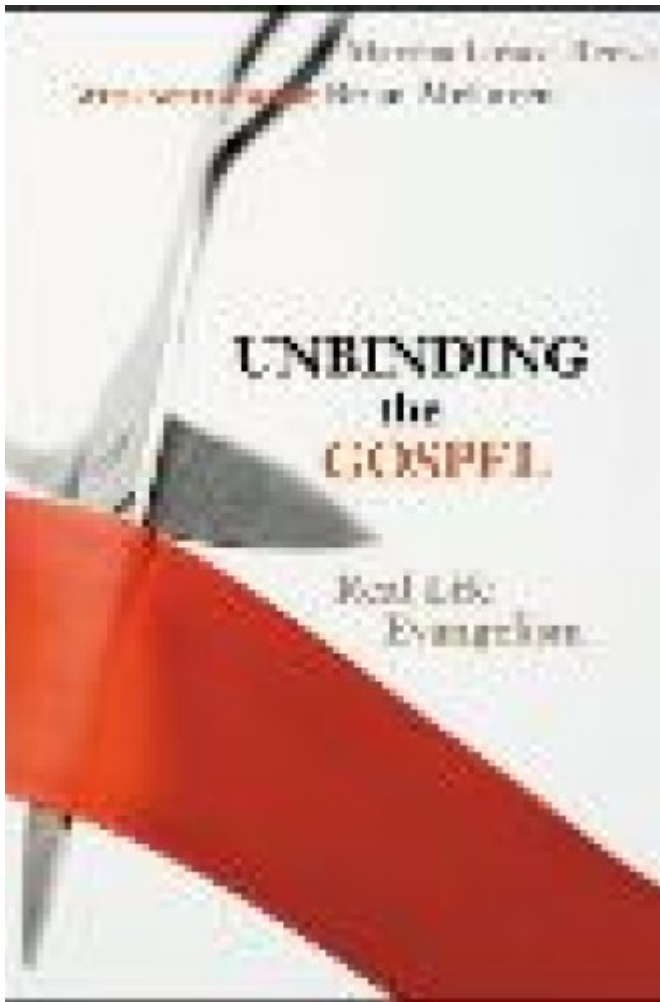


Go and tell

By [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [June 26, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism

Martha Grace Reese

Chalice

About 86 years ago the mainline churches did something. Maybe we washed our lucky game underwear. Maybe we traded Babe Ruth. Lots of people have lots of

ideas. But we have not been winning any evangelism series for a looong stretch of time.” So begins Martha Grace Reese’s whimsical yet ultimately serious effort to get us mainliners to act like the Boston Red Sox and finally break our curse.

In an ecclesiastical world in which it is assumed that mainliners do not evangelize well and never will, Reese brought to her project the eschatological hope of a pre-2004 Red Sox fan. One thousand interviews and 50 visits to growing churches later, she is now a post-2004 fan—one who hopes, but who also has recent positive data.

Reese’s tone is what sets her book apart from others. It comes out of a significant Lilly Endowment-funded four-year study of evangelism in seven mainline denominations, but rather than tracking down trends and statistics, Reese searched out individual examples of excellence to see what was going right. She interviewed pastors, which is to be expected, but she also paid close attention to laypeople, whose ideas run throughout the book, expressed in their own words. This approach fits with Reese’s thesis: that it is the laypeople who welcome one another into churches and, therefore, that they are the ones who need to speak to one another about evangelism. The church does not need another “How I grew my shiny massive church with Jesus’ help” vanity project. It is refreshing to read a book about church growth that does not focus on one charismatic pastor or one particular method.

Reese understands and embraces the peculiarity of mainline life and allows room for many ideas about evangelism to come through. She resists the temptation to present a program and instead allows growing churches to tell their own stories. Sometimes the theological language is so varied one wonders how these people hang together.

Most mainliners will recognize the person who says, “In the last two years since I began attending [my church] I realize I probably *have* known intelligent, liberal Christians, but I didn’t know they were Christians. This congregation is amazing. . . . Different beliefs are represented in this church, but they have ability to discuss issues openly. I find no dogmatic, simplistic, theological strictures. I am beginning to develop an interest in the spiritual disciplines, which is completely new for me.”

But we also know the church member who says, “I was an alcoholic and a drug addict. I went to order a pizza one night and misdialed the number. The person on the other end was a pastor from [the church I ended up joining]. I received Christ the next day. Since then I have known the joy and love of Christ. Later I went on a short

missionary trip to Cuba that made me realize how much God wants us to share his message.”

Both of these people are part of the mainline story. Within our congregations, some people evangelize in order to offer salvation in Jesus Christ, while others want to spread the good news of a terrific junior high youth group. We do not all bring the same theological assumptions to the task, and Reese tells us that we need to stop using that as an excuse to do nothing. We should evangelize anyway, and whatever we do believe, we should be prepared to share it with others.

The chapter that may ruffle experienced church leaders’ feathers the most is the one titled “What New Members Want—Transformed Lives.” In it Reese challenges many of the practices that comfortable churches engage in—practices that work for a club but not for a growing community of discipleship. Apparently new members are looking for a real relationship with God, and they expect longtime members to have one too. Who knew?

Yet the following chapter, “How’s Your Church Doing?” is full of practical exercises and helpful questions that any church can use. Each chapter has discussion questions at the end, making it ready for use by clergy groups, ministry teams and church boards.

One common thread in these mainline evangelism stories is that church members and pastors have learned to testify to their faith. Even if their faith is in a universal salvation, they have learned to tell the story of how they have experienced God’s grace in their community of faith and to share that story with enthusiasm. They have broken through the mainline fear of offending people and decided to talk about their church.

It has long struck me that the same mainline church members who pass resolutions on gay marriage and propose solutions to conflict in the Middle East suddenly shrink in silence on the subject of their faith, and they do this—here’s the irony—so they won’t offend anyone. For too long, our noble impulses toward tolerance and inclusivity have turned us into spiritual illiterates who, being out of practice, have forgotten how to speak the words of our faith.

We ask our church members to vote on the most complicated social issues, but we let them off the hook when it comes to inviting a neighbor to church. We relegate that duty to the pastor, the professional Christian who speaks about the faith on

everyone's behalf and hopefully has a whole lot of neighbors.

Whatever the reasons for our decline—and there are many theories out there—one thing is clear: 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 not just in the public square, but in the school playground, at the bus stop and during the church coffee hour.

The title of Reese's book suggests that it is the gospel that will be unbound. I suggest that it is tight-lipped mainliners who will most benefit from a little unbinding. As we loosen up, we may find that God is not done with us yet.