too—hidden or forgotten for a moment, but right there, on their consciences, in their pasts. They left. Jesus looked directly at the woman and told her he didn't condemn her. Now—don't do it again.

I heard a man say, "We need to be gentle with each other. Everybody's got a story." What's yours? What is the one thing in your life you'd love to take back, to undo? ...the thing that might get people palming rocks to throw at you? Which memory makes you flinch? We all have one.

Would you be willing to whisper it now to Jesus? Tell him about the memory in your mind, even if you don't really believe he's there. He sees your sin for exactly what it is, unvarnished. He sees it even more clearly than you do. He won't condemn you. Tell him how sorry you are. See if you can feel his hand on your head, blessing you, taking the pain and the guilt away. Now go into your day. Start fresh.

Notes, drawings, thoughts:

Quote: Be kind, because everyone you meet is fighting a mighty battle.

Philo of Alexandria, Egypt, 1st century

Prayer: Jesus, I hardly dare look in your face and tell you this: _____
_____. Please forgive me and help me begin again. Amen.

Count Your Blessings

Scripture: Genesis 18:1–8

Sit comfortably for a minute. Read the scripture carefully, a couple of times. Sarah and Abraham are the original “parents” of the Jewish people. Three men visit them as they are camped near an oasis. Sarah and Abraham are herders. It later turns out that the men are really angels, messengers from God. But Abraham and Sarah don’t know that. Do you see the extravagant hospitality Sarah and Abraham offer—water to wash, rest, a banquet? Think about the gift this couple gave the men.

We don’t think about it, or see it, very often, but people (and God) give us gifts every day. Our very lives are gifts. People bless us, and we’re so busy, we just blow by it and don’t even recognize a blessing when someone hands it to us! People let us cut into a line of traffic. A greeter at Wal-Mart holds a door or gives you a cart. Maybe you don’t get the speeding ticket you earned! Someone catches your child swiping M & Ms™ and talks with her! You have a job. You are **out** of work, but can volunteer at the animal shelter. Someone talks to you at the gym. Lunch with your friends at school is fun. Someone sends you a thank-you note. You get to spend an hour reading.

Here’s the field trip challenge: Carry a 3 x 5 card in your pocket today. Every time a person, or circumstances, or God gives you a “gift” (blesses you somehow), write a short note about it. Then whisper “thank you” to God. Say “thank you” directly if there’s another person involved. Then ask God to bless that person too! Look at your card at the end of the day. Paper clip it right here. What do you think? Are you blessed?

Notes, drawings, thoughts:

Prayer: Oh, holy God—help me to be sensitive to all the blessings in my life. I pray now for each of the people who gave me some gift today. [Think about each person, picture them in your head, then whisper their name aloud to God. Ask God to bless them.] Thank you, God, for being the instigator of all these blessings! Amen.

Now You Can Give

Scripture: Luke 20:45–21:4

Light your candle. You know the drill. Calm down. Concentrate and slowly read the scripture. Do you see what's going on? Jesus ("he") was teaching by the Temple in Jerusalem. (Only one wall of the Temple remains today. The "Wailing Wall," the "Western Wall," is holy ground for all Jews.) Jesus told his disciples, his primary followers, to be careful of the scribes, many of whom were wealthy, hypocritical leaders who loved everyone's admiration and respect, but didn't have much real holiness. Along came a poor widow. She put two tiny copper coins into the collection boxes (the "treasury") in the Temple. She gave her food money to God. If you look at it as a percentage of what she had, it was an enormous gift.

Review your 3 x 5 card from yesterday. Think or say "thank you" to God for all of the blessings. Now ask God if God will show you something *you* could give today. Don't decide yourself. Ask. Sit quietly in the silence now and ask God (or Jesus, or the Spirit, whichever feels most comfortable) to give you an idea of something you could do for someone else. Sit for a while. Write down any ideas that come into your mind.

Buy an extra sandwich to give to a homeless person? Donate money to a shelter? Secretly help someone who lost their job? Is someone at school being bullied? Could you help stop it? God might love it if you visited your lonely neighbor, or called someone on the phone. Take treats to your kid's class, or to the nursing home. Here's a thought: If you give something to anyone, hold it in your hands for a moment—the sandwich, tray of cupcakes, envelope with a check, the phone before you dial. Ask (think in your mind) God to bless the gift and bless the person who receives it. Have fun!

Notes, drawings, thoughts:

Prayer:

May the road rise to meet you.

May the wind be always at your back.

May the sun shine warm upon your face.

And rains fall soft upon your fields.

And until we meet again,

May God hold you in the hollow of His hand.

Ancient Irish Blessing

Prayer Partners

Scripture: Romans 16

(Select your meeting day to fit your schedules. If you meet on Day 4, do Day 4's prayer exercise on Day 5. You'll figure it out! Just aim for a time about halfway between group meetings.)

Paul of Tarsus, sometimes called “Saint” Paul, wrote these words. He was a scholarly Jew. He didn’t know Jesus during Jesus’ lifetime, but Paul became one of the main leaders of the new movement of Jesus’ followers that turned into Christianity. He crisscrossed the Mediterranean basin from Jerusalem, through modern Turkey, Greece and Macedonia, to Rome, teaching and founding communities. His letters to these little churches make up a huge part of the New Testament.

I love Romans 16. First, it looks like just a list of people that I’d tend to skim over lightly. But I like that 2000 years later, you can still tell how much Paul respected and loved these people. Prisca and Aquila “risked their necks” for Paul (see verse 3). Look at verse 13. Rufus was Paul’s friend, but it looks as if Rufus’ mom loved Paul too. She probably made the boys’ dinner, listened while they talked, and gave them sage advice while they ate. Maybe she rolled her eyes when Paul wedged his muddy sandals against the rungs of the clean kitchen chairs. All I’m saying is, Paul wasn’t a Christian on his own—these people were close friends in one of the very first churches, about 15 years after Jesus was crucified.*

Churches are still filled with heroic, loving people who have fun together. **We** can start with prayer partners. Meet today with **your** prayer partner. Talk about what has happened as you’ve done these prayers this week. How did your group meeting affect you? Did any of the prayer exercises make you crazy? Did you learn anything? What do you wonder about? What have you really liked? Help each other any way you can. Just talk about what’s going on.

Notes, lists, drawings, ideas:

Prayer: God, please bless my prayer partner. Bless the people in my group and all of their families. Thank you for this time with these people. Let me see and learn whatever is best for me to learn next. Amen.

*Fred Craddock, beloved Disciples preacher, biblical scholar, professor and pastor preached a series of 12 sermons on Romans in Canada, probably in the 1970s. They’re the most powerful sermons I’ve ever heard. He spoke of Paul and Rufus’ mother in a way I’ll never forget. I can’t find these sermons, which were on tape. If anyone knows where I could find a set, let me know!

Review & Think

Read. Have you read chapter 2 so you're ready for tomorrow's group meeting?

Review. Think back over your week of prayer. Reread your favorite scripture from the week. Review your notes, lists, insights. How is your prayer life going? Review *Using Your Prayer Journal* on page 123. Which ideas do you need to pay particular attention to this week? Take some notes.

Then, answer two questions:

Question 1. *What are the most important things you've learned/discovered/remembered this week?*

Question 2. *What do you wonder about?*

Prayer: Talk to God. Sit in silence for a bit. Listen. Amen.

From a Midwest, university church. The building is stone, elegant and neo-gothic:

*“Most of our members are highly educated and highly rational. Prayer hasn’t been a strong suit for either the congregation or for me (the pastor). We’ve started praying seriously since our all-church study of **Unbinding Your Heart**, and the light went on for me.*

Several Jews and Muslims have started worshipping with us. We are overwhelmed that they feel free to worship God with us and with each other. Last Sunday, a bedraggled, drunk, homeless man (another first for us!) walked in at the beginning of the worship service. He sat in the pew, weaving back and forth. I was already in the pulpit. I saw two leaders in the congregation in back, huddling over whether they were going to have to remove the man, and ask him to come with them into another room.

Ahmet walked over, in his turban, with his long robe sweeping about his legs. He sat down next to the homeless man. He put his arm around the man and helped him sit upright during the whole service. God’s at work.”