



Pictured Left to Right: Stephanie Kilgore, Henry Crittenden, Beth Dowdy, Trey Dowdy, Lisa Wilkins and daughter Caroline, Clint Wilkins, Alex Yarto, Virginia Zimmerly, Steve Zimmerly, Margaret Mukundi, Sarah Griffin, Julie Roberts with daughter Ryann and son Jackson.

# BEYOND THESE FOUR WALLS

Taking Christ into the Community, a Lent in the Living Room Experience.

by Lisa Wilkins

**AS I WALKED INTO ELLIOTT HALL** that January Sunday morning, I thought halfheartedly, “OK, I’ll listen to this speaker with an open mind, open heart.” But to be honest, the premise of Martha Grace Reese’s book *Unbinding Your Heart* that she would discuss that morning did not seem relevant to me. It didn’t seem like something I or we as a church needed to hear. Nevertheless, Elliott Hall was completely filled. All adult Sunday School classes had been cancelled that morning to encourage everyone to listen to Reese. The reason I was half-hearted and skeptical was simple. I didn’t think my heart needed unbinding in the first place. I’m a reasonably dedicated Christian who makes a good effort to do the right thing. I try to have an open heart and look for opportunities to serve where possible. So, was my heart bound? Did I really need to hear her speak that day? There is always room for improvement, but I skeptically sat down in the back of Elliott Hall with my husband, Clint, and listened closely to see if Reese

could make a case for her cause to apply to my life. Her stories began unfolding as she explained several real-life examples from her Mainline Evangelism Project in which her team closely studied what was working well in more than 1,200 mainline denominational churches today. Good, that certainly piqued my interest; I am intrigued about our changing culture and what that means for our churches. It took a while, but eventually I was moved by her stories about several dying, aging mainline churches – many like we see all around us – that were onto something. The Holy Spirit was stirring in their congregations. They were finding ways to turn their congregations around. And it wasn’t because of a consultant or some impressive minister. Of course, those can be very helpful. But no, it was because the church members were beginning to reach out to their community around them in a very deliberate way. They were also intentionally

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devoted to prayer in a new way. They were praying very specifically and regularly for God to show them how to grow and thrive. These were true stories, not wishful thinking.

What was most compelling was her conviction that we need to pray more and to listen for the Holy Spirit's gentle nudges more. And we must change our approach, so we more intentionally reach out to people in our community. Her assertions about the true power of prayer, backed up with real-life examples of answered prayer and wondrous – but not perfect – church transformation seemed believable and possible.

Perhaps her recommendations resonated with me, because they got us back to the basics of our faith.

So, she made her case (she was originally trained as a lawyer, after all), thus marking the kick-off to what HPPC calls “Lent in the Living Room.” Following her talk, the Rev. Howard Griffin explained that Lent in the Living Room would be an opportunity to meet once a week for six weeks with other HPPC members in our respective neighborhoods. The church encouraged all members

to focus on praying and studying together in neighborhood community groups knowing that “*Where two or three come together in My name, there am I with them*” (Matthew 18:20).

The main purpose of Lent in the Living Room is to take the church to the neighborhood. And while HPPC has a long legacy of providing crucial ministries within the church walls, Griffin said, “The ‘if you build it, they will come’ approach

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can't be our only mind set. We also have to take the church to the people; we must reach out to people around us.” He explained that the rules have changed. Not everyone grows up in church anymore, so there's a mission field all around us.

Griffin and Reese agree that in today's post-modern world, truth is based on one's perspective, and perspective is based on one's experience. Today people aren't as concerned about what happens once they die – heaven vs. hell.

Rather they are most concerned with the question: Does Jesus make a difference in my life today?

Griffin emphasized, “This is why as Christians we must learn how to articulate our experiences in the faith. We need to be comfortable explaining how God works in our lives.”

Clint and I signed up that morning. This was exactly what we had been looking for – a chance to create deeper connections at HPPC. What better way to do that than to meet in such a personal way – in someone's living room. And studying a book about prayer and faith sharing seemed worthwhile.

Turns out, Clint and I were asked to serve as facilitators for Lent in the Living Room, which meant we'd be trained to help lead and facilitate the meetings and discussions each week. We were surprised to be chosen but were reassured that the decision to get us involved was prayerfully considered. We were hesitant to agree, because we have two young children – James who is 3 years old and Caroline who was 13 months old at the time. The most likely time for weekly meetings would be in the evening right around the children's bedtimes. However, we knew that if

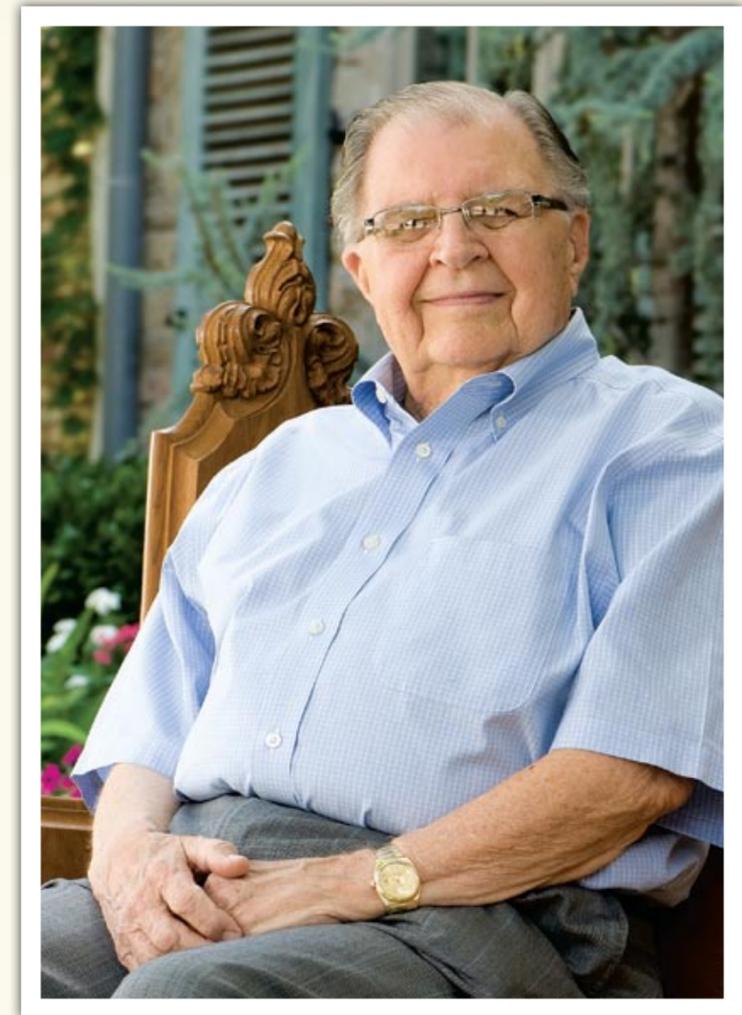
we said “yes” to this opportunity to serve, God would help it all work out somehow. We thought surely there would be others with children in our neighborhood in the same situation, and we were right. That meant we offered baby sitters in a special area of our home each week, and we encouraged families to bring their children comfortable in their pajamas.

Because we don't live in the Park Cities, we were surprised at how many other HPPC members live near us. We were also surprised at the number of unfamiliar faces, reinforcing the fact that with the size of our congregation and the variety of services, it's easy to miss each other on Sunday mornings.

The Rev. Nelson Bell underscores the importance of small group connections: “Opportunities like Lent in the Living Room help transform one's church experience, because it provides a better and healthier vision of what it really means to be a member of the body of Christ. Getting plugged into a small group – especially in one's neighborhood – makes the body of Christ more tangible and real.”

### Taking the Church to the Neighborhood: Our Experiences

How thankful am I that we said “yes” to the call to serve. My favorite



As time went on people participated more and more in praying together. And that was God's work!

-Henry Crittenden

experience with HPPC so far has been through Lent in the Living Room. I think God knew that we needed such a personalized experience that built a more meaningful community for our family.

Only living in Dallas for a year, Clint and I are still trying to find our way here and continually look for God's guidance as we get settled. With no immediate family close by, we have been trying very deliberately to make our new city and new church feel more like home. We believe that God led us to HPPC for specific reasons. We may

not know what all the reasons are, but we know that God led us to this church. Nevertheless, it's taken us longer than expected for us to feel completely at home here.

In a church the size of HPPC, most of one's friends and acquaintances are in his or her same age and life-stage group. Perhaps it's only natural considering the size. However, Clint and I both grew up in relatively smaller churches and have missed the intergenerational relationships and bonds that have provided a firm foundation for us throughout our lives. We want to provide our children with the priceless experience of knowing and loving people of all different ages and stages at church. To us,

it's the truest kind of community.

So Clint and I were very glad that age ranges varied greatly within our Lent in the Living Room group. We thoroughly enjoyed meeting all the new HPPC friends in our area and spending more time with HPPC friends we already knew. Four to eight children attended each week (in their pajamas), so we bonded as we watched them play together before and after every meeting. Listening to the kids squealing with glee as they chased each other around in another room (with a baby sitter, of course) while we adults were trying to close

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Francis Hawkins (affectionately known as Granny Franny) was one of the 87 facilitators trained for Lent in the Living Room.

in prayer was certainly humorous and ensured that we ended on time. We had one elder and two deacons in our parish group, too, which was a welcomed introduction for many.

“Lent in the Living Room re-ignited the established and engaged the new. It helped connect people in new ways,” said the Rev. Nelson Bell.

“I realized that not everyone lives within a mile of HPPC,” Julie Roberts shared about her experience in our group. “There are so many members that are our neighbors. It made the church not feel quite so big to me.”

Another member of our group was Lee Sun Lee. She shared: “I was very pleased to see the consistency and commitment our group showed. There was a sense of comfort among us. The group was diverse: families with young children, single, empty nesters, etc. And with the wide intergenerational range, we were able to experience our spiritual life together. My favorite aspect was people truly caring about me. At the time, I was nine-months pregnant and anxiously awaiting the arrival of my baby, and people in this group genuinely cared for my needs.”

Clint and I were particularly glad to gain a new friendship with our co-facilitator Henry Crittenden, who is an HPPC elder and has been a member for more than 50 years. At age 83, Henry’s energy, enthusiasm, friendliness, and life experience served as an inspirational foundation for our group. He described what our neighborhood was like when he first moved here in the early 1960s as it was being built, which we would have never known otherwise.

Henry’s strong faith and positive attitude were obvious and uplifting. “The Lord made our Lent in the Living Room meetings so successful,” Henry reminded me afterwards. “I was surprised that people were so willing to share and participate in prayer together. As time went on people participated more and more in praying together. And that was God’s work!”

Knowing a greater cross-section of ages within a congregation helps teach our children about the rhythms and seasons of life. It’s a richer Christian experience, and it’s available to us at HPPC as long we make an effort.

In recounting his experience, my husband Clint said: “Besides the fellowship with my neighbors, my most poignant memories are



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—Shae Hensley

### Life Transformation Groups (LTG)

A Life Transformation Group (LTG) is a group of two to four people of the same gender who meet weekly to discuss their daily Bible reading, answer character building questions, and pray for their friends and family to be drawn closer to Christ as their Savior.

In your personal journey to make disciples of Jesus Christ, your participation in a LTG will not only provide transformation in yourself, but in your LTG friends and the people for whom your LTG prays. You will become more like Christ as you participate in an environment and process in which the Holy Spirit can do transformational work in your life.

*“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

Romans 12:2

two. The first is of a night when we broke into small groups to share prayer concerns. The people in my small group were very specific, heartfelt, and vulnerable as they shared their concerns. I could feel the presence of the Holy Spirit. The second is of the discussion our group had one night about evangelism that turned into a brainstorming session about how to make the church feel more warm and welcoming to visitors. This is an area where many folks felt passionate and had strong ideas and opinions. If the energy in the room was any indication, there is an abundance of fuel for moving evangelism forward in our church.”

Margaret Mukunki, who participated in another group, testified: “In the course of the six weeks of Lent in the Living Room, God moved in our midst as people opened up and spoke candidly of their experiences in faith, in community, in their families and in the church. We listened to God and to each other. We made friends with people who go to different

services, and we continue to interact with one another and to remember each other in prayer on a daily basis.”

“Lent in the Living Room was a very positive experience for my whole family. We loved the fellowship with families in our neighborhood.

My kids looked forward to it every Tuesday,” said Mary Beth Weatherford. She and her husband were members of our group. She added: “One night we were randomly divided up into small groups to share prayer concerns and to pray together. My husband went to one group, and I went to another. I happened to be placed in a group with two men of different ages. I was surprised to learn how rarely most men ask others to pray for them. I guess it never occurred to me that men were not like women in that I e-mail my friends on a daily basis to ask for prayers for the smallest concerns! It seems like there is such a need –

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particularly for men – to open up in a confidential Christian environment, to share needs and concerns and to be held accountable. I think Lent in the Living Room could be the start of that for many members – both men and women alike – in the future!”

Clearly for us and many others, this neighborhood-driven fellowship was a significant blessing.

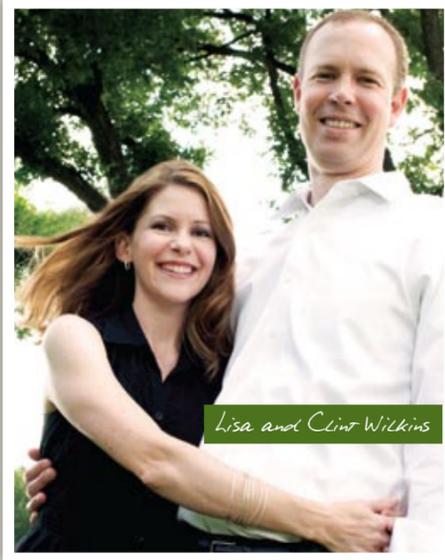
### A New Perspective: Opening Hearts and Minds

I find that many of us already know what we’re supposed to do as Christians. We know we’re supposed to build community and reach out to others to bless the world by showing God’s love and mercy. The real challenge lies in following through. And as human beings, we so quickly forget or lose sight of our ideal, our goal, and our purpose. As Christians, we desperately need

to help each other along. I depend on Christian brothers and sisters to help remind me, to encourage me, to inspire me and to pray for me to keep pressing on as we try to follow Christ.

Christian fellowship isn’t a surface nice-to-have option. It’s an essential part of our Christian journey. I can’t tell you how many times God has worked through other people in my life to move me in a certain direction, to guide me, to encourage me when I needed it most or to help me accomplish something I thought was impossible. I’m reminded of Proverbs 27:17: “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” You name the challenge or fear, God regularly works in my life through other people. So this particular opportunity for fellowship was a gift from the Lord. Bringing us all together was a great beginning that I believe God will use as a platform for many things to come.

And while I felt God work in tremendous ways through the fellowship enjoyed during Lent in the Living Room, I believe that the Holy Spirit stirred in some other powerful ways. I think God used the book *Unbinding Your Heart* to amplify an extremely important conversation in our church. It helped us to reconsider what evangelism means. It doesn’t have



Lisa and Clint Wilkins

to be a topic or word from which we run. And even if we’re still uncomfortable with it, we certainly can’t discount its importance and value. So let’s continue the dialogue about what it means to reach out to one another and to others who don’t know

the love of Christ. It was very powerful to hear us admit to each other how uncomfortable we feel about the concept of evangelism. The process of reaching out beyond ourselves is complicated, confusing, risky, and uncomfortable. So even if some perceptions haven’t completely changed yet, God is working in our hearts in new ways. I am now much more aware of how the Holy Spirit can use my interactions to affect someone else’s life. And I’m not alone.

“I am seeing evangelistic opportunities more often and more clearly now and am less hesitant to act upon them,” said Shae Hensley after her Lent in the Living Room experience. She was a facilitator for another parish group. “As for my perspective on prayer, I am continuing to learn the importance of the two-way aspect of prayer. Sometimes God speaks quietly, and I am trying more and more to listen to those whispers.”

Margaret Mukundi said, “It became apparent to each one of us that the evangelist is you and I, that God has revealed himself to us and has chosen us to spread the message of His amazing, saving grace as we tell our own ‘before and after’ stories. We found that God can use us anytime and anywhere.”

Laura Osler, a member of our group, said, “Regarding evangelism, my take away is that it isn’t a rare talent that only a few select people have. Rather, it can be done by all of us in small everyday ways. And my eyes and heart have been opened to look for those seemingly small but often meaningful opportunities to spread the good news.”

The study also reminded me how critical regular prayer is if we want to continually experience God’s work in our lives and church. Most have heard this from an early age, but how easily we let prayer slip from our busy to-do lists.

The business of changing hearts and minds is ultimately God’s work and up to His timing. God’s hand was clearly orchestrating these connections, conversations and this fellowship during Lent in the Living Room.

My family was certainly blessed by the fellowship and study. Even writing this article was a blessing, because it gave me an opportunity to learn how to tell my own story of God working in my family’s life. It’s not always easy to explain how God works, and we often wonder how God meets us day to day. But as long as we seek Him daily in prayer and simply try to tell our stories when opportunities arise, we can trust that God will use us in mighty ways. ■



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- Rev. Howard Griffin,  
pastor of outreach

“Lent in the Living Room reignited the established and engaged the new. It helped connect people in new ways.”

- Rev. L. Nelson Bell II,  
pastor of adults and personal  
discipleship



“There was a sense of comfort among us... we were able to experience our spiritual life together.” -Lee Sun Lee