



Martha Grace Reese

FOREWORD BY **George G. Hunter, III**

AFTERWORD BY **Brian McLaren**

**UNBINDING**  
*your*  
**HEART**

40 Days of  
Prayer &  
Faith Sharing

**All-Congregation Study**  
Real Life Evangelism Series

## Enthusiastic Endorsements for *Unbinding the Gospel* and the *Real Life Evangelism Series*...

“...with clarity and sound theological grounding, we are invited into a grand adventure....could be a watershed book for mainline Protestantism.”

***Alban Institute, Congregations magazine***

“...the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ evangelism program will not reverse the trend. Humor, whimsy and joy in the faith will serve us better. Reese’s book is written to provoke, to tease and to charm us back into telling our story.”

**The Christian Century**

“The *Real Life Evangelism Series* is a power pack! Based on the extensive and authoritative research of Martha Grace Reese, and rooted in her passionate love for God and respect for the mainline church, these books, like Reese, are the rarest of gifts: they give us authoritative facts that arm us for real change rather than simply being alarming; they provide data that moves one to action....a treasure.”

***Todd Hunter, National Director, Alpha USA;  
Former Director, Vineyard Churches USA***

“Martha Grace Reese gently but persistently lures the Mainline back to the ministry of evangelism that is the heart of the church. Based on careful research and extensive listening, the *Real Life Evangelism Series* avoids gimmicks and the trap of the latest church growth fad. They invite pastors and members instead to a relationship with Christ that overflows the banks of our often cautious and reserved congregations. These books can convert even the most ‘evangelism-cautious’ Christians into eager disciples who love others enough to tell them why Jesus is the answer.”

***John H. Thomas, General Minister and President, United Church of Christ***

“Martha Grace Reese loves the Church. Hope for the mainline church abounds in these pages. She carefully demythologizes evangelism and then reconstructs it through common sense practices.”

***Jim Griffith, President, Griffith Coaching***

“*Unbinding the Gospel* teaches us how to relearn the practice of evangelism. It’s published at a teachable moment. Don’t just read this book—use it!”

***Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, General Secretary, Reformed Church in America***

“Don’t miss this one!”

**Evangelism Connections**

“*The Real Life Evangelism Series* is a great resource for congregations. It is inspirational, motivational, and a great model and companion for congregations as they seek to be faithful stewards of the Gospel.”

***Belva Brown Jordan, Philips Theological Seminary (formerly Harvard Divinity School)***

“The statistics Reese gives sober me, and they motivate me too. And her stories of vibrant congregations give me hope.....when you turn the last page, you can’t just let this be another book you read. You need to let Reese’s message affect you, and your faith community, and through you, other people.”

***Brian McLaren, Author of Everything Must Change***

“The *Real Life Evangelism Series* knocks one out of the park! Reese equips mainline church leaders with prayerful and practical tools needed to change the church through the power of Christ’s redeeming love.”

***Becky Garrison, Senior Contributing Editor, Wittenburg Door,  
Author of Rising from the Ashes***

“This book is a marvelous resource—I heartily recommend it!”

***Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly,  
Presbyterian Church U.S.A.***

“Written with intelligence, heart and a sense of humor...this is real life evangelism for real life Christians.”

***Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President, Christian Church (DOC)***

“*Unbinding the Gospel* is a must-read for those of us in the progressive mainstream church that are trying to reclaim the e.word.”

***David Schoen, Evangelism Minister and Team Leader, United Church of Christ***

“Look at Reese’s sections on the congregational dynamics that impact the growth or stagnation of our churches. She has put together an approach to sharing the gospel that works in mainline churches.”

***Bruce Humphrey, Senior Pastor,  
Rancho Bernardo Community Presbyterian Church, San Diego, California***

“There is a palpable sense of God’s presence and availability in Martha Grace Reese’s keen-eyed, level-headed, and big-hearted approach to evangelism. She poses the empowering possibilities of new life with style, verve, and an abounding sense of joy and trust in God. In a time when it is so easy to beat up on churches, she offers warm encouragement and wise guidance.”

***Robert Lee Hill, Senior Pastor, Community Christian Church, Kansas City, MO***

“This book will be a great resource for small groups, churches, and pastors who are ready to be instruments of unleashing God’s awesome Spirit in the world.”

***Yolanda Villa, Executive Pastor of Congregational Care, United Methodist Church of  
the Resurrection, Leawood, KS***

“There is nothing quite like the solid research Martha Grace Reese gives us, along with clear, thoughtful analysis and concrete prescriptions for how we can move forward in faithful and effective evangelism. She manages to do all this in a book that is completely accessible to both clergy and lay people and fun to read! It is an amazing and timely accomplishment!”

***Richard L. Hamm, Executive Administrator, Christian Churches Together,  
former Disciples General Minister and President***

“Martha Grace Reese has done a great service to the church by creating the Mainline Evangelism Research Project and then reporting on it in such an engaging, faith-filled, readable way. This should be required reading in all mainline churches. Our continuing existence may depend upon it.”

***Richard Peace, Robert Boyd Munger Professor of Evangelism and Spiritual Formation  
at Fuller Theological Seminary***

# The Real Life Evangelism Series by Martha Grace Reese

## *Change Habits, Not Just Minds!*

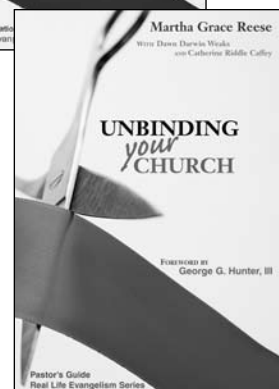
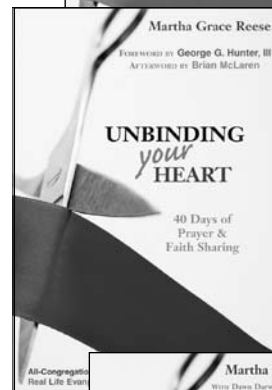
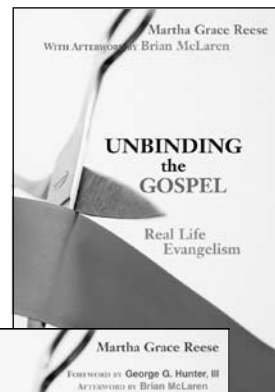
Evangelism books presume everyone *wants* to do evangelism, so they tell you *how* to do it. Four years of Lilly Endowment-funded research has demonstrated conclusively that most people would rather go get a root canal than think about evangelism!

The *Real Life Evangelism Series*, based on this research, doesn't leap to the *hows* of faith-sharing. This course will help your church grapple with fundamental questions before it moves to the *hows: Why* share our faith? Why *do* evangelism?

Author, pastor, researcher and lawyer Martha Grace Reese discovered that most mainline Christians don't share our faith because we aren't clear why we should. (She calls evangelism the "E-word," because it's not a good out-loud word in most churches!) The *Real Life Evangelism Series* will help your church get past the E-word stigma, answer the fundamental "why" questions, connect with the power of a deep faith in Christ, begin to pray for real and start to share *your* faith with enthusiasm and theological authenticity.

The *Real Life Evangelism Series* is an integrated set of resources, endorsed by seven heads of denominations, evangelism experts and pastors. It is grounded in a four-year, Lilly Endowment study of superb evangelism that included 1200+ interviews, 50 site visits and a major survey of congregations doing the best job reaching unchurched people. The *Series* has sparked a transformation in understanding, thinking, habits and practices of prayer and evangelism in churches of all sizes, cultural and geographic settings and theological understandings.

The *Real Life Evangelism Series* works. It is accessible, joy-filled, research-based, spiritually mature and beautifully written. It is not a quick fix. Please do not skim. Please do not skimp on time, planning or intensity. God can change our churches into vibrant, enthusiastic, articulate communities of faith *if* we'll change our habits.



- *Unbinding the Gospel* (red ribbon)
- *Unbinding Your Heart* (purple ribbon)
- *Unbinding Your Church* (green ribbon)

**STEP ONE: *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*** (*Church Leaders' Study, Red Ribbon*). Pastors, key congregational leaders and evangelism teams will benefit most from using *Unbinding the Gospel* as a seven- to ten-week small group study. This book sparkles with practicality. Each chapter concludes with questions, scripture suggestions and group exercises. *Unbinding the Gospel* helps committed leaders deepen and start sharing their own faith, understand our cultural context, and begin to plan for authentic congregational faith-sharing.

**STEP TWO: *Unbinding Your Heart: 40 Days of Prayer & Faith Sharing*** (*All-Congregation Study, Purple Ribbon*) is a six-week, church-wide, small group E-vent! It's perfect for a Lenten, summer or fall study for all established classes and small groups, and new ones formed just for the E-vent. *Unbinding Your Heart: 40 Days of Prayer & Faith Sharing* is a six-week version of *Unbinding the Gospel*, with the addition of 40 days of individual prayer exercises coordinated with each chapter. It will enrich your church's community life. It will help individuals risk face-to-face encounters with God. Your entire congregation will begin to talk about their faith. The E-vent creates momentum in your church. **IMPORTANT NOTE: Pastors should order a copy for each person participating in the study. There is an individual prayer journal included that should be used by each participant.**

**SUPPORT FOR STEPS ONE AND TWO: *Unbinding Your Church*** (*Pastor's Guide, Green Ribbon*). Pastors, teachers and church musicians are busy. This collection of fully integrated resources will help your church work and pray through the Series seamlessly. You will spend your time on what matters—praying, teaching, working directly with your people. *Unbinding Your Church* offers:

- **worship resources:** seven engaging, theologically rich, inspiring sermons you can adapt or adopt; short Bible teaching on texts; children's activities, prayers and complete coordinated music plans from four stellar church musicians (African-American, Hispanic, new church and traditional Euro-American).
- **step-by-step planning tools:** advice for pastors, church staffs, organizers, small group leaders, prayer group leaders and leaders of children and youth. Calendars, checklists, rosters, forms, impact diagrams, invitations, website and e-mail ideas will help you organize the E-vent, establish an intercessory prayer group, recruit small group leaders, form new groups and help existing groups commit to the all-congregation study.
- **integrated web sections:** select chapters are located on the web for **FREE** and easy access and downloads.

The *Real Life Evangelism Series* works! Congregations and people flourish when we are inspired, informed and given the chance to practice new ideas and skills together. The *Series* will help you invite the Spirit to sweep into your church. Ready?

***More info, download free chapters: [www.GraceNet.info](http://www.GraceNet.info)***

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## Series Foreword

What a promising project! Martha Grace Reese’s “trilogy” may be the most useful resource for awakening slumbering churches that has come along in a very long time. She publishes it at a critical time in the history of Protestant Christianity in North America. Ninety-nine percent of our mainline churches have little or no effective engagement with people in their communities who are not yet people of faith, hope and love. Unlike their forebears, our churches’ main business is no longer “apostolic.” We care for “our people”—oblivious to the fact that, due to the secularization of the West, our churches are now placed in the largest mission field in the Western hemisphere (and the third largest mission field on earth).

The *Real Life Evangelism Series* includes three resources: *Unbinding the Gospel*, *Unbinding Your Heart*, and *Unbinding Your Church*. Each has the “unbinding” metaphor in common. It is an accurate and powerful metaphor. Like Gulliver, who was once tied down by so many small strings he could not move, most mainline churches are so “tied down” by their traditions, customs, routines, assumptions, perceptions, anxieties, passivity, denial, scapegoating, and (yes) rationalizations that they feel powerless to move. And, keep in mind, these churches are in denominations and traditions that were, once upon a time, great contagious movements in this land!

It occurs to me that our need for unbinding extends even beyond Gospel, Heart and Church. For instance, many conventional Christians have binders—or filters—over their eyes. They mistake the masks that people wear for their real faces, so they assume that people are more “okay” than they really are. They wager that pre-Christian people do not really need to experience forgiveness, justification, reconciliation, or second birth; or to experience the grace, love, peace, or Kingdom of God; or to join the Body of Christ; or join God’s movement in the world; or to fulfill the will and purpose of God for their lives.

Most church members have bound “tongues” as well. They, tragically, assume that “witnessing” necessarily involves “preaching at” people. They do not want to do that! They do not even *want* to want to do that! Most church people love conversation, however. When they discover that faith-sharing best takes place through conversation, their tongues are often liberated.

Nevertheless, Reese’s *Real Life Evangelism Series* addresses eye and tongue bindings covertly, while addressing the bound heart and church overtly. These books are rooted in Martha Grace Reese’s four years of Lilly Endowment-funded research into all kinds of effective evangelism, including a study of the 1% or so of mainline churches that actually reach unchurched people in significant numbers. The work seems to embrace the full range of mainline theology and melts traditional dividing lines. She and her colleagues stand on the shoulders of the Church’s evangelical tradition to help churches today to find their way forward. So traditional features like worship, sermons, small groups, prayer, testimony, and



narrative play prominent roles in the *Real Life Evangelism Series*. Readers will see, however, the imagination and innovation expressed in these expressions.

Some features within these books are new, with little or no precedent. *Unbinding Your Church*, for instance, has a chapter specifically for church musicians, *by* church musicians! I noticed that the project commends resources in Spanish as well as English. I am embarrassed that in the most multilingual nation-state on earth, recognizing any other language than American English will be regarded as avant garde. This reveals the extent to which our churches are pathologically out of touch with the changing mission field around them.

*Unbinding Your Church* prepares churches for a sustained “E-vent” to catalyze the church into outreach. I expect such E-vents to move at least 20,000 churches into their first invitational foray into the community in anyone’s memory. To keep the momentum, they will need to “institutionalize” evangelism as a “regular” ongoing ministry of the People of God. Evangelism—like worship, Christian education, and regular giving—must be institutionalized expressions of our life together. Furthermore, the churches that get really serious will develop a strategic plan for their future mission and growth. They will become local movements through the strategic perspectives featured by the Church Growth movement at its best.

Most important, this whole series focuses on “Real Life Evangelism.” Christianity is not only, or even mainly, a fire escape or a ticket to heaven. The faith is a redemptive approach to the whole of our lives—this side of death as well as beyond. I predict that churches whose leaders and people are tired of net membership decline, and tired of slow death by attrition, will take to the *Real Life Evangelism Series* big time. Reese is right that our churches are stuck. By my calculations, at least 200,000 churches in the USA are stuck. Alas, churches cannot get “unstuck” without their full cooperation. This series *can* help them regain momentum.

George G. Hunter III  
Distinguished Professor of Evangelization and Church Growth  
School of World Mission and Evangelism  
Asbury Theological Seminary

# Unbinding Your Heart

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## PART THREE

- **PART ONE** focuses on *what is* and on *what can be* for individuals and for churches.
- **PART TWO** helps you see your church more clearly and start to move toward new possibilities.
- **PART THREE** offers you a 40-day, individual prayer adventure to experience as you work through *Unbinding Your Heart* with a group of friends.

*Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. (Rev. 3:8a)*

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## Daily Prayer Exercises

Welcome to your private time with God, a page for each day of this six-week journey. Let's start with a confession. Mine: I talk *such* a good game about prayer, but doing it isn't always so easy! I swoop eagle-like on currents of glorious inspiration—every once in a while. But many days, I'd rather talk than pray, read than pray, sleep than pray. Gosh, I'd rather organize my sock drawer than pray! I have developed impressive avoidance mechanisms to shield myself from going face-to-Face with God. So, if you have tendencies to think, "I'll pray in an hour... I'll pray after I finish changing the oil in the car... I'll pray tomorrow—at Tara," here are daily prayer exercises from a soul-buddy! They may help you get into the habit of praying.

Habit incubates a growing relationship with God. If we pray, if we show up, God has a much better chance of getting through to us. Over time, we know ourselves better. Over time, we grow ready for God to give us more and longer glimpses of Godself. Over time, we begin to assemble an integrated theological understanding of God, life, people and faith.

We're probably not going to slip one day and fall into Christian maturity. A friend said: "I'm never going to get any skin in this game unless I get my [derriere] in the chair every day and start praying for real." So, are you ready to get started? Leaf through this section of *Unbinding Your Heart* and see if it looks inviting to you. Take a moment in the quiet (or several days) to ask yourself if the Spirit is nudging you to commit to this prayer habit.

Will you try to pray consistently for six weeks? If you agree to try, sign here:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Unbinding Your Heart

### Same Time, Same Place

William Law, a wise eighteenth-century English theologian and writer who influenced generations of pastors, including the Wesleys, suggested that we have one special chair in which to pray each day. Choose a (not too) comfortable, straight-backed chair in a room away from family traffic patterns. Only pray and do your devotions in this chair during these six weeks—no mystery novels, no TV, no phones, no IPODs™, no directing kids' homework! Keep your supplies right next to your chair so you don't have to interrupt your prayer time to go get something.

### Supplies

- Bible
- Pens, pencils, art supplies, clay
- Reading glasses
- This book
- Journal or extra writing paper
- Church directory, personal address book and city phone book
- Prayer candle and matches

### Non-Sitters, Artistic Types

Not everyone thinks, works, learns or prays the same way. Some of us pray best while moving, or talking. My ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) friends have fits when they even think about sitting in one place in silence. Our motto is: give new ways to pray a chance, but pray in the ways that work for you! Part III offers you 40 days of varied prayer exercise suggestions. We don't have space to list all the personalization options, but here are a few.

- Walk around the room while you read the scripture, timing the words with your steps or your breath.
- Read the scripture out loud.
- "Act out" the scripture portion.
- DRAW or form a Play-doh™ figure of the scripture.
- Read the scripture sitting, then go for a walk while you pray.

I suggest that you imagine building an altar on Tuesday of the first week. You may get more out of the prayer if you stand up, move around the room and pretend to pick up rocks and move them into place. You may want to use your kids' blocks, or go to the river and use real rocks. You could draw or write a list of what you are offering God, then place the paper on your altar. There is a "Notes, Drawings,

Thoughts” section for each day. Write a list, sketch a drawing, do whatever makes the day’s exercise most effective and memorable to you. Experiment. Have fun with it. If you don’t know what you want to do, ask God. You may be surprised at some of the nudges you get from the Spirit!

### When to Pray

Choose a specific time to try to pray each day. Although I have written as if you are praying early in the morning, you may be drawn to a time after breakfast, when everyone else has left the house; lunch time in your office; or evening (instead of TV or before bed). If in doubt, ask God what time you should choose. Don’t drive yourself crazy about exact adherence to A Rigid Plan, but consistency will help you develop the habit of prayer! Light a candle each day as you sit down if you wish, to remind yourself that Christ is right there with you. You can develop simple habits that will help grow your relationship with God.

### Pattern of the Exercises

You now have a scripture, a prayer exercise, note-taking space and a closing prayer for each day of the next six weeks. Some days suggest an exercise to be carried out during the day, but you will always have your scripture and prayer time first. (If you pray in the evening, use these devotionals the night before, i.e., Sunday through Thursday nights.) Saturdays you may repeat any prayer exercise you have already done—your favorite, or whichever one you sense the Spirit directing you to do again. Sundays will offer a time to rest—to review how your prayer is going, and to pray with all the others in your church during the worship service.

### As You Begin

Light your candle if you wish. Breathe deeply. Close your eyes and ask Christ to help you be spiritually available to him (or God, or the Spirit). Ask God to help you understand whatever you need to see next. Then, when you feel centered, read the entire day’s exercise to familiarize yourself with it. Finally, take a deep breath, exhale, read the scripture and begin!

### Prayer Partner

Talking about your reaction to these exercises with someone else from your small group at church, a neighborhood friend, someone in

your retirement community, or your family will maximize the benefit of your six weeks of prayer. A mother told me, “We are praying together in the morning and talking about what God’s showing us at dinner [two parents, a very active second grader and two junior high school kids]. We all love the prayers, scriptures and exercises for different reasons. Doing this together is awesome—it’s helping us understand each other better and love each other even more.” Whatever your living situation, please talk about your response to these exercises with at least one other person, once a week, in person or by phone. Budget at least a “check-in” time when your small group studying *Unbinding Your Heart* meets each week. Half the fun is getting to see how everyone’s individual prayer is progressing.

### **Overarching Principle**

The point of these prayer exercises is to help you be open to God and to grow as a Christian. If you are drawn into a certain phrase of scripture, if you feel a sense of God’s presence one day, tarry with it (stay there)! Our increasing awareness of the presence of God is what matters in our spiritual lives. The exercises are only a tool to help you try new ways of being more receptive to the Spirit. If you and God are drawn into a “side conversation,” it’s probably the main thing. Stay with God, not the program!

Christ loves us. He loves it when we try to get to grow closer to him. Our prayers help us and others more than we will know. Ready to move into this faith adventure? All right, let’s go!

## How Do You Know God?

*Scripture: Psalm 139:1–12*

Light your candle if you'd like. Take some slow, deep breaths and relax. Sit quietly for a few moments and ask God to bless this six-week prayer adventure.

God is huge, unfathomable. Christ knows and loves us so intimately. *Unbinding Your Heart* is about faith sharing. But our faith is in a God who is vast, mysterious and very different than we are. How can we talk about our fumbling understandings of such a God? The more our faith means to us, the less we want to reduce it to bumper-sticker portability!

We can learn to begin to talk about our faith authentically because God has shown us Godself through scripture and through the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus. We can learn to talk about our faith because God will speak to us moment-by-moment through the Spirit. The Spirit will give us words.

Will you read the Psalm slowly? Which lines speak to you most powerfully? Sit quietly for a moment. Now read the Psalm again, slowly. What words or phrases shine out at you? Mark them in your Bible or jot them down here.

How do you know God? Close your eyes a moment and ask God to show you again the moments, the ways in your life when you have seen or understood or experienced God most clearly. What are your deepest moments of faith? A conversion experience? A tiny moment of awe during a Christmas Eve service? A nudge from the Spirit? A powerful insight during a sermon or reading the Bible? A healing? A knowledge of forgiveness? Everyone's experiences of God are different. Ask God to show you yours. Write down what feels most important.

*Notes, lists, drawings, ideas:*

*Prayer:* God, you are the Holy One of Israel, Creator of the Universe, so majestic we cannot possibly understand you. And Jesus told us to call you "Daddy" because you love us so much. Thank you for my life and for my family and friends and the people you can use me to help. Please let me know you better as I go through these next six weeks. I offer you this time. Amen.

## Build an Altar

*Scripture: Genesis 12:1–9*

This is the beginning of the story of Sarah and Abraham, the father and mother of all the Jews and, because of our faith, our spiritual great-great-great...grandfather and mother. They are 66 and 75 years old. God calls them to leave home behind, to set out on a trip, in some ways similar to this next 39 days for us. God promises that he will bless them and give them a land and children. They packed up and left the life they had known. In verse 7 and in verse 8, Abram builds altars to God. Abraham and Sarah symbolically offer God everything—their obedience, their lives, their decisions.

You've answered God's call to start out on a faith journey, too. Will you stop now and imagine building an altar to God? Read this, then close your eyes and imagine. God has called you here, into this chair, into this room, into this quiet. See yourself slowly building an altar. Find rocks. Pick them up. Carry them to the right place. Carefully stack them.

Then ask God if there is anything you can put on the altar. Is there anything you could hand over that would please God? An opinion? A sin? A habit? Something you want? Your time? Ask the Spirit if there is anything you are using to keep God at a safe distance.

Place your gifts on the altar. Light the match. Light the gifts, and watch them burn, crackle and spark into the night sky.

*Notes, lists, drawings, ideas:*

*Prayer:* Oh, Lord. Here is what I think you'd like me to offer you on my altar. Please accept these gifts, these sacrifices. Please show me if there's anything else I can give you that would help me see you more clearly. In these forty days, please let me know myself better and know you better. Please let me begin to understand how much you love me. Amen.



## A Thank You Note to God

*Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1–5; Philippians 4:4–7*

St. Paul opens letters with thanksgiving and rejoicing. Paul closes letters with thanksgiving and rejoicing. He rejoices in what God has done. He rejoices in salvation. He gives thanks for the work of the Spirit. He gives thanks for the church people and the ministry they are doing for Christ. Paul teaches, he encourages, he diagnoses, he blasts, he charms, he rants, he sings powerfully and poetically about what a Christian life can be. But Paul always thanks people. He always thanks God.

We live way too quickly. We race to meetings, blast horns, prioritize and multitask. Very few of us write thank you notes. Few of us slow down enough to see the blessings of our lives, or God's presence in our lives.

Do you remember how much fun it was when you were a kid and drew a grid on your hand to play tic-tac-toe in class? Remember drawing a face on your fisted hand, where the mouth was the space between your thumb and first knuckle? Try something fun as you go through your day today. Make a little ink mark on your hand today every time you see God's presence, a kindness, a blessing. (Okay, okay, if you're a bank president or work in a suit, you can put the marks under your sleeve or on a 3 x 5 card in your pocket!)

At the end of the day, look at your hand. Remember. Write something about it here. Would it be good to write a thank you note to a person? Do it. Would it be good to write a thank you note to God? Please do.

*Notes, lists, drawings, ideas:*

### *Prayer:*

God be in my head and my understanding,  
God be in my eyes and in my looking,  
God be in my mouth and in my speaking;  
God be in my heart and in my thinking;  
God be at my end and in my departing.

*from the Sarum Missal, 11th century, Salisbury, England*

## Prayer for the Children

*Scripture: Mark 10:13–16*

Jesus loved children. The gospels (the New Testament books that tell the story of the life of Jesus) tell many stories about Jesus with children, healing children, bringing a little girl back to life, and Jesus himself as a child. We see Jesus first as a baby in a manger. Children are precious to God.

One of the great gifts of praying is to pray for others. This is called “intercessory prayer.” Let’s start with the children. Picture a child. Imagine you’re holding him/her between your hands, or on your lap. Ask Christ to surround that child with love, protection and healing. Pray for the child’s safety, for growing maturity. Pray that the child will come to know Jesus, now and every step of the way as s/he grows. Pray that Christ’s love and protection will radiate out from the child to his family, to her school, to his friends and their families.

*Two prayer options:*

**(A) Pray this way for the children you know.** Pray for children in your church’s pictorial directory. Pray for the children you don’t know yet, but that you and your church could reach in the next year. Pray that God will prepare them, their families and your church to care for them. Pray for one child and ask God to use your prayer to bless *all* children.

**(B) Take a field trip.** Go walk around a school in your neighborhood. As you circle the sidewalk around the school, pray for the safety, health and spiritual growth of every child, teacher and staff person in the school. Pray that all the children come to know God in whatever way God wants to reach them. Feel that you are encircling the children, their families, the staff and the school with Christ’s love, presence and protection with every step you take.

*Notes, lists, drawings, ideas:*

**Prayer:** God, please let every child know your love, health and safety. All of us in our church today pray for the children we know...for children with too many possessions and too little attention...for children of single parents...for children who are ill or in danger...for children on the other side of the world—in Africa, in Asia, in the Middle East. May all the children know health, safety, loving training and You. Amen.

## What Difference Does It Make That I'm a Christian?

*Scripture: Luke 9:18–27*

Jesus has been many things to many people for nearly two millennia. This passage shows who some crowd members thought Jesus was—“Elijah,” “a prophet risen from the dead,” “John the Baptist.” When Jesus asked the disciples what they thought, Peter answered with what we’ve come to call “the Great Confession.” Peter said, “you are the Messiah of God.” Then Jesus told the disciples that to be his followers, they would join in his suffering and rejection, take up their crosses daily and follow him.

Most of us are not very clear about who Jesus is. What do you think? Is Jesus a great teacher for you? A great prophet? A vague, historical figure of holiness or comfort? An example of kindness and service? Your savior? What does he save you from? Does he walk beside you?

Do you think of yourself as a Christian? What practical difference does that make in your life? What real difference does it make that you are a Christian?

Close your eyes and ask Christ to show you what being his disciple means in your life. Ask him to show you what you could learn next. Invite the Spirit to show you the next step you could take.

*Notes, lists, drawings, ideas:*

*Prayer:* Holy One—I’m only scratching the surface of what it means to be a Christian. Will you show me what I can do to be a better disciple, a real follower? Please show me the steps and give me the courage to walk them with you. Amen.

## Free-Form Prayer!

It's Saturday! Fun day! Repeat your favorite day of prayer. If you loved praying for the children, do it again. Does God want you to burn something else on your altar? Do that. Or, get modeling clay and make a statue of what makes your heart sing with gratitude. Want to revisit your old prayer routine? Sit in silence with God? Would you like to try something new that occurred to you during the week? Today is your free-form prayer day. Have fun!

*Notes, drawings, thoughts:*

***Prayer:***

Oh yes, fix me, Jesus, fix me.

Fix me so that I can walk on a little while longer.

Fix me so that I can pray on just a little bit harder.

Fix me so that I can sing on just a little bit louder.

Fix me so that I can go on despite the pain, the fear, the doubt and, yes, the anger.

I ask not that you take this cross from me,

only that you give me the strength to continue carrying it onward 'til my dying day.

Oh, fix me, Jesus, fix me.

*"Fix Me, Jesus, Fix Me," African-American Spiritual*

## Intercession in Church

*Scripture: Isaiah 60:1–5a; Acts 9:1–19*

**REVIEW.** Reread the introduction to Part III. How is your prayer going? Do different ideas from the introduction seem important to you after this week of prayer? You might want to make some notes.

**PRAYER IN CHURCH.** Today everyone in your church will have the opportunity to pray together, most of you in the same physical place. There will be a special prayer time before or during worship this morning.

Pray for each other,  
for each of your families,  
for the church,  
for the people you will each have contact with this week.  
Ask to love them with Christ's own heart.

If you cannot be in church for worship, please pray for these things “with” everyone, just not in the same room! Try to pray them with another group of Christians.

*Notes, drawings, thoughts:*

**Prayer:** Holy God, thank you for this beautiful day of rest.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

*Ancient Prayer, Gloria Patri*

## Afterword

I went to my doctor this morning. It was a routine checkup. I need to see him every quarter to make sure that the medications that are supposed to help my blood pressure and cholesterol aren't damaging my liver. Our visits are usually very brief—you know, blood test results, blood pressure, temperature, pulse, followed by, "How are you feeling? Any problems?" to which I answer, "I feel fantastic. No worries at all," and he tells me to come back in three months.

But today was different. My doctor knows that I am a Christian, because it came up in an earlier conversation, maybe a year ago. So today he comes in and says, right off the bat, "I have a question for you. You know, I'm getting older, and that makes any sane person think about their mortality, their spirit... You know what I mean. But any time I begin to feel closer to God, I hear some wacko on TV say something absolutely outrageous in the name of God or religion, and it just smothers my interest. It pushes me in the totally opposite direction."

He said he had a question, but it was left unexpressed. It didn't matter, because with or without a specific question to get us started, we ended up having a good conversation. Three things are still kind of vibrating inside of me from that conversation.

First, people like my doctor—intelligent people, thoughtful, honest people—really want to talk about God and the spiritual life. In spite of the important statistics Martha Grace Reese presents, in spite of the fact that, generation by generation, fewer Americans identify themselves as religious, everywhere I go I find people like my doctor who are thinking about life, its meaning, its destiny, their souls, their purpose, God. And they want to talk. They need to talk. And they need a conversation partner.

Second, there are plenty of religious wackos around who talk about God a lot. Whatever the religion, there are people who abuse it and say "absolutely outrageous" things "in the name of God or religion," as my doctor said.

And third, there are plenty of sincere and generous people of faith around, too, who would be great conversation partners for people like my doctor. But here's the problem: so many of them are so afraid of sounding like the wackos that they keep their faith to themselves.

Their silence, of course, makes the strident and outrageous voices seem all the louder, and so their silence ends up being complicit in smothering the interest of the spiritual seekers.

That's why Martha Grace Reese's book is so important. That's why when you turn the last page, you can't let this be just another book you read. You need to let her message affect you, and your faith community, and, through you, people like my doctor.

Her image of the pitcher being filled to overflowing is worth the price of the book. Her insight that there can be many sources of motivation and inspiration for faith sharing—many ways to fill the pitcher to the brim—rings very true to me. The statistics she gives sober me, and they motivate me too. And her stories of vibrant congregations give me hope.

Especially today, after my conversation with my doctor.

On my way home from the doctor's office, I turned on the radio and caught the news. More violence. More bad news about global warming. More political division and rancorous

name-calling. More stories of people abusing people sexually, kids with guns, crooked politicians, corrupt business executives.

I thought to myself, “What can change this vicious cycle of viciousness?” I switched the radio off as I drove along in silence. I remembered the famous quote from the 19-century British statesman, Edmund Burke: “All that the forces of evil need to win in this world is for enough good people to do nothing,” or something to that effect.

I thought, “Somebody should start an organization that would mobilize people—recruit them, train them, support them—so they could be good people who do something so that the forces of evil don’t win in this world. This organization would need to accept people just as they are, infuse them with hope, give them a vision of a better world, give them a vision for themselves becoming agents of making that better world a reality. It would need to both practice and preach. Why hasn’t somebody started an organization like that?”

And, of course, about a quarter mile down the road I realized that somebody had done just that. In fact, it had cost him everything to do so.

But that organization can become so preoccupied with lesser things—including its own institutional survival—that it forgets why it’s really here: to recruit people to switch sides and opt out of the vicious cycle and join a cycle of healing, to infuse them with vision, to send them out as change agents, to help them experience transformation and sustain them so they can be lifelong catalysts of transformation, to give them good news to share to counter the bad news that is being reported every hour on the hour.

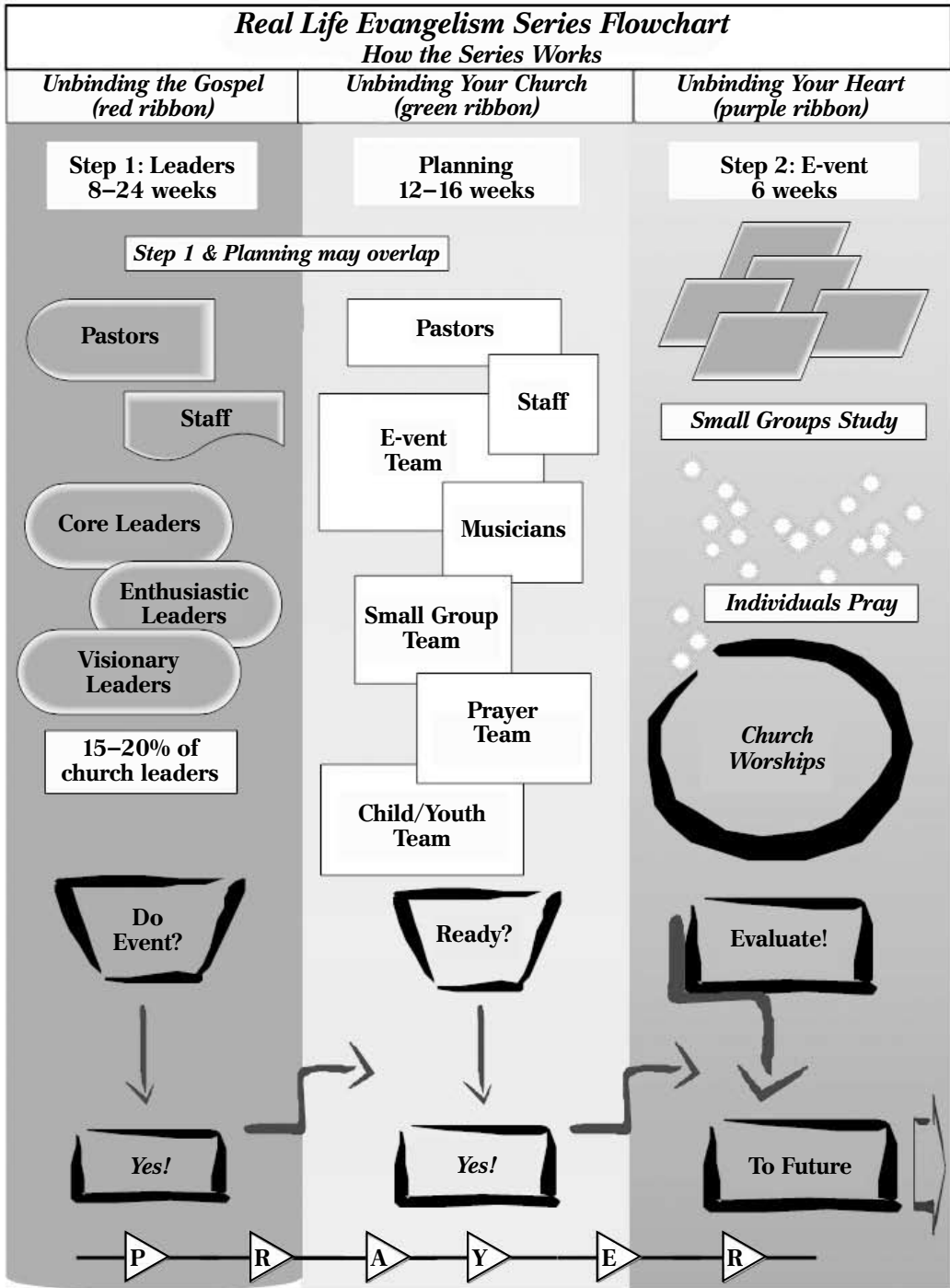
When you close the covers of Martha Grace Reese’s book, I wonder if you could say a prayer asking God to empower you to help your faith community become the kind of organization that Jesus intended it to be, the kind of organization that helps people like my doctor, the kind of organization that brings good news in a bad-news world.

And if your faith community is hopelessly stuck in the mud—let’s face it, some are—then don’t let that get you down. You have a kitchen table, right? Then invite some friends over and get them talking. Ask them about their faith stories. Ask them about their beliefs about God. Ask them about what kind of world they see, and what kind they dream of, and what they’re doing about it, and how God might fit in. Make it clear there aren’t “right answers”—just honest answers—and see what happens. See what God does around your table.

If you don’t have a kitchen table, invite a friend out for coffee, or take a walk. Don’t preach. Just do what Martha Grace talks about in this book. And pray that God will somehow use you to be a blessing to somebody by being an available conversation partner about the things that matter most in life.

You don’t need anyone’s permission to do this. You don’t need a committee or a budget. You don’t need a degree in theology or (God forbid) sales and marketing. You just need a pitcher full of motivation—and Martha Grace has given that to you in this book. Let it overflow. Let it pour.

# Unbinding Your Church



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**MARTHA GRACE REESE**, MDiv, JD, embodies the experience of a researcher, corporate attorney, congregational pastor, middle judicatory minister, church consultant and author. She directed the Lilly Endowment-funded Mainline Evangelism Project, in which this book and the two other volumes of the *Real Life Evangelism Series* are grounded. The study, which included over 1200 interviews, focused on highly effective examples of evangelism in mainline churches across the theological spectrum. Reese serves as President of GraceNet, Inc., specializing in church research, consulting and coaching ([www.GraceNet.info](http://www.GraceNet.info)).