

Q & A

- [Home](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [UMR Staff](#)
- [News Archive](#)

[About the Reporter](#)

[Letters to the Editor](#)

[Blogs](#)

[About UMR](#)

[Media Kit](#)

[Print Products](#)

[Mozambique](#)

[Customer Care](#)

[Editors Conference](#)

[Links](#)

[Classifieds](#)

[UMPortal Store](#)

UMR Communications is offering the latest headlines in the RSS format.

[RSS](#)

[Sign up for UMR Communications Newsletter](#)

Enter your first name:

Q&A: Nurturing a sense of evangelism

Mary Jacobs, Jun 15, 2007

Between 1960 and 2000, membership dropped by 5 million in seven mainline Protestant denominations in the U.S., while the overall population grew by 100 million. But some mainline churches are growing in spite of the trend. Martha Grace Reese thinks she's figured out what those churches are doing right.

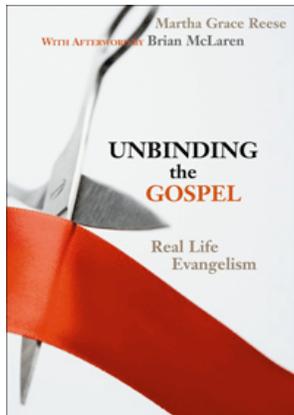


Martha Grace Reese

After interviewing more than 1,000 people for a four-year study of the country's most successful mainline churches, she's described her findings in a new book, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism* (Chalice Press). She spoke recently with **Associate Editor Mary Jacobs**.

Why are many mainline church members so reluctant to evangelize?

We don't want to look pushy. Most mainline churches have a grace-filled sense of God and we don't want to pressure people. We don't want to look as if we're haranguing them or being manipulative. So when you take our shyness and the fact we haven't trained most of our pastors in evangelism for decades, and that many pastors have little personal experience at inspiring evangelism so they don't know how to lead people toward evangelism, the result is that mainline church members don't have a strong sense of what a difference evangelism can make.



Your book raised an interesting question: If a person believes that Christianity is just one of many paths to God, why would you need to "sell" yours?

I think that's a bit of a red herring. We are Christians, and that's the path we're on. We can't lead anybody to be a Buddhist, even if we think that is a perfectly wonderful way to God. Most people who are hesitant to do evangelism use the multiplicity of

religions as an excuse not to do evangelism. But in my experience, the people who know the most about world religions are often the least hesitant to do evangelism. World religion professors are totally fine with doing Christian evangelism. People who are most hesitant are the ones who have a vague sense that it's fine to be a Sufi or a Hindu or a Jew.

Whatever we believe about other religions should not stop us from talking about our faith. I think Christianity is the most powerful story in the world. It's an extraordinarily powerful faith of surrender and justice and community and



Enter your last name:

Enter your email:

Join

[View Archived Newsletters](#)

[Send This Page To A Friend](#)

Submit

a deep, deep relationship with God. I think that is extraordinary news for the whole world.

You write that the purpose of your study was to find churches that were doing effective evangelism and to discover their motivation. What was it?

If you look at a typical Southern Baptist person, for example, you find what's motivating them is a tremendous concern that people who don't choose Christ are going to go to hell. That is a huge motivator. However, there are many mainline people who don't believe that. Other mainline people are sort of fuzzy and don't quite know what they believe. There isn't a whole lot of articulated motivation for evangelism. Very few mainline churches are preaching about hell.

In mainline churches where real evangelism is taking place, their motivation for doing evangelism is they are absolutely in love with God. They have the most exciting sense of a life of faith. They love Jesus. They love having a sense of the Spirit that is moving them through the day. There is this sense of being on an adventure with God in their lives and they want to share that.

Can that desire to evangelize be created or fostered?

I think it can be, and that's why I wrote the book. If people start praying and start talking about their faith with each other, we, too, can realize there really is a God, and it's not just some sort of vague idea. It's a vivid sense of relationship to faith. Mainline people can do that. When you get people together and ask them "What was a powerful moment in your life with God?" people who think they don't have a faith story realize they do. We have faith in the mainline churches. We just need to nurture it, pay attention to it and share it.

What's your sense of how Methodists are doing with evangelism?

United Methodist pastors have an openness to evangelism that many other mainline pastors don't. I can't tell you how excited I was that United Methodists are requiring an evangelism class for elders. And you're the only ones. When I talk to seminary professors, they say, "We do have this evangelism class, for the Methodists."

Part of that may be because of the whole Wesley story. You have such a profound history of an experiential faith. Basically what is going to fix this [lack of evangelism] is the Holy Club -- a small group of Christians gathering and talking about their faith. You have the Walk to Emmaus and the Academy of Spiritual Formation. That's huge. Anything we can be doing to help people to pray and talk about their faith -- if you couple that with a focus on sharing their faith with people outside the church, it will work. It's not rocket science! What we're talking about is, do people have a living relationship with God and are they really praying? If you have that relationship, if you focus on loving people outside the church enough to help bring them in, then all of a sudden God can do stuff with our churches. It's a huge, real, vital thing.

I invited a friend to church recently for a special event I thought might interest her, but I didn't share anything about my faith with her because she's an atheist and is almost defensive about that. If I were a better Christian would I have said something?

You know, faith-sharing is very context-dependent. You have to be her friend -- just praying for her that this relationship with God will be helpful for her and that there will be some opening. Usually people are more open to the idea of faith at turning points in their lives. I really think that if you pray for her and keep it up, all of a sudden one day you'll know what to say.

I feel so strongly about this because I grew up completely unchurched. I never went to church until I became a Christian when I was 21. I must have had many friends who were church members and it was a big part of their lives, but none of them talked to me about their faith. In college I met this girl who was brilliant, and she talked about Jesus as if there were one! [Laughs.] She talked about her faith and praying as if it were a real thing. I had never in my life heard anybody talk like that. I became a Christian and had a huge conversion experience, and it was all because of her. She didn't teach me the Four Steps to Salvation, she just articulated who she was and why her faith was so important to her. I never would have even thought to go to church. I just thought it was bogus. I know there are people like me out there, but those of us in church are all so hesitant to say anything. I just think we need to get over it. Just because you don't feel like it -- well, tough noogies -- it's not all about us.

What can churches do?

The problem is that pastors are incredibly busy; they are sort of like plate-spinners on the Ed Sullivan show. All of us have this tendency to think, "OK, I understand this, good, on to the next thing." Evangelism is something that takes a very long time. It's not reading one book and getting the idea.



You need to get a deep saturation. You practice the habits and patterns in a long-term way. Otherwise it's like foam on the top of the cappuccino; it's just talk, it's just excitement that just goes away. I can't tell you how important that is. People don't get that it takes years of prayer and practice, that this is very long-term. The congregation just has to keep at it, keep doing the prayer and the small-group work over and over, and keep the focus on evangelism. There are no quick fixes when you're talking about transformed lives and transformed churches.

mjacobs@umr.org

 [Print](#)

 [Email to a friend:](#)

Other articles by Mary Jacobs:

[LASTING LEGACY: Pithy and persuasive, Chesterton's writing still inspires today \(Jun 26, 2007\)](#)

[Q&A: Happiness from goodness \(Jun 20, 2007\)](#)

[A 'cleansing diet' for the soul \(Jun 14, 2007\)](#)

[COMMENTARY: Dad, the 'Bumbling Idiot' \(Jun 12, 2007\)](#)

[Q&A: Growing a small church with outreach \(Jun 4, 2007\)](#)

Other articles in Q & A category:

Q&A: Minnesota pastor crafts layman's guide to world faiths
([Bill Fentum, Jun 29, 2007](#))

Q&A: Happiness from goodness (Mary Jacobs, Jun 20,
2007)

A 'cleansing diet' for the soul (Mary Jacobs, Jun 14, 2007)

Q&A: Mainline men love Jesus, too (Robin Russell, Jun 8,
2007)

Q&A: Growing a small church with outreach (Mary Jacobs,
Jun 4, 2007)

Archived articles:

[Search archive](#)

[Home](#) [UM News](#) [UMPortal Store](#)

[2007 UMR Communications](#)