

The Chimes

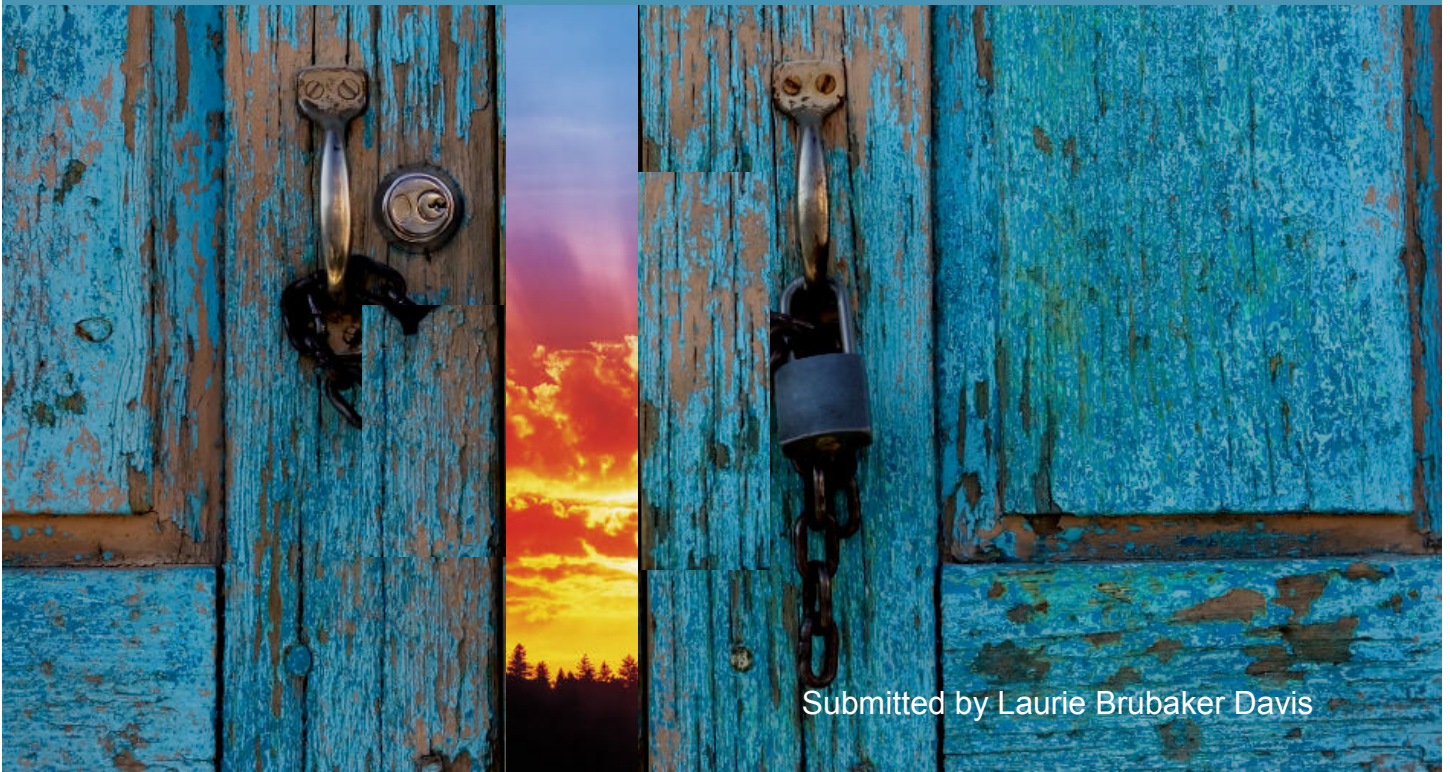
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Unbinding Your Heart Exceeds Expectations



Submitted by Laurie Brubaker Davis

“For everything there is a season” (Ecclesiastes 3:1) – even for something as “un-Westminster” as attempting to involve 80% of our worshipping congregation in a six-week spiritual growth opportunity centered on praying aloud together and faith sharing (evangelism). As Stan Herr said, “I knew that our small group was not sold on the idea of spending six weeks dedicated to evangelism, but after I volunteered to lead the sessions, everyone signed up, bought their books and promised they would give it a chance.” Susie Weaver was most surprised by the people who signed up for her small group. She describes them as “members of the congregation who are already very involved in the life of the church and fairly long-time members. These folks were still willing to learn and experience new ways of doing something as intimidating as ‘evangelism’ especially since they thought the whole church (as well as themselves) would benefit from this process.”

And they were right. The response was remarkable, not only in numbers but also in spiritual

growth. First the numbers: we fielded 29 small groups (19 new groups and 10 pre-existing small groups) totaling 296 participants. We also directly involved 90 children and youth for a total involvement of just less than 400 Westminsterites. Eighteen of the groups met on Sundays at Westminster, the rest met throughout the week at a variety of sites: in member homes from Vandalia to Centerville; at a coffee shop in Bellbrook; Bethany Lutheran Retirement Community; and online, meeting “virtually” via computer. The children followed a parallel curriculum, “Hi God: Unbinding Your Heart through Prayer,” in their CrossRoads Sunday school classes. Some of the youth opted to participate in a small group using the same book as the adults. The Sunday night youth program was also coordinated with the *Unbinding* themes. From young to old and with long-time members as well as first-time visitors jumping on board, we surprisingly not only met but exceeded our 80% goal.

Evidence of spiritual growth is more difficult to measure, yet this small sampling of participants’

reflections indicates real progress. Stan's group "moved from being very uncomfortable about praying with each other to really finding meaning with our prayer exercises."

Sally Dyer wrote, "My Presby Group has been together for about 20 years. In the past couple of years, the enthusiasm for being together has dwindled. Those of us who met together for these six weeks discovered the joy of being together again. It was wonderful to reconnect on a spiritual level with the others, to share thoughts about God, evangelism, our faith journeys, and to pray for each other—even out loud—a new experience for most of us. We are anxious to keep meeting in the future to continue growing our faith together."

"*Unbinding Your Heart* was a healing time for me," reflected Brent Manley. "After some 'budget wars' in the past couple of years, it was refresh-

Sunday-morning activity to a daily (often 3 or 4 times a day) activity. [God] has shown me that he is there to lean on when I need support and to listen when I need to talk." Sally Dyer realized, "This study/experience came at just the right time in my life. It has brought me peace and healing. There were many instances when the daily scripture really spoke to me. The ritual of daily study and prayer has enriched my life in so many ways, and I look forward to continuing the practice." Brent Manley observed, "Throughout these six weeks, I was reminded that my own personal relationship with God is the most crucial element of a growing church."

What about the faith-sharing (evangelism) part? "It really pushes you to do that evangelism thing," writes Rebeca Goetz, a member of the teen small group led by Nancy Hodgkins. Rebeca continued, "It's inspiring. If you tell your friends, you

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ing to sit with other members, pray together, and discuss scripture. It has led me to some of the most 'spiritual' conversations I have had with other members in my 20 year history at Westminster." As one member in Brent's group stated, "More groups like this would go a long way in diminishing the label of the 'frozen chosen.'"

Participants of all ages found new avenues for connecting to God from day to day. One small child left a note in the pew, asking God to give her grandfather (who passed away last year) the picture she drew. Teen Bridget Gladden, our recently ordained Deacon, said, "The prayer practices encourage us to take time out of our busy lives. They direct us onto a path that allows time to devote ourselves to God." Debbie Lloyd was surprised by how enriching the *Unbinding* experience has been for her in ways "I never would have imagined possible. Prayer has gone from a

can really change someone's life." Susie Weaver learned something she hopes she won't forget: "I

want to remember that people are just waiting to be asked to come to church...it isn't so 'outside the box' to simply ask. Because evangelism has developed a bad rap, we have negated our responsibility to welcome people to our church and then to engage them in fellowship here. I think all of us need to extend ourselves to each other in more caring and supportive ways."

What next? Stay tuned. With so many Westminster hearts beginning to unbind, and a flurry of new energy and new ideas, there's no limit to what the Spirit can do.

