

# MOVE

## FOR CHURCH PLANTERS

What Willow Creek and 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth



**FEATURING**  
**Bill Hybels'**  
Perspective on How  
He Would Plant a  
Church Today.

**GREG L. HAWKINS & CALLY PARKINSON**

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**MOVE for Church Planters**

**What Willow Creek and 1,000 Churches  
Reveal About Spiritual Growth**

**Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson**



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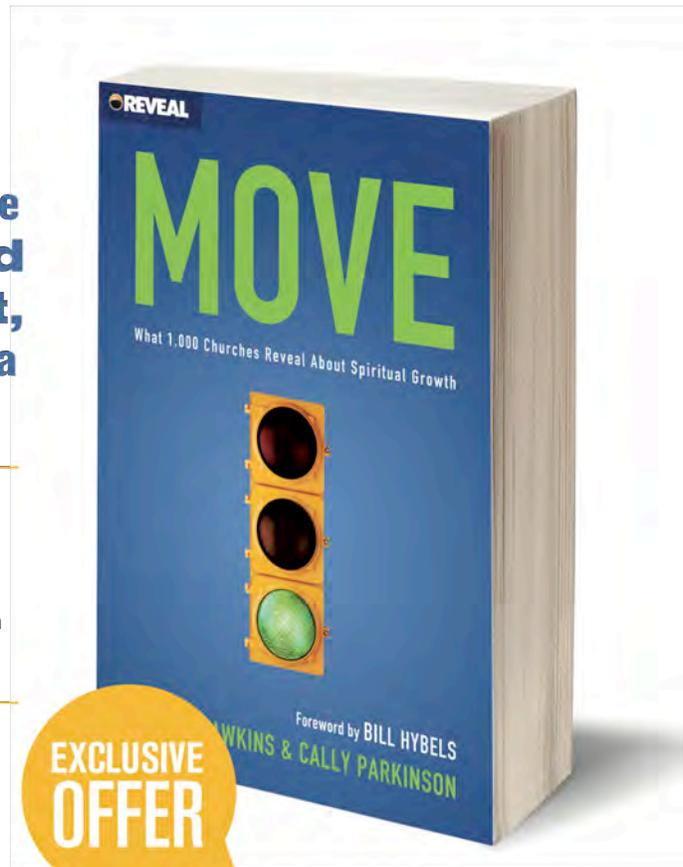
# MOVE

## What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth

**It's a question every Christian leader wrestles with: Is our church really helping people to become devoted followers of Christ, or are we just giving them a nice place to go to church?**

With years of research through the REVEAL Survey, MOVE presents the remarkable findings from over 1,000 churches of this research, including four best practice strategies common to highly effective churches.

**What emerges is a new lens for church leaders who want to build faith communities that are focused on growing disciples.**



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Willow Creek Association

# INTRODUCTION

## What to Expect

Welcome to *MOVE for Church Planters*! Greg Hawkins and I are thrilled to bring you this e-book, packed with insights based on everything we've learned since Willow Creek launched REVEAL in 2008. The voices of hundreds of church leaders and thousands of congregants will speak to you from these pages, sharing facts about how spiritual growth works and how churches can be more effective at making that happen. Willow Creek's senior pastor, Bill Hybels, will add his voice to the mix in Chapter 3, telling us how he would start a church today, given everything he's learned from nearly 40 years of ministry—and from REVEAL.

But be forewarned. By its nature, this e-book is a radically condensed version of the more substantive work in *MOVE: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*. We've tried to capture what's most relevant for church planters—but large chunks of information have necessarily been omitted. For example, although it is important information, we had no space to include material covering the barriers to spiritual growth.

That's the bad news. The good news is that we've noted such omissions in this e-book, to let you know where you can find the missing information in *MOVE*. And anticipating that you will want to read the full story, the Willow Creek Association is offering *MOVE* to you at a special discount (see *MOVE AD* on page 8).

First, though, welcome to the many insights you'll gain that will help you create a church fully focused on growing disciples of Christ. We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to your progress.

Cally Parkinson

## CHAPTER 1

### The Truth about Spiritual Growth

I (Greg) should have been ecstatic.

Our numbers over the past five years weren't just good, they were great. Twenty-six percent increase in church attendance. I know—bigger doesn't always mean better, but our people were not just showing up on weekends. Participation in small groups had increased by 200 percent. And more people than ever were spreading Christ's love in local compassion initiatives throughout the greater-Chicago area.

But it wasn't just the numbers. Behind every number is a person, and I saw so much evidence of life change in our congregation. Marriages put back together. Students taking a stand for God. The look on a guy's face when he finally gets what grace is all about.

This is why I do what I do. This is what keeps me going.

And yet.

One Sunday in 2003 I was sitting in my usual spot in our auditorium. As the congregation streamed in, my heart was full of gratitude at the sight of so many people eager to worship God and learn from his Word. Isn't this what it's all about? Getting more people involved in the life of the church? The weekend services are a visual reminder of all that has gone on during the week—small groups, special classes, serving opportunities, outreach experiences and other events designed to help people grow. It's hard not to get excited about ministry when you're surrounded by people hungry to know God.

That's when it hit me—a haunting question so jarring I couldn't shake it off: are all the things we do here at Willow—things that these people so generously support—really helping them develop and deepen their relationship with Jesus? Or are we just giving them a nice place to go to church? Does all the work, all the financial investment, all the programming and all the planning we pour into “church” really make a significant difference in people's lives?

If you know anything about Willow Creek, you know that we love guiding people on a journey from standing on the sidelines to becoming fully devoted followers of Christ. That's our



That's what we believed. Actually, our bias was so strong we would have said we *knew* this was true.

We never questioned the validity of this approach, so what we really wanted to know when we conducted our initial survey was which activities produced the most spiritual growth. In other words, which activities were most effective in helping people grow in their love of God and love of others? We considered this the mother lode of church-leader questions. If we could figure that out, we could make better decisions. Spend money more judiciously. Cut those programs that don't help people grow and beef up the ones that do. We felt that we were doing a pretty good job of moving people toward spiritual maturity, and that the results of our survey would help us do even better.

Initially, we were very encouraged by the congregation's response to the survey—a 40-percent return rate on the 15,000 surveys distributed. But despite questions designed to measure everything from church participation to spiritual maturity, and despite the application of state-of-the-art research techniques, the answers we were looking for just weren't showing up.

Weeks went by, but the data still didn't make sense to us. In fact, the data itself was perfectly fine. We were just blinded by our bias that increased participation leads to spiritual growth. Once we got over ourselves and let the data do the talking, we learned three shocking facts about our congregation: 1. Increased participation in church activities, by itself, *barely moved* our people toward greater love of God and others; 2. We had a lot of dissatisfied people; 3. We had a lot of people so dissatisfied that they were ready to leave.

All the great things we were doing, and our people had *barely moved*! The haunting feeling that had come over me that Sunday was now confirmed by cold, hard facts.

That's the bad news, and I have to admit it was hard to take. But the good news that came from this survey has not only transformed how we do church at Willow, it has also dramatically revitalized my own commitment to ministry. Here's what happened.

What began as a survey to inform the direction of a single church slowly evolved into the REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey—a tool that has been used by more than 1,000 diverse congregations. Based on the responses of over 250,000 people who attend those churches, we not only discovered a new lens through which to view spiritual growth, but also a new way of

understanding what it takes to lead a spiritually vibrant church. That's what *MOVE for Church Planters* is all about: an opportunity to face the facts about what's really going on in churches today and, based on what we've learned, to share practical insights into how to build a church from scratch that has the best possible chance to grow people into followers of Christ.

One important caveat: surveys and data are never the deciding factor in determining spiritual growth. In his sovereignty and providence, God often moves mysteriously in the hearts of people—which is why we continually sought his wisdom and guidance throughout the REVEAL experience.

## **FIVE DISCOVERIES FOR CHURCH PLANTERS**

At the foundation of this new way of understanding how people grow spiritually are five significant, ministry-changing discoveries that are particularly relevant to church planters:

1. **It is possible to measure spiritual growth.** Measuring spiritual growth is not something the REVEAL team set out to do. But in analyzing the results of our first survey in 2004, a framework emerged—based on how people describe their relationship with Jesus Christ—that predicts spiritual growth (defined as an increasing love of God and of others—Matthew 22:37-40).
2. **Church activities do not predict or drive long-term spiritual growth.** More precisely, increasing church attendance and participation in organized ministry activities do not predict or drive spiritual growth for people in the more advanced stages of spiritual development. Church activities have the *greatest* influence in the *early* stages of spiritual growth, but things like personal spiritual practices, including prayer and Bible reading, have far more influence later in the spiritual journey.
3. **Nothing has greater impact on spiritual growth than reflection on Scripture.** If churches could do only one thing to help people at all levels of spiritual maturity grow in their relationship with Christ, their choice is clear. They would inspire, encourage and equip their people to read the Bible—specifically, to reflect on Scripture for meaning in their lives. The survey numbers say most churches are missing the mark—because only one of five congregants reflects on Scripture every day.

4. **There is no “killer app” for spiritual growth.** While we did identify a number of churches that are spiritual powerhouses, we found no single “save the day” program that guarantees discipleship success. However, in the top REVEAL churches, we did find four best practices, which we’ll discuss in Chapter 2.
5. **Leadership matters.** The leaders of the more highly successful REVEAL churches have diverse personalities and styles—from quiet and reserved to self-assured and commanding. But they share one key attribute, which is an unrelenting, uncompromising focus and drive to help grow people into disciples of Christ. This matters—big time—because the strategies and programs they pursue are not radically different from those found in most churches. It’s their hearts—consumed by Christ—that make the difference.

(Learn about three additional discoveries in MOVE, pp. 19-20.)

These five discoveries pay off the title of this chapter—the truth about spiritual growth—because they set the stage for the REVEAL spiritual-growth framework. This framework includes a new way to think about doing church and a new set of tools to help church leaders answer the question, “What should we be doing to help our people grow spiritually?”

REVEAL has helped Willow Creek answer that question, and we believe it will help your church as well. Just to be clear, this book is not just one church’s recommendations or opinions, but a compilation of relevant, fact-based information. As my co-author, Cally Parkinson, likes to tell people who question one finding or another from the research, “Listen, we did not make any of this stuff up!”

Such assurance is occasionally necessary, because many REVEAL discoveries take some getting used to. They may not align with what we thought we knew. In short, the new lens we have talked about requires that we also use new eyes. Or at least old eyes, opened slightly wider.

## **THE SPIRITUAL CONTINUUM**

We’ll unpack the first discovery—that it is possible to measure spiritual growth—by introducing you to the REVEAL spiritual continuum, which includes four segments of church attenders (Chart 1-2):

**Exploring Christ:** Congregants in this segment have a basic belief in God, but they are unsure about Christ and his role in their lives.

**Growing in Christ:** Congregants in this segment have a personal relationship with Christ. They've made a commitment to trust him with their souls' salvation and for eternity, but they are just beginning to learn what that means and what it takes to develop this relationship.

**Close to Christ:** Congregants in this segment depend on Christ every day. They see Jesus as someone who assists them in life. On a daily basis, they turn to him for help and guidance for the issues they face.

**Christ-Centered:** Congregants in this segment identify their relationship with Christ as the most important relationship in their lives. They see their lives as fully surrendered to Jesus and his agenda, subordinating everything to his will and his desires.



CHART 1-2

In the following pages, you will get to know the people in each one of these segments, and it's important that you do. Because we can assure you that every congregation includes people in all four segments—even in a young church plant!

### **Exploring Christ: On the Spiritual Fringe**

Those who are Exploring Christ are on the perimeter of faith, evaluating Christianity's core beliefs and checking out the community of people who embrace those beliefs—but they themselves remain unwilling or unready to fully join in. In general, those within this segment are searching for a reason to believe fully in God's existence and Christ's redemptive promise. But their doubts block their progress and prevent them from making meaningful spiritual connections—either with God or with his followers.

Unlike the other segments within a typical congregation, the Exploring Christ segment is composed of two distinct groups of people—those who are *active* explorers and those who are *passive* attenders. The first group includes individuals who are genuinely seeking to resolve their doubts about the reality and character of Jesus. But there is also a second group in this segment who are not really “seeking” at all. These are churchgoers who seem content with a shallow spiritual life marked by minimal faith-based beliefs, relationships and activities. They may have a nominal faith, but they fail to show any signs of active growth. The combination of these two kinds of “explorers” makes the Exploring Christ segment a mixed bag of non-believers.

(A key characteristic of those in this segment is that the longer they attend church, the less likely they are to become Christ followers. You will find two additional key characteristics in MOVE, pp. 35-39.)

Just let this first key characteristic sink in for a moment: the *longer* people who are Exploring Christ attend a church, the *less* likely they are to follow Christ. Logically, we would assume that the longer someone is exposed to the church, the more likely he or she will be to eventually cross that line of faith. But our research suggests that people in this segment who have attended church for *more than five years* are far more likely to say they are spiritually stalled or content with their spiritual growth. For them, attending weekend services is more akin to spinning tires on icy roads than actually moving toward a destination. The diminishing pace of their growth suggests that the likelihood of ever making a decision for Christ *decreases* the longer they attend church.

There are Explorers in most churches who have been hanging around for a very long time. Even start-up church plants can attract these habitual church attenders. And certainly, we would rather have them attending church instead of staying home. But the fact that the longer they attend, the less likely they are to make a decision to accept Christ disturbs us greatly. Clearly, we have to challenge our long-standing assumptions and increase our sense of urgency.

<i><b>A Person Who Is Exploring Christ Is . . .</b></i>
• On the spiritual fringe
• Investigating, but undecided about the claims of Christianity
• Struggling mostly with belief in Christ, not God
• Attending, but not involved in church
• Possibly a long-tenured churchgoer

### **Growing in Christ: Embracing the Church**

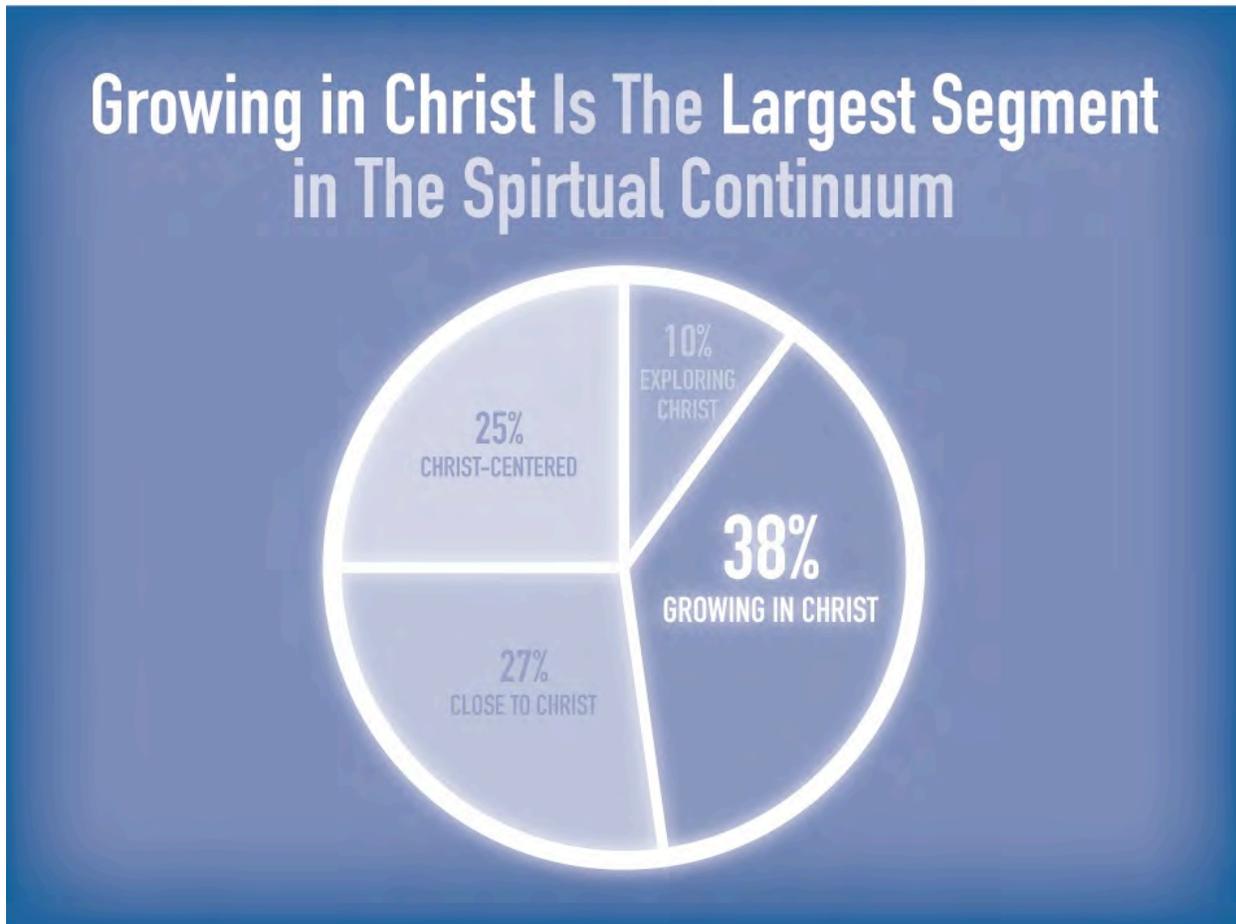
Growth can be awkward. This is most apparent when we go through adolescence—a stage of life characterized by emotional volatility, physical changes and social anxiety. Much like teenagers, those in the Growing in Christ segment experience significant intellectual and emotional changes as they adapt their life routines to their newfound beliefs. They may demonstrate adolescent-like insecurity, suggesting that at least some degree of struggle is involved as they absorb the real-life implications of their growing faith.

But despite the struggle—or maybe because of it—those in the Growing in Christ segment are indeed making progress, moving from an acknowledgement of God that was largely irrelevant to their daily lives to a personal relationship with him that directly impacts their everyday experiences. These newest-to-the-faith believers are typically huge fans of churches, including newly planted ones, that foster the initial steps of spiritual growth.

(A key characteristic of those in this segment is that they represent the largest segment on the spiritual continuum. You will find two additional key characteristics in MOVE, pp. 50-53.)

The Growing in Christ segment represents 38 percent of the people we surveyed, making it significantly larger than the next-largest segment, Close to Christ (Chart 1-3), at 27 percent. This means that in any church gathering, two of every five congregants fall within the Growing in Christ segment. While there are wide variations in the spiritual profiles of the thousand

churches we surveyed, this segment consistently represents more than 30 percent of the church population, often approaching up to 50 percent of those who attend a church.



**CHART 1-3**

What are we to make of this statistic? Well, we should begin by recognizing that since the Growing in Christ segment is the largest in a church, it naturally has a greater influence than others. The question thus arises: If church leaders receive the majority of their feedback from this large, but spiritually immature segment of the church, what impact does that have on their decisions? Could it sway them to allocate their resources in a way that serves the largest segment at the expense of others? What might it mean for the ministries of the church if the largest pool of candidates for all volunteer positions, including volunteer leaders, is made up of people relatively new to the faith?

These are just a few of the questions church leaders must consider as they recognize that the largest segment in most churches is made up of immature believers in a growing relationship with Christ.

***A Person Who Is Growing in Christ Is . . .***

- Increasing the range and frequency of participation in church activities
- On board with core beliefs
- Becoming more comfortable with spiritual practices
- Hesitant to take their faith beyond the walls of the church
- Poised for great spiritual advances and impact

**Close to Christ: On Personal Terms with God**

For those in the Close to Christ segment, faith is a deeply personal and significant force that is relevant to their every waking moment. Faith in Christ is no longer defined by an event that happens once or twice a week at church and is only remotely connected to their daily lives. They are more deeply invested in their faith and are willing to be publicly identified as followers of, and advocates for, Jesus Christ—whether they are inside or outside the walls of the church.

They are also characterized by an increasing spiritual certainty—a growing confidence in the existence, dependability and power of God’s presence in their lives. The initial signs of spiritual transformation that began to appear in the Growing in Christ segment are deepening into consistent practices among those in this segment. They continue to demonstrate their love of God with ongoing, regular communication and through personal spiritual practices. In addition, their increasing love for others shows up most markedly through increased evangelistic activities.

(A key characteristic of those in the Close to Christ segment is that they listen to and talk with God all the time. For an additional key characteristic, see MOVE, pp. 69-75.)

The spiritual rudder for those in the Close to Christ segment is their investment in personal spiritual practices. Across the board, this segment is more involved in regular, spiritual practices than both the Exploring Christ and Growing in Christ segments. Most of them (80 percent or more) read the Bible, reflect on Scripture, pray for guidance and pray to confess their sins at least several times a week—and, with similar frequency, over half listen to God during times of solitude.

The distinction between those who are Close to Christ and the prior segments becomes most pronounced when we look more closely at *daily* practices. On a daily basis, more than half of those who are Close to Christ pray for guidance. Almost half pray to confess sins every day.

It is through these channels that those who are Close to Christ walk the talk of being a Christ-follower—by using multiple channels to discern God’s voice, then leaning into that voice for spiritual guidance, courage and support.

<i>A Person Who Is Close to Christ Is . . .</i>
• Making a relationship with Jesus part of everyday life
• Confident in God’s presence and power
• Connecting daily with God through personal spiritual practices
• Beginning to show signs of spiritual transformation
• The backbone of the church

### **Christ-Centered: Undeniably Transformed**

The true north for these believers is Jesus Christ. A moral compass defined by a deep and abiding love for God guides their daily lives. They are genuinely submitted to the guiding authority of God’s Word. Christ is their life, their source of spiritual nourishment and their central purpose is to be a living example of his values and commandments. Are there ever any chinks in the spiritual armor? Of course. At times the spiritual behaviors of this segment can seem pretty anemic when compared to their skyrocketing spiritual passions and levels of activity seen in other segments. Having great love for Christ and a rapidly growing willingness to serve him do not always translate into robust spiritual activities.

(A key characteristic of those in the Christ-Centered segment is that they are Christ’s workforce. For two additional characteristics, see MOVE, pp. 87-95.)

The people in this segment represent the most active hands and feet of Jesus on the planet. They do everything—serve the church, care for the poor, tithe and evangelize—and they demonstrate all of these spiritual behaviors, not just one or two of them, in greater proportion than any other segment.

However, we believe their real potential for kingdom impact is largely untapped. Why? Because, although their responses to questions about their love of God and their willingness to serve Christ are sky high, their spiritual behaviors—although the highest across the spiritual continuum—lag far behind what we might expect from such strong professions of commitment to Christ.

Consider this discrepancy. While the percentage of Christ-Centered people who have more than six meaningful spiritual conversations with non-Christians in a year is the highest of all segments, it's still *only* 40 percent. And only 20 percent of those in the Christ-Centered segment have invited six or more people to church in the last year.

We conclude that those in the Christ-Centered segment are under-challenged—not about loving God, but about loving others. They have the potential to do truly magnificent things for Christ. They are not unwilling. They are simply uninspired and unmotivated.

This may be the most significant finding to come out of the whole body of REVEAL research. Nothing else we found represents such a tremendous opportunity for the kingdom.

<i><b>A Person Who Is Christ-Centered, Is . . .</b></i>
• Christ's greatest workforce
• Head over heels in love with God
• Tithing, serving and evangelizing more than anyone else
• Under-challenged by the church
• On the brink of spiritual greatness

(You will find practical advice about how to deal with the leadership challenges posed by congregants in each segment in MOVE at the end of chapters 2, 3 and 4.)

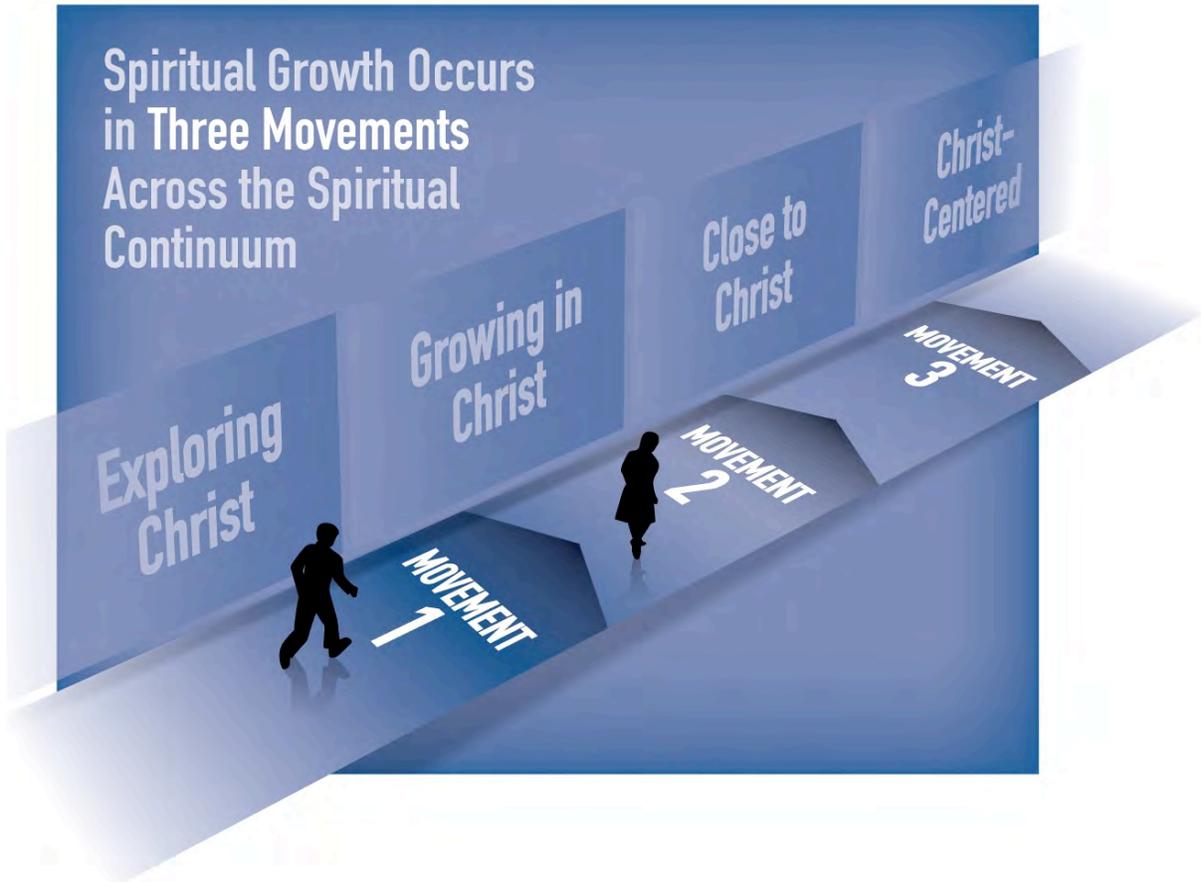
### **THREE SPIRITUAL MOVEMENTS**

Church activities do not predict or drive long-term spiritual growth, according to our key discoveries. So, then, what does drive spiritual growth? The answer is: It depends. The catalysts for growth differ dramatically across three spiritual movements: (Chart 1-3):

***Movement 1: From Exploring Christ to Growing in Christ.*** Movement 1 is all about Christian basics. Developing a firm foundation of spiritual beliefs and attitudes is critical during this trust-building phase. The impact of church activities on spiritual growth is most significant in this movement.

***Movement 2: From Growing in Christ to Close to Christ.*** In Movement 2 people decide that their relationship with Jesus is *personal* to them. It hinges on developing a routine of personal spiritual practices that make space and time for a growing intimacy with Christ.

***Movement 3: From Close to Christ to Christ-Centered.*** In Movement 3 believers replace secular self-centeredness with Christ-like self-sacrifice. They pour out their increasing love for Jesus through spiritual outreach activities, especially evangelism.



**CHART 1-4**

Importantly, each of these movements is most effectively fostered through unique aspects of what the church has to offer—an “aha” for most of us, who have long believed that weekend services, small groups and serving opportunities generated much the same potential impact for most everyone in our congregations. But the reality is that people in different segments have different needs from their church, so now we’ll take a look at how to meet those needs.

**Movement 1: From Exploring Christ to Growing in Christ**

Trust is a vital element in all relationships, and convincing a skeptic to trust in a God who is invisible, inaudible and abstract is no easy task. In fact, apart from the grace of God, it’s impossible! Only God can open blind eyes and deaf ears to the truth (2 Corinthians 4:4). But that doesn’t detract from the purpose and mission of the church: to proclaim the truth and model the

love of God in a way that draws people near so they can hear and experience the good news about Jesus.

Essentially, today's church serves as a spiritual matchmaker: it provides a meeting place, an idea of the "next steps" and the foundational teaching that ultimately leads people to trust in core Christian beliefs. Absent the contribution of the local church, the majority of people who are Exploring Christ stay right where they are—separated from God, now and for all eternity.

Evidence of the church's unique role in Movement 1 is most apparent in rising levels of participation in church activities. In fact, participation in weekend services, small groups and serving increases at a higher rate for those moving from Exploring Christ to Growing in Christ than for any other movement across the spiritual continuum.

But the church is only part of the story. The five most influential catalysts for Movement 1 include a balanced mix of beliefs, church activity and spiritual practices:

1. Belief in salvation by grace (Nothing I do or have done can earn my salvation.);
2. Belief in the Trinity (The God of the Bible is the one true God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.);
3. Serving the church (at least once a month);
4. Praying for guidance (at least several times a week);
5. Reflecting frequently on the meaning of Scripture (and how it impacts my life).

These five most significant, highest-impact spiritual growth catalysts for Movement 1, ranked by level of importance, represent the decisions that most commonly move someone sitting on the sidelines into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

The ranking is both relevant and important; it tells us that belief in salvation by grace is typically the catalyst with the greatest spiritual growth impact for Movement 1. In other words, if you, as the leader of your young church, could emphasize only one thing to those in Movement 1, salvation by grace would be your target.

(Learn about the most effective church strategy for Movement 1 in MOVE, pp. 136.)

## **Movement 2: From Growing in Christ to Close to Christ**

Movement 2—the movement from an intellectual acceptance of Christ to a relationship characterized by interaction and intimacy—is the most dramatic shift on the spiritual continuum. It is within this movement that faith travels from the head to the heart; where the word *personal* begins to describe how people relate to Jesus in their daily lives. No longer abstract, distant or theoretical, Christ becomes, instead, a real person—someone they depend upon for guidance, wisdom and encouragement in the course of everyday events.

The key dynamic created by this movement is that their relationship with Christ is set free from organized church activities and becomes, instead, a central force that influences the believer’s life choices and direction. And which catalysts are most influential in Movement 2?

Interestingly, they differ dramatically from those we found in Movement 1, which focused on the *fundamentals* of faith: accepting core beliefs (the Trinity and salvation by grace) and taking the first, early steps in spiritual practices and serving the church. The most influential catalysts in Movement 2 expand on this by emphasizing the importance of putting those fundamentals into *practice* by:

1. Believing in a personal God (I believe that God is actively involved in my life.);
2. Praying to seek guidance daily (instead of frequently);
3. Reflecting on Scripture frequently;
4. Having six or more meaningful spiritual conversations with non-Christians in a year (approximately one every two months); and
5. Tithing (giving ten percent or more to the church).

These five highest-impact spiritual growth catalysts for Movement 2 represent the most common decisions and actions of those who are growing in their personal relationship with Christ and becoming Close to Christ.

Movements 1 and 2 show similarities between two of their top-five catalysts—prayer to seek guidance and reflection on Scripture. There is a notable difference, however, between the two movements in the *frequency* of the practice. In Movement 2, these spiritual practices occur much more often.

(Learn about the two barriers to spiritual growth, which often impact people in Movement 2, in MOVE, pp. 169-189.)

### **Movement 3: From Close to Christ to Christ-Centered**

“What’s love got to do with it?”

Pose Tina Turner’s famous question to those in the midst of Movement 3 and you’ll get their unanimous answer: “Everything.” Love has everything to do with it—at least when “it” is the shift from a quasi-independent Close to Christ relationship to a fully surrendered Christ-Centered life.

The key to this final movement is found in the following statement from the REVEAL survey: “I am willing to risk everything that’s important in my life for Jesus Christ.” In church after church that has taken the survey, the higher the percentage of congregants who “very strongly agree” with this statement, the more likely one is to find visible evidence of spiritual momentum within their church.

That statement is at the top of the list of five most influential catalysts for Movement 3, which reflects a very different profile compared to the lists for Movements 1 and 2. In fact, in this movement toward becoming a mature Christ-follower, there is only one spiritual catalyst shared in common with the prior two movements—reflection on Scripture. The rest of the list puts an exclamation point on our observation that this, the final movement of spiritual growth, is almost entirely driven by inner heart transformation. Movement 3 people are moving from the Close to Christ’s personal, but still somewhat reserved, relationship with Jesus to a fully surrendered Christ-Centered life by:

1. Giving away their lives (I am willing to risk everything that’s important in my life for Jesus Christ.);
2. Deciding that Christ is first (I desire Jesus to be first in my life.);
3. Embracing an identity in Christ (I exist to know, love and serve God.);
4. Believing in the authority of the Bible (The Bible has decisive authority over what I say and do.);
5. Reflecting on Scripture daily (instead of frequently).

The impact each one of these catalysts has on spiritual transformation varies considerably. The top three heart-related catalysts stand head-and-shoulders above numbers four and five. In fact, the top catalyst—the willingness to “risk everything”—has three times the impact of those bottom two factors.

So if that one statement is such a key marker of mature, Christ-Centered people, what is it that inspires someone to “very strongly agree”? What is it that motivates people to “risk everything” for Jesus?

Some may believe the answer resides in a big menu of serving opportunities. And indeed, the research does suggest that expansive serving opportunities have the potential to catalyze growth in mature Christ-followers. But serving does not appear to be the *key* catalyst. Yes, it’s important. But it’s not what matters most.

(Learn what matters most, and how churches make it happen in MOVE, pp. 164-167.)

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A few Sundays ago I (Greg) sat in our auditorium, watching people take their seats, eager to be stretched and challenged. The gnawing feelings of doubt about our ministries’ effectiveness had been replaced with a settled peace. We might not be doing everything right, but I knew we were making a real difference in these folks’ lives. Not because we came up with yet another creative program, but because we were willing to face, and act on, the truth: increased church activity does not lead to spiritual growth.

So, what does this mean about the role of the church?

Chapter 2 continues with four church strategies, and one overarching principle, that do lead to spiritual growth—ready and waiting to be applied to the success of your new church.

## Chapter 2

### THE TRUTH ABOUT SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

“We found them.”

The longer we stood there welcoming people—shaking hands, putting faces with the names we knew, making introductions—the more those words echoed in our minds. After five long years, here they were, gathering at Willow Creek: the pastors of the churches representing the most vibrant, spiritually alive congregations among the 500 churches that had, to that point, participated in the REVEAL survey.

We had invited this group together because the analysis of their REVEAL survey results indicated something special was going on in their churches. According to their numbers, they were among the top 5 percent of all churches surveyed in terms of their congregants’ spiritual growth. We knew the factual results were conclusive, and that something quite remarkable set these congregations apart from all the others we’d surveyed—including our own. But when it came to the leaders of those churches, we wondered: Would they be as remarkable as their survey results?

The only way to find out was to meet them in person. So we arranged an all-day meeting the Thursday after Labor Day 2008.

By the first break, we knew these were the individuals we’d been looking for. Behind the impressive survey statistics were equally impressive leaders—individuals who had much to share about how to help people grow in a relationship with Christ.

What convinced us? For one thing, in spite of their churches’ great diversity of sizes, locations and cultures, we sensed these leaders’ hearts were all in the same Christ-centered place. As they interacted, they did not discuss church growth strategies; there were no conversations, for instance, that began, “We did this and our church grew by X percent.” Instead, they talked about helping people move from simply knowing Jesus to surrendering their lives to him. Their devotion to that work was extraordinary.

These church leaders also pursued common strategies—which was somewhat surprising. We thought we would find that some achieved their results through creative small group strategies, others with far-reaching local and global serving programs, and still others through dynamic teaching. What we found instead was a group of leaders pursuing very similar strategies to advance the spiritual growth of their people. They also shared a common passion: a single-minded focus on making disciples of Christ.

That’s why we considered this such a big deal. Since REVEAL began, we dreamed of finding—through fact-based evidence—churches that were spiritually thriving. We believed that if we could find them, we could learn from them. We could share what we learned with others. Now, within a single day, we were in the midst of something quite incredible.

We really had found them.

## WHAT DEFINES “BEST PRACTICES”?

Every church that takes the REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey receives a measure called the Spiritual Vitality Index (SVI) that summarizes their results (Chart 2-1). The SVI is the yardstick for determining which churches are “best.”



CHART 2-1

The SVI is the number in the center of the triangle. It is based on a scale of one to one hundred and indicates how a church's congregation compares to the other churches in the REVEAL database. This comparison is made in three categories of attitudes and activities vital to spiritual growth:

***The Church's Role.*** This category assesses the congregation's satisfaction with a few key church attributes most catalytic to spiritual growth—for instance, how the church helps people develop a personal relationship with Christ, understand the Bible in greater depth and challenges them to grow.

***Personal Spiritual Practices.*** This category assesses those spiritual practices most critical to spiritual growth across all three movements, including reflection on Scripture and prayer for guidance.

***Faith in Action.*** This category includes factors significant to the more mature movements of spiritual growth, such as evangelism, serving those in need and the degree to which congregants are willing to risk everything for Christ.

Based on the research, the factors in the Spiritual Vitality Index are those that are most catalytic to advancing spiritual growth (defined as increasing love of God and others). We determine the SVI by comparing the responses of each participating church to the responses of the 1000 churches currently included in the REVEAL benchmark database. A church is considered “best practice” if it receives an SVI score of 85 or higher out of a possible 100, which means it ranks in the top 5 percent of churches in the REVEAL database.

So, who are these churches? Their most remarkable characteristic is their incredible diversity. They range from a church with weekend adult attendance of 220 located in the poorest zip code in Detroit to a church from the Dallas suburbs where 9,000 weekend attenders support one of the highest tithing rates in the nation. Two churches are African-American and seven are multi-cultural. Many are nondenominational, but four Assembly of God and two Baptist churches are included. While some come from the heavily church-ed Bible belt, one church is from a community where regular church attendance hovers at only 4 percent. A 400-person church in the outskirts of Chicago has the most dangerous street in the U.S. in its backyard. This is an all-volunteer church with no paid staff. The senior pastor is a dentist.

In MOVE, these pastors generously share their church strategies and stories—which we offer in summarized form here.

## **FOUR BEST PRACTICES FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP**

“Christianity is not a spectator sport.” This quote from the pastor leading the Spirit of God Fellowship in South Holland, Illinois, defines the character of the top REVEAL churches. If you attend one of them expecting to just sit in a pew on Sundays, you will eventually be encouraged to go elsewhere. These churches are on the move, growing people up in Christ and releasing them to have impact for the kingdom. Their tolerance for spiritual lethargy is low.

The following is a synopsis of the lessons learned from them, specifically regarding four best practices.

### **Best Practice #1: Get People Moving**

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we might present everyone fully mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28 NIV).

The military uses boot camp to turn civilians into soldiers. Baseball uses spring training to test new players and try them out in different positions. Such short-term launching pads are analogous to the first best practice found among the most spiritually effective churches in the REVEAL database. They get people moving by providing a high-challenge, non-negotiable path of first steps to engage people in a process of spiritual growth—a process that will ultimately lead them to become followers of Jesus Christ.

To be clear, this practice is *not* about providing a comprehensive, detailed spiritual roadmap to guide someone who is Exploring Christ toward becoming Christ-Centered. Instead, this is the spiritual equivalent of jump-starting a car: an action that charges up the multiple parts of an automobile’s engine so it can get itself moving. That’s what this practice is all about—jump-starting *movement*—because these churches recognize that one of the greatest challenges to spiritual progress occurs right at the outset, and that by employing this practice, they tackle what may be the biggest obstacle to spiritual growth: overcoming inertia in order to take those first steps.

Based on our review of the top REVEAL churches, three key strategies—which are particularly relevant to new church plants—make all the difference.

**Strategy 1: *Make the destination clear.*** People leave these jump-start experiences crystal-clear about two things. First, they know that the church’s top priority is to do everything within its power to help them grow into devoted disciples of Jesus Christ. Second, they know how the church defines what it means to be a disciple.

**Strategy 2: *Make the spiritual jump-start non-negotiable.*** A newcomer to these churches quickly realizes that participation in the jump-start program is expected and assumed. From verbal announcements to written collateral about church priorities, the jump-start pathway is prominently featured as a centerpiece opportunity and implied necessity for congregants.

**Strategy 3: *Make the senior pastor the champion.*** The senior pastor strongly promotes and encourages newcomers to make attending the jump-start program a top priority and, in most cases, teaches one or more of the sessions. Especially when it comes to casting the vision of the church, this is not something typically delegated to the staff or volunteers.

(Learn how best-practice churches put these three strategies into action in MOVE, pp. 213-218.)

## **Best Practice #2: Embed the Bible in Everything**

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NLT).

“Church leaders should bleed Scripture when they’re cut.”

So says Todd Wagner, senior pastor of Watermark Church in Dallas, Texas. His descriptive language reflects an attitude that is pervasive among best-practice churches—one that views the Word of God as much more than a teaching tool or source of guidance for life decisions and self-improvement. For these churches, the Bible is less a resource than it is a defining characteristic of their church culture—something they look to as a gauge and mirror for everything they say and do.

All churches and church leaders love the Bible. But transitioning that love to congregants who have mixed levels of trust, experience and confidence in reading and interpreting Scripture for themselves is not easy. This is the distinction of the best-practice churches—not their *love* of Scripture, but how they *execute the transition of that love* to their congregants. Based on our review of the top REVEAL churches, three key strategies appear to make that happen.

**Strategy 1: *Make the Bible the main course of the message.*** While there is great debate over the most effective way to teach God’s Word, a number of best-practice churches lean toward the expository teaching style. However, the most important takeaway about teaching from best-practice pastors is that they all start the preparation of their messages with Scripture. Even if their teaching is topical in nature, their goal is to transfer a life application from Scripture.

**Strategy 2: *Eliminate excuses.*** Best-practice churches make Bible engagement practical, meaningful and accessible—something that can fit even into the busiest schedules.

**Strategy 3: *Model Scripture as the church’s foundation.*** Everywhere you turn in best-practice churches, you see the Bible as core to the church and its leadership. This includes everything from weekend services to serving experiences to leadership selection and training.

(Learn how best-practice churches put these three strategies into action in MOVE, pp. 221-227.)

### **Best Practice #3: Create Ownership**

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers . . . so the body of Christ may be built up . . . and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 3:11-13 NIV).

Jesus Christ was counter-cultural. He rocked the ancient world, teaching about humility, compassion and service in a legalistic society ruled by kings and caste systems. He came to earth to save us, to be sure, but he also came to bring God’s kingdom to earth by challenging and changing two characteristics that define a culture: its beliefs and its behaviors.

Two thousand years have passed, and the change Jesus wanted to see—a shift from a culture of self-absorption to one of self-sacrifice—isn’t going particularly well. This

disappointing truth—that Christian beliefs don’t necessarily translate into Christ-like behaviors—is the target of the Create Ownership best practice. Its spirit is captured by the phrase emblazoned on t-shirts worn by those who attend Tri-County Church in DuBois, Pennsylvania: “I don’t go to church. I *am* the church.”

Too many churches are satisfied to have congregations filled with people who say they “belong” to their church—who attend faithfully and are willing to serve or make occasional donations. But that bar is not high enough; simply belonging doesn’t get the job done for Jesus.

The goal of best-practice churches is to *change behavior*, and they do it by employing three strategies:

**Strategy 1: *Empower people to be the church.*** This priesthood-of-all-believers strategy aims to break down the mindset that divides pastors and congregants. Blurring those dividing lines involves assigning high levels of ministry accountability to lay leaders and using creative ways to inspire people to experiment with Christ-like behavior in their everyday lives.

**Strategy 2: *Equip people to succeed.*** It’s not enough to simply empower people. Establishing high standards for performance and accountability is critical, as is educating and giving congregants the tools they need to meet those standards.

**Strategy 3: *Hold people accountable.*** Best-practice churches understand that their attenders need spiritual mirrors, which means safe, relational networks that help navigate the ups and downs of an expanding walk with Christ. Many invest significant time and resources in small group infrastructures to provide that support.

(Learn how best-practice churches put these three strategies into action in MOVE, pp. 232-236.)

#### **Best Practice #4: Pastor the Local Community**

You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden....

In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father (Matthew 5:14, 16 NLT).

“I don’t pastor a church; I pastor a community.”

This somewhat unconventional statement guides the ministry of Terry Inman, senior pastor of Harbor Light Church in Fremont, California. Note his use of the word “pastor” as a verb; he uses it instead of the word “serve” as a way to describe his relationship to the community. To serve means to be useful or to render assistance in some way. To pastor, on the other hand, is a broader concept. Derived from its original Latin roots with the meaning “to shepherd,” to pastor means to guide, watch over and protect an entire flock.

That’s how best-practice churches see their roles: pastors of their communities—people of God who not only *serve* their communities, but also step up to try to resolve problems like homelessness and addiction that plague their neighborhoods. They are plugged into community networks and are deeply involved in local issues. That’s because they believe they are called to be shepherds, not just for the people who walk through their doors, but all the people who walk the streets where they live.

Three strategies—which seem especially meaningful for church plants—make this work:

**Strategy 1: *Set a high bar for serving the church and the community.*** Best-practice churches make it clear early and often that they count on congregants to serve the needs of both the church and the community. The senior pastor sets the tone and pace for this commitment because, according to senior pastor Steve Gallimore of Tennessee Valley Community Church, “your people will care no more than you do; go no farther than you will. It’s that simple.”

**Strategy 2: *Build a bridge into your local community.*** Most best-practice churches establish strong relationships, and often partnerships, with other churches, non-profits and community leaders. They do this for two reasons: to stay in touch with the most pressing community needs and to generate the greatest possible impact by working shoulder-to-shoulder with others to address those needs.

**Strategy 3: *Make serving a platform for the gospel.*** Best-practice pastors see a natural affinity between evangelizing and serving those who are struggling and broken—because hopeless people have hearts that are fertile ground for Christ’s message of grace and redemption.

(Learn how best-practice churches put these three strategies into action in MOVE, pp. 240-245.)

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The four best practices covered in this section revolve around an overarching principle that influences them all. It is called Christ-Centered Leadership, and it begins with a fundamental and imperative first step. (Chart 2-2)



CHART 2-2

### THE FIRST STEP TOWARD CHRIST-CENTERED LEADERSHIP

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind

and with all your strength (Mark 12:30 NIV).

Less than two months after our first meeting with the top 5-percent pastors—on October 16, 2008—we concluded a conference in which many of these individuals spoke to more than 1,500 church leaders.

Cally was on Cloud Nine—excited about accomplishing what we felt was a major milestone for REVEAL.

On the other hand, I (Greg) was extremely discouraged. Because as a pastor and leader in my church, I knew I had a lot of work to do—since it had become crystal clear to me that the first step toward helping Willow Creek become more spiritually vibrant was for *me* to become more spiritually vibrant. I had just encountered a group of people who were significantly more focused and committed to their relationship with Jesus than I was. And that chasm—between where I was and where I wanted (and needed) to be—looked almost impossible to cross.

Up until then, I had thought our work with REVEAL would provide new insights and strategies to help me in my role as executive pastor. To this point, that had been the case. But by the end of this conference, it was painfully obvious that those ideas and strategies would get me only so far. What had to happen—what was nonnegotiable—was that I had to pursue my relationship with Christ with even greater intensity, passion and single-minded commitment.

The verse, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6), has guided me since that day. I needed to feel it in my body, like a craving for food and water. I needed to ache to be close to Christ; to give him everything, small and large. I needed to desire being with him more than I desired anything else.

I had to ask myself the question, “Am I consumed with becoming a disciple of Christ?” And on that morning, I had to be honest and say that I still had a long way to go.

The journey to a spiritually vital church must begin within your own heart. After that, you can explore and implement the four best-practice strategies you’ve read about and pursue insights inspired by the other research findings. But if you get that order reversed—relying on strategies before working on your heart—beware. You cannot reproduce in others what you are

not producing in yourself. The main thing you need to do—the one thing you *must* do—is fully within your reach.

You must surrender all. Everything. Because the first step to building a great, spiritually vital church is for you—and the leaders around you—to die to your own agendas and follow Christ with your full heart every day of your lives.

Remember what Paul wrote: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39). God’s passion is *you*. Always has been; always will be. Every step you take toward him is matched by scores of his steps in your direction. You walk toward him; he runs toward you. He loves you and desires to give you everything you need—for your life and for your leadership.

God has taken the first steps. Now it’s your turn. What are you waiting for?

Move.

(Learn about three key characteristics of Christ-Centered Leadership in MOVE, pp. 248-252.)

## CHAPTER 3

### **BILL HYBELS Q & A: HOW I WOULD PLANT A CHURCH TODAY**

The suburban Chicago church plant, launched by a 22-year-old Bill Hybels back in 1975, would dramatically impact the face of American Christianity. What later became one of the nation's first mega-churches, which now draws some 25,000 worshippers each week, Willow Creek Community Church began in a closed-on-Sunday-morning movie theater and was mostly staffed by teenaged volunteers passionate for Jesus Christ. As Willow grew, sharing what it learned with other churches became one of its highest priorities.

That desire to foster the progress of all Christ-centered churches continued into 2004, after Willow Creek's internal congregant survey resulted in unanticipated findings. Now some 1500 churches have participated in REVEAL, the resulting spiritual growth survey that carries implications for all Christian congregations, from long-established community anchors to bold new church plants.

It is to church planters, in fact, that Willow Creek's founding pastor Bill Hybels directed his remarks when he was asked, recently, what he has learned in 37 years of ministry, how his experience might impact his actions were he planting a church today and what advice he would most like to share with those whose passion is to share the good news of Jesus Christ with un-churched people in a relevant, compelling and successful way.

Welcome to that conversation.

Q: Before we start talking about what you might do the same and differently if you were planting a church today, let's talk a little about our current environment. What societal factors have changed in the past 40 years that would impact your decisions today?

A: I think that there's even more resistance/cynicism to the idea of the institutionalized church now than there was then. And I think that's the result of all of the skepticism created as too many well-known pastors—and even some denominations—have broken trust. People who are starting a church today have to present an even stronger argument than we did in the mid-70s for *Why another church?* How is this one going to be different than all these other ones that are treading water and not doing a whole lot for their communities? So, I would spend a lot of time coming up with the rationale for why would I be starting another church. What's going to be different? What's going to keep it from becoming like these others? That would be very important, because I think there's a general feeling that there are already enough churches.

In short, if you are going to launch a new church, you have to **start with a white hot, differentiated, compelling vision**, or why take up more real estate? Why not just go join one on the corner of Elm and Vine? Half of them are empty these days anyway, so why don't you go take over their property as opposed to starting yet another one? So thinking about that and how to craft that vision would be quite important to me.

### **Start with a White-Hot, Differentiated, Compelling Vision.**

Q: With this current environment in mind, can you give us an example of what worked well in your church plant 37 years ago that you would duplicate if you were planting a church today?

A: One thing I really got right is that I started Willow with my friends. The founders are still with me today and we're still best of friends. I had an incredible team of proven people around me, and we had established a loving and joyful community before we held our first service. That I did right, by the grace of God. So if I were starting fresh, the minute I felt I had clarity on the vision for starting a new church, I would **present that vision to close, trusted friends** who I wanted to come along with me on this adventure.

## **Present That Vision to Close, Trusted Friends.**

I get real nervous when senior pastors have a compelling vision and they start to share that vision with people they don't know very well. Then they invite them to be a part of the inner circle that's going to start this thing. I feel a lot more comfortable—even if the people aren't as qualified—in having trust-filled, loving, already established friends surround you. Because they stick with you through thick or thin. They're not the kind who bail because something goes a little wrong. The glue, the adhesion, is already in place and will hold together.

Q: Do you have an example of something you would do very differently?

A: Something that I didn't do well, and this is a common problem all across the world, was to adequately capitalize our ministry. Therefore, the financial pressures were terribly destructive to the life of our church for the first five years. And it didn't have to be that way. Most church planters and church planting organizations these days say you've got to raise X amount of money, so you're sure people can survive—like, making sure your rent payment can be made. That kind of information was not widely known because there weren't many church plants going on in our era. So I rather naively said, “God's leading us to do this, so God will provide. We're going to hold the first service and pass a plate around and it's all going to be good.”

Well, we didn't have a big enough core. We didn't have people who had professional careers and resources to be able to invest, and we sank further and further into debt. All of us had to do things like take on part-time jobs and bring boarders into our homes, which led to a chaotic, unsustainable lifestyle.

Q: What steps would you take today?

A: These days I receive things in the mail from church planting organizations that have funds, but they don't have the church planters. We've come so far that there are organizations with tens of millions of dollars ready to invest in a good church plant and church plant team. So I would

say that church planters now should probably go to all of the various funding options and present their case, and see what part of it can be underwritten by one of these national or denominational funds. Then **make the judgment about how “full on” your start can be, based on available funding.**

### **Make the Judgment About How “Full On” Your Start Can Be, Based on Available Funding.**

I would go to these organizations and say something like this: “There are ten of us on this team who want to give 18-hour-a-day efforts for the first three or four years to get this church up and going. If we don't have to work part-time jobs, if we don't have to take in boarders, if we don't have to have our spouses work full-time jobs and neglect our kids—if we could take the basic financial stress out of the first three years, that would free us up to do all the things that we ought to be spending our time on. Like winning people to Christ, then discipling them and finding their place of service in this church. We'll be way ahead five years from now if the first three years can get covered financially.”

But we didn't do that and the stress was destructive. I certainly would capitalize the church better at the start.

Q: What else would you do differently?

A: Whenever I'm asked about my biggest mistakes in the early days of Willow, I say that I put undisciplined, untested people into positions of responsibility prematurely. And then I watched every imaginable kind of hurt happen as a result of that poor judgment. So, saying it the other way, I would spend far more time, and perhaps have a more formalized process, to **vet and test leaders rigorously before putting them in key positions.**

### **Vet and Test Leaders Rigorously Before Putting Them in Key Positions.**

Q: What would that look like in a church-planting context?

A: Over the years I've learned you need to look for character, competence and chemistry. In the early days, I looked for warm bodies. I didn't have the discernment grid. I didn't know what would make or break a leader. So I didn't know to the extent that I know it now that any little chinks in the character armor are going to be lethal. It's not going to be a little problem. It's going to be a major problem. So I have much higher standards now and have ways of determining who are people of character and who are not. Whereas in the early days, if they had a driver's license and hadn't served time, I figured—well, they're probably okay.

I should have observed them in a whole series of engagements. I should have checked references much, much better. I should have shot for the highest competence that I could find. I didn't pay a lot of attention to chemistry. I thought, "Hey, people will get along." I was naive about that.

The truth is—and people in the church-planting world know this—that church planting attracts a sort of rogue personality. They're risk-takers. Entrepreneurial, independent types who think, "Why would I go to a well-established church when I could help a church in a shopping center that's just making it up as they go?" This makes it even that much more important to be careful about how you build your teams. Because you have a lot of highly independent, opinionated entrepreneurial types coming together at the same time to do the same thing.

I remember one of the first boards I put together. The third night we met, one of these hard-charging, real opinionated people said, "Hey, you have the totally wrong idea. I can't believe that you are wasting your time talking about this." He got up and not only left the room, but slammed the door. And the rest of us in the room were like, "Holy Cow! This is a church meeting. We're just trying to figure out what place we're going to rent for our mid-week service and someone blew up because he didn't like the way we were going about it?"

Again, I was 22 years old, and I remember driving home that night thinking, "I even have to be careful about who I ask to serve on an ad hoc committee." Because the rest of the guys who were

in that room were thinking, “I don't want to be on any committees. Committees are dangerous places where doors get slammed and you don't know who Bill's going to have in the mix. I'm not going to sign up for anything like this again.” Well, I decided I have to be extremely careful about the chemistry thing in building teams and even ad hoc committees to make sure that people will like being with the other people on the team.

Q: So once you need to expand your network beyond your circle of trusted friends, how do you find the best possible leaders?

A: If you're a start-up pastor, you **do two breakfasts, two lunches and two dinners every week with people outside your circle**. This is a must because the pastor is the relational hub that makes the church work. If you have a hundred people coming to your early services, none of them know each other. But they all know you because they listen to you speak. So, it's up to *you* to get to know every one of those people, so you can quickly establish who ought to be getting to know each other. Maybe they went to the same college, but they don't know that. They're both structural engineers, but they don't know that. So I did two breakfasts, two lunches, two dinners. And I would keep a little spiral notebook so I would remember that the Smiths ought to get together with the Johnsons because they have a lot in common. Then Lynne and I would invite the Smiths and Johnsons over to the house.

### **Do Two Breakfasts, Two Lunches and Two Dinners Every Week with People Outside Your Circle.**

Our job was to get to know everybody so we could help the other people who didn't know anybody start to form relationships. We did tons of social events. Halloween parties, hayrides, picnics—where people could begin to connect with people other than me. They got to know each other, and I got to know them. That's how I found the best people with the best possible chemistry to put into leadership positions in the church.

Q: Any other practical steps you'd recommend to church planters?

A: I can think of two. The first is how to decide where to locate their church. When I talk with church planters, I always start by talking about vision. But quite quickly after the vision talk, I ask this question: “What demographic do you think calls the best out of you?”

When you’re with a certain kind of people, do you get a sense of exuberance—that these are the kind of people I want to do life with? Some church planters actually think that’s an illegal question. But let me give you an example. I was talking with a church planter who was on the verge of quitting. I knew his family background. These were very sophisticated people—grad school trained, excellent educational institutions and all that. And the church planting organization had put him in a blue collar, lower education level, semi-rural setting that was boring this guy to tears. These were lovely people. It’s just that they didn’t call the best out of him.

He would want to discuss complex subject matters and things that are going to shape the future of the world. But they were not willing to engage in those conversations—the kind that gave him a lot of life and excitement. So I said, “Before you quit and go back into the business world, why don’t you see if there’s another plant that can be done in an area with a demographic that you actually feel fairly excited about?” And he said, “I couldn’t ask for that because that would be arrogant.” I said, “I don’t know that you ought to feel like that’s so bad, because a certain environment is going to call the best out of you and in another environment you’re not going to feel like such a great fit.”

And I think “fit” is key. God can always overrule it and call you to do anything. But if you have a choice in the matter, why don’t you choose to locate where the demographics call the best out of you? I heard from him several years later. He had relocated. It was like talking to a different guy. And he said, “I wouldn’t have stayed in ministry in that setting. But this is the group I’m supposed to be with.”

## **Locate Where the Demographics Call the Best Out of You.**

It works the other way, too. Sometimes working with the poor and uneducated calls the best out of very sophisticated people. But they know that it does, so it works. The main thing is, find the fit. You have to have the self-awareness to know who calls the best out of you.

A second practical issue is how to think about using volunteers vs. adding staff. In my opinion, **the more a young church can get done through volunteers, the better.** The fewer the staff, the better. As I said earlier, when we started Willow, we were undercapitalized and one of the downsides of that was tremendous financial stress. One of the upsides was that every week I told everyone attending the church—we need you! And they knew it was true. We needed everybody to step up—to take care of kids, to help set up and take down chairs, and eventually, to help us find a piece of land. That brought people forward. At one point, I think we were dangerously close to having 100 percent of our attenders serving because we didn't have any paid staff.

## **The More a Young Church Can Get Done Through Volunteers, the Better.**

As I look back on it, that's how that sense of servanthood got embedded quickly. When you're serving with each other, then connections happen. And when you are connected and serving, you're owners of that vision.

Sometimes I hear of church plants that are overcapitalized. They start with 14 staff. Everything is slick and when people come, they think, “They don't need me!” So they don't become owners of the vision. They become spectators. They don't use their spiritual gifts. They don't get connected. Then you've got a polished, well-paid staff putting on a service for people who are spectating and leaving. So, you can be undercapitalized or you can be overcapitalized. There are dangers with each. You just have to understand what the dangers are.

Q: What you describe sounds like a strategy to Create Ownership, which is one of the four best practices discovered by REVEAL. Can you elaborate on how REVEAL has influenced your thinking about how a church can best fulfill its mission to help people become fully devoted followers of Christ?

A: I'd start by going back to something that was a miss in the early days of Willow, and it's still a mystery to me why it was so much of a miss. It may be due to the fact I was still a fairly recent Christian when we started the church. In fact, I had only been a Christian five years. So when I started Willow, I loved reading God's Word and I loved communicating with him in prayer and reading good Christian books. I liked that just because of my relationship with God.

But I dramatically underestimated how often my colleagues and the people in the church practiced the classic spiritual disciplines. I just thought everybody spent time with God and surrendered their spirits before him every day. That everybody worked hard to receive promptings from God, quieting the ambient noise in their lives so they could hear him. I misjudged that, and the few times that I preached on it, I remember seeing the semi-confused faces of the people in the crowd and thinking, "I must be doing a terrible job of teaching this because they are not getting it or they are not interested. I'm not getting the same kind of feedback that I get when I teach on other subject matters." So, I wound up not teaching on the spiritual practices very often. It's hard to do, and I got mixed response.

Decades later I found out, primarily through REVEAL, that I should have stuck with that. I should not have been dissuaded by the kind of feedback I was getting. I should have done a major series on the classic spiritual disciplines every single year, whether I saw confused faces or not. I should have just dug in and made that a regular part of the menu.

We also had some feedback that went like this: "Yeah, well, interesting. But I'd really like to know something more practical than this, like how to be a better parent. Why don't you teach this other stuff at a seminar, not on Sunday morning?"

Well, we didn't have the facilities or the teachers to hold those kinds of seminars. So, it wasn't until decades later when we found out—through REVEAL—that you can strip away almost every other thing the church does. But at the core of the core of the core, growing people into Christ followers is all about helping them engage in God's Word and inspiring them to invite God to be at the center of their lives. I did not emphasize that as much in the early days as I do now.

Q: So you would do things differently today?

A: Absolutely. Now at Willow we have what we call the Getting Started Classes. The second movement in the Getting Started Classes is the spiritual practices: how to read your Bible, how to pray, how to surrender, how to confess your sins. We get people on track with these very basic things that will help them walk with Christ as soon as they show any movement. In the early days of Willow, when someone showed spiritual movement we would congratulate them and point them toward a ministry where they could serve or a group where they could get to know other people. But we didn't **instill a strong awareness that, more than anything, people need to know how to relate to God through his Word, and how to hear his prompting.** How to navigate a day with him in your head, in your heart, at your side—and all of that. It's a deep regret I carry.

**Instill a Strong Awareness That, More Than Anything, People Need to Know How to Relate to God Through His Word, and How to Hear His Prompting.**

Q: What you're talking about relates directly to two of the four best practices: Get People Moving and Embed the Bible in Everything. Other than getting people on track right away with spiritual disciplines, is there anything else you'd do differently?

A: Yes, and it relates to my church upbringing. I grew up in a church that was doctrinally intense. Because I heard the Heidelberg Catechism every Sunday for twenty years, and didn't get application-oriented Bible teaching, I overreacted. I said to my congregation that all you're going to learn from me is stuff you can put into practice on Monday morning. I'm not going to bore you

with anything else. You'll learn how to make a better marriage, how to bring Christ to your workplace, how to make good decisions—all this application-oriented teaching. In hindsight, I realize that I never really established the greater context in which those messages were being preached.

Theologians would say I didn't understand systematic theology. I didn't create the infrastructure in which all of these pieces could make sense. And I think that hurt people. It robbed them of a richer understanding of the whole story of God and the arc of his activity throughout history. Now I find ways to be doctrinally and intellectually rigorous—to **stretch people's understanding of the whole narrative of Scripture** as opposed to only delivering the goods for them to put into practice on Monday morning. If you shortchange people on that richer narrative, you do so to everyone's peril.

### **Stretch People's Understanding of the Whole Narrative of Scripture.**

I think many church planters are eager to get a church up and going—eager to help people make better decisions in their everyday lives. In their eagerness, they might do what I did, which was to shortchange them on a fuller understanding of how awesome God really is. Don't shortchange people on knowing the attributes of God—who is he, what does his kingdom mean and where is this all going to wind up at the end?

Q: The fourth best practice found by REVEAL is “Pastor the Local Community.” That brings up this question: What about local and global service? Your “second conversions” about racial injustice and HIV-AIDS are well known and have influenced churches around the world. How would you advise young church planters today to find their mission field?

A: What gives me hope, especially in the lives of young pastors, is that if they stick with leading their churches and practicing the spiritual disciplines, God will give them their own “second conversions.” He will bring some causes into their minds five years from now that they don't care a whiff about today.

I talked to a church planter recently who is in a tough urban area. With the crime in their neighborhood, they are almost in a war zone. And this guy is doing a very good job. He's building a nice congregation there. I ran into him at a speaking event and I congratulated him. He's been at it for six or seven years now. And I said, "Man, you're not giving up, this is good, way to go!" And he said, "Yeah, but I want to do this global stuff like you. Aren't you in 20 or 30 different countries? I want to start getting our people over there." And I said, "What? Is God talking to you about this?"

He said, "Shouldn't we all be globally oriented?" I said, "Yes, we should all be globally oriented. But there are so many traumas occurring within ten blocks of your church my advice would be solve some of that before you solve some village's traumas in Malawi. Show the power of God in the place you know. If you don't do much for Malawi in the first decade of your existence, I don't think you're going to get a merit badge removed when you stand before God someday. Now, if God really moves in your spirit, great! But don't do this just because other churches do."

So many younger idealistic church planters want to be full blown with every cause and every program. I think we need to let God do that over time. You don't have to do it all at the beginning. Just do a few things well. Let the Holy Spirit tell you when it's time to do the next thing. And the next thing, and the next, and the next.

It would not have been wise for us, in the early days of Willow, to cook up some big outreach thing when we didn't even have a youth ministry. We didn't know how to disciple people who were getting saved. So take baby steps at first. Do the simple things well, and then as God grows your competence and you have some stability, **God will give you your own "second conversion."** Stay focused for a while.

**God Will Give You Your Own "Second Conversion."**

Q: Christ-Centered leadership is at the heart of REVEAL's best-practice findings. How do you keep your passion for Jesus fired up?

A: In Romans 12:11, Paul says: *Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.* He's saying don't let your zeal burn low, but he's also saying you're responsible for your zeal.

I like to remind myself of that. It's my responsibility to keep my passion hot. It's no one else's. So if mine starts running low, I have to discern what cooled it off and then I've got to stop letting that happen. I have to figure out who the people are, what the books and the experiences are, that refresh my spirit—and then **lean into whatever works to re-fire a passion for Jesus.**

### **Lean Into Whatever Works to Re-fire a Passion for Jesus.**

For example, whenever I'm around certain people for any length of time, I feel my pulse rate increasing. They fire me up. I need to be around them a little more. And, besides the Bible, the book I've turned to more often than any other for inspiration and encouragement is Dallas Willard's *Spirit of the Disciplines*. If I need spiritual refueling, that book works for me.

So, who I'm with, what I read, where I go—that's what keeps me charged up. Last week I attended a particular conference in Manhattan that I go to every year. I go there as a discipline because there are certain years that I don't feel like going. And this year nothing of great substance happened until the last night. Then some things unfolded and I almost couldn't control the amount of enthusiasm in my spirit because I got a new idea. I got a new vision for something and it came all at once. I could see it and I knew it was going to help me so much and be so cool at Willow when I finally figure out how to do this. So I went up to my room and journaled about it for 45 minutes, then called a friend to talk to about it. Something like that generally happens when I go to this place.

So I know I've got to go there. Even when it's inconvenient, I have to take responsibility and just go.

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Q: Thanks so much for sharing all of this with us, Bill. To close, do you have a final word of advice or encouragement for church planters?

A: You're one of the luckiest people on the planet—because the most important thing happening on earth is the establishment and building of local churches. God selected you to be able to form a community where this incredibly important work is going to be going on under your direction for perhaps the next 40 years. **You won the lottery!**

### **You Won the Lottery!**

Enjoy it! Every day realize you don't have to stand at a drill press. You don't have to load and unload trucks. You get to traffic in kingdom ideas and work with great people who are pulling with you to try to form this Acts 2 dream of Christ's church. You should fall on your knees and say, "God, what an incredible privilege to be invited by your Holy Spirit to play a key role in the most important thing happening on planet Earth."

I tell pastors all the time that I've had a ball! We've taken our hits. There are bad days. But I've had an astonishingly blessed ride. And I think God would have that same heart toward every pastor.

I think he wants every pastor to love his Word and love the adventure of his work. I don't even know what it's like to lay my head on the pillow and say that today was a waste. Every night I

feel like we moved the ball. We may have only moved it a foot, but we moved the kingdom ball ahead a little bit today. That's good enough for me.

A high percentage of the human race hits the pillow at night feeling like their day was a waste. They didn't move anything eternal ahead. They didn't touch any lives. They didn't do anything that's going to outlive them.

So my final word to church planters is this—you won the lottery! You get to lead the coolest endeavor on planet Earth, the only agency God said he was going to predictably bless and favor. You get to be a part of *that*!

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Note: At the 2012 conference, Exponential interviewed Bill and his family about how their lives were impacted by his leadership of Willow: [www.vimeo.com/44417961](http://www.vimeo.com/44417961)

# How Do You Know If People Are Growing Closer to Christ?

It's the question that is at the core of church planting. It gets to the heart of the local church. Reaching lost people and making disciples. Bill Hybels, Founder and Sr. Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, daily wrestles with this question and speaks in this book to what he would do differently if he were planting a church today.

In 2004, the leaders at Willow Creek Community Church asked themselves that question. Though attendance and activity levels were high, they wanted to be sure the church was wisely investing its resources into what matters most. Leaning into innovative research tools that correlate behaviors with attitudes and beliefs, they made some startling discoveries. Although some common church activities did fuel spiritual growth, they discovered many did not. The research also identified a spiritual continuum for people on the journey of faith and revealed that some practices are more catalytic than others for people at different stages of growth.

Over the next six years, this same research tool – the REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey – was used with over a quarter million people in well over a thousand churches, diverse in size, denomination, and geography. *MOVE for Church Planters* presents a summary of the remarkable findings of this research, including four best-practice strategies common to highly effective churches. What emerges is a new lens for church planters who want to build faith communities that are focused on growing disciples.

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