

Measuring Spiritual Growth in the Church

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One of the difficulties in measuring spiritual growth in churches stems from the two-part nature of what we are trying to measure. We aren't interested in measuring just the health of the church as an organization—such as by evaluating its programs, staff, systems, leadership, strategy, etc. We also aren't solely focused on measuring the spiritual state of congregants as if they were disparate individuals, not part of the same local church. Ultimately, the problem of spiritual metrics for churches is a matter of finding a way to measure what research methodologists call a “nested model.” In a nested model, we're interested in accounting for both the characteristics of individuals who share a common context and the characteristics of that context that affect these individuals. In education research, nested models are typically used to study students within classrooms or schools within districts.

One unique aspect of the REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey (SLS) is its focus on both characteristics of congregants and of the climate that the church provides for their spiritual growth. As our research has progressed over the past 10 years, we have tried to isolate and analyze the congregant aspect alone and the church climate aspect alone, using survey items that focus on one or the other. What we have realized is that the only way to get fully informed metrics that provide a clear view into the spiritual vitality of a local church is to look through both lenses at the same time. Our most recent research, described later in this chapter, capitalizes on this combined view to provide precisely targeted feedback to church leaders.

As of 2014, more than 500,000 individuals in over 2,000 churches have responded to the REVEAL survey. Although we have never attempted to randomly sample churches or individuals, the sheer volume of data provides compelling evidence for the validity of our findings. In this chapter, we will explore the development of REVEAL and the full gamut of our findings to date. A case study of one church who responded to the Reveal Spiritual Life Survey (SLS) twice over a period of three years concludes the chapter. Their experience illustrates how churches have used REVEAL to measure spiritual growth and to implement strategic changes to help congregants continue moving forward on their spiritual journeys.

The History of REVEAL

Which church activities best promote spiritual growth? In 2003, the desire to answer this question led Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago to launch what became the REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey. Underlying this question was a huge assumption: that the more someone dives into what the church offers, the more that person will grow spiritually (defined by

¹ Much of the content of this chapter summarizes previous work authored by Greg Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, particularly G. Hawkins and C. Parkinson, *Move: What 1000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*. Zondervan, 2011.

Willow Creek as increasing in love for God and love for others). The conventional wisdom of the day declared that if you expose an unchurched person to church activities like worship services, small groups, and serving opportunities, that person would grow. But Willow Creek's survey results revealed a different reality: how much someone participated in church activities did not predict that person's level of love for God and others or any other markers of spiritual maturity.

Surprised by these findings, the REVEAL team further analyzed the data to determine what did drive spiritual growth. Statistically, the best predictor of spiritual growth turned out to be a person's self-described relationship with Jesus Christ, operationalized as a four-stage continuum of spiritual maturity. Meaningful differences can be seen between people in different stages of maturity. People who are in later stages serve, give, and evangelize more than those in the earlier stages. They express stronger beliefs in core Christian doctrines and engage more frequently in personal spiritual practices like prayer and reflection on Scripture. Although those in the more mature segments participate in church activities, these activities are not significant drivers of their spiritual growth.

To find out if these findings would generalize beyond Willow Creek, the survey team reached out to a few other churches to take the survey. Their findings paralleled Willow Creek's, showing that the extent of a congregant's involvement in church activities did not predict spiritual growth but the spiritual continuum did. More churches were invited to take the survey, yielding additional evidence for the initial findings and new insights into how churches can help people grow in their faith, as well as allowing for further refinement of the SLS. Finally, the opportunity to take the REVEAL SLS was opened to any church interested in taking it. Nearly 2,000 churches have stepped up to take the survey as of late 2014, and the results described in this chapter have replicated across the entire dataset, which includes churches from a wide range of denominations; megachurches, small churches, and everything in between; urban, suburban, and rural churches; churches in the Northeast, the Midwest, the South, the West, New England, Canada, and outside North America.

The Spiritual Continuum

As mentioned above, the REVEAL spiritual continuum consists of four stages. In the *Exploring Christ* stage, people express belief in God, but uncertainty about Christ and his place in their lives. Those in the *Growing in Christ* stage have committed to trusting Christ for salvation and are starting to understand what it means to have a relationship with him. In the *Close to Christ* stage, Christ is viewed as a strong guiding influence, helping the person navigate the issues they face. Finally, those in the *Christ-Centered* stage have surrendered to Christ's agenda, subordinating their wants, needs, and plans to his will and desires and viewing their relationship with Christ as primary. In the overall REVEAL database, Growing in Christ is the largest

segment, with 38 percent of respondents in this stage of spiritual growth. Ten percent fall into the Exploring Christ segment, 27 percent in the Close to Christ segment, and 25 percent in the Christ-Centered segment.

Spiritual Growth Catalysts

To learn more about what catalyzes spiritual growth, the REVEAL team examined the differences between people in each group (while acknowledging that spiritual growth is not a strictly linear process and that ultimately it is the Holy Spirit who brings growth). Using discriminant function analysis, we learned which beliefs, attitudes, personal spiritual practices, church activities, and spiritual activities done outside the church most sharply discriminated between those in each of the first three stages and those in the next most mature stage. This research, though cross-sectional and not longitudinal, points to the factors that are catalytic to spiritual growth.

Based on our findings, the top five catalysts for each movement are:

- *Exploring Christ to Growing in Christ:* belief in the Trinity and salvation by grace; serving in ministry in the church; spiritual practices of prayer to seek guidance and reflection on Scripture.
- *Growing in Christ to Close to Christ:* belief in a personal God; spiritual practices of prayer to seek guidance, reflection on Scripture, and solitude; evangelism.
- *Close to Christ to Christ-Centered:* attitude of willingness to surrender everything to Christ and of desiring Jesus to be first in my life; belief in identity in Christ and in the authority of the Bible; spiritual practice of reflection on Scripture.

Taken together, the key factors promoting growth in each movement show a clear progression. In the first movement, the focus is on Christian fundamentals. In the second movement, building on this foundation through spiritual practices is critically important. In the third movement, surrender to Christ and His will is predominant.

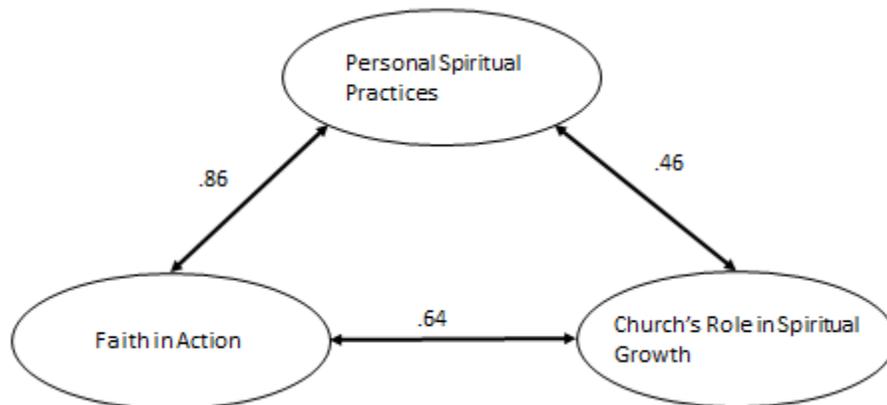
Notice that there is one constant among the catalysts: reflection on Scripture. It is the only catalyst of spiritual growth that appears in the top-five list for each of the three movements. Our research indicates that nothing else even comes close to having the same impact as the Bible when it comes to spiritual growth. For those in the Close to Christ and Christ-Centered stages, reflection on Scripture is twice as impactful as any other catalyst. The key difference in the impact of reflection on Scripture across the spiritual continuum is frequency. For someone in the Exploring Christ stage, shifting from reflecting on Scripture rarely (a few times per year) to frequently (several times per week) speeds movement to the Growing in Christ stage. For the later movements, increasing from frequent to daily reflection on Scripture plays a significant role in spiritual growth.

REVEAL Spiritual Vitality Index

REVEAL created the Spiritual Vitality Index (SVI) in response to requests from churches for a metric that summarized their survey results and benchmarked their results for comparison in the future when the church next administered the SLS. The objective of the SVI is to present a single number that represents the spiritual vitality of a church and its congregation. It is based on nine items from the SLS that researchers identified as the most significant indicators of spiritual vitality. These items include three spiritual practices, three church characteristics, and three items that represent faith in action.

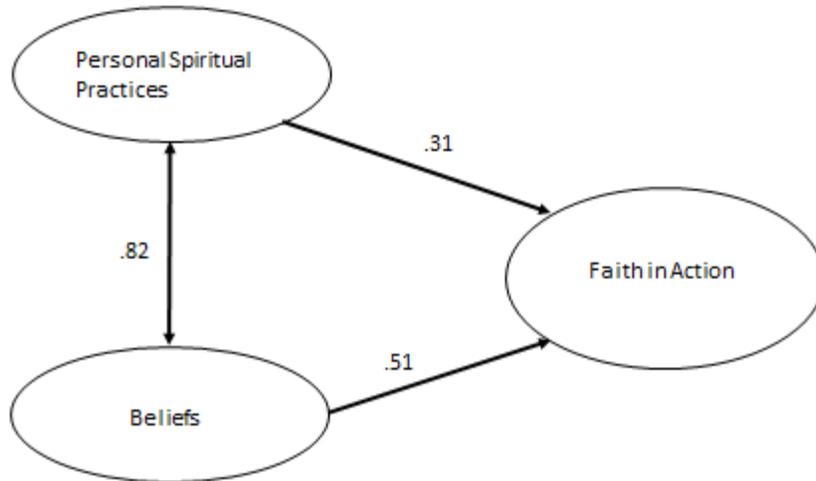
The validity of the SVI as a measurement model was tested through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The model contained the three items for each element of the SVI loading on a latent factor for that element; the three elements were allowed to inter-correlate. All model fit indices for this CFA met accepted criteria for good fit. All factor loadings were statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. See Figure 1 for the model and inter-correlations.

Figure 1. The REVEAL Spiritual Vitality Index.



A model that included three core Christian beliefs as a fourth element also was tested. Adding the beliefs element resulted in worse fit for the model, likely due to the high correlation between beliefs and personal spiritual practices and beliefs and faith in action. To better understand the relationship of these three aspects of congregants' spiritual growth, a model with beliefs, spiritual practices, and faith in action was tested (with the church's role latent variable removed). This model, shown in Figure 2, used beliefs and practices to predict faith-in-action behaviors. It had excellent fit and accounted for 60.2% of the variance in faith in action ($r^2=0.602$).

Figure 2. Predicting Faith in Action.



Having tested both of these models, the REVEAL team decided that the best model for understanding the spiritual vitality of a church needed to include both congregant and church-level measurements. Given the high correlation between beliefs and spiritual practices, including both in the SVI would be somewhat redundant. The spiritual practices latent variable was chosen for inclusion because the model shown in Figure 1 had better fit than a similar model with beliefs replacing spiritual practices.

To compute the SVI, the percentage of the congregation meeting a set criterion of excellence for each question (e.g., the percentage of the congregation that engages in daily reflection on the meaning of Scripture) is calculated. A deviation formula is then used to determine how far a given church is from perfection (defined as 100% of the church’s congregants meeting the criterion of excellence). This deviation score is scaled to have a mean of 70 and a standard deviation of 10. The SVI was normed against a database of 1,252 churches. It is normally distributed and has shown good internal consistency reliability (coefficient alpha of 0.88).

In its final form, the SVI is the central example of the way REVEAL looks at churches through the dual lens of the church as an organization and the spiritual state of its congregants. Three church characteristics comprise the church’s role component of the SVI. These characteristics measure congregants’ satisfaction with how their church is helping them grow spiritually in ways such as helping them understand the Bible and challenging them to grow. The personal spiritual practices component of the SVI is a measure of what congregants are doing on their own to further their spiritual growth. The faith-in-action component measures behaviors such as serving those in need and evangelism that can be seen as the fruit of spiritual growth happening through the church and on one’s own. For churches that take the survey, the SVI is a kind of temperature gauge of their overall spiritual health. Although their survey reports contain a wealth of information, it is often the SVI that pastors migrate to as a way of conceptualizing their results.

The REVEAL Best Practice Principles

One way in which the REVEAL team has used the SVI is to study churches with scores of 86 or above (the top 5 percent of all churches in our dataset) for insights into the best practices of churches that are highly effective in promoting spiritual growth among their congregants. The only common denominator among these churches was their high SVI. They varied widely in size, location, annual budget, denomination, and demographics.

In a qualitative research project involving interviews with 16 high SVI churches, these five practices rose to the top:

- *Get People Moving*: Best practice churches offer a spiritual “on ramp” that helps newcomers jumpstart their spiritual growth through a series of clear next steps. One example would be *The Alpha Course*, though the specific approach depends on the church’s context. The common factor is a clear discipleship pathway that every congregant is expected to follow.
- *Embed the Bible in Everything*: Scripture is at the heart of the church culture in best practice churches. Every discussion, decision, and activity involves Scripture. Leaders also find a way to overcome people’s excuses and make Bible engagement easy.
- *Create Ownership*: At best practice churches, serving in ministry and small group involvement are designed to help people “own” the vision of the church—to move people from going to church to being the church. The small group system often is used as a pipeline to empower and equip leaders.
- *Pastor the Local Community*: Best practice churches expect their congregants to be involved in serving local community needs. They also often partner with other churches and non-profits to address local problems.
- *Lead from a Christ-Centered Heart*: Undergirding all of the best practices is a leader or team of leaders marked by humility and transparency, fully surrendering all leadership dilemmas and decisions to Christ.

The REVEAL Archetypes

Most recently, the nested-model approach to looking at congregants within churches has yielded a typology that classifies churches into one of eight church archetypes. This typology was discovered through a cluster analysis that took into account congregants’ adherence to Christian beliefs, engagement in spiritual practices, and faith-in-action behaviors and the extent to which their church delivers the best practice principles. Initial attempts to define a typology by looking at only the congregant side and only the church best practice side failed to produce enough differentiation between types. It was only when we applied the combined lens that the archetypes came into focus.

The eight archetypes include some that one might expect to find, such as Troubled Churches, where both the congregant side and the church side show significant deficiencies. The Vibrant Church archetype is the other side of the coin, where congregants are highly engaged and moving along well on their spiritual journeys and they rate their church as doing a great job of implementing the best practices. There are also Average churches, which are unremarkable in every way. Some of the less obvious archetypes include the Complacent Church, where the congregant side of the equation is very low but congregants are generally satisfied with their church. The Energized Church is one in which congregants give their church very high marks for the best practices but are not engaging as fully as they should be in growing in their faith outside of church activities.²

Measuring Longitudinal Change

Approximately 200 churches have taken the SLS more than once. When the REVEAL team examined the changes in these churches, we were particularly interested in looking for positive change in the SVI, the best practice principles, and congregant beliefs, personal spiritual practices, and faith-in-action behaviors. Because the survey does not collect personally identifiable information, it was not possible to determine which congregants responded to the survey at both time points. As a result, testing for statistically significant change was impossible. Instead, we used the REVEAL dataset itself to determine a metric of meaningful change. Looking at the distribution of the data, we determined that a gain of one-half of a standard deviation represented a meaningful improvement in the survey metrics.

Looking across all churches with multiple survey results, the only meaningful gain was in the best practice of Get People Moving. We believe that more could be learned about how churches change over time by looking at the data by church archetype. Five of the eight church archetypes had meaningful changes in one or more areas. Troubled Churches showed the most wide-ranging improvement. They made significant gains in all best practices and in congregants' engagement in personal spiritual practices and faith-in-action behaviors. These gains suggest a high level of intentionality by church leaders in digesting their initial survey results and beginning to turn the wheel of positive momentum to move their church in a healthier direction.

Two other church types also demonstrated wide-ranging gains in the best practices. Introverted Churches, which have high engagement in personal spiritual practices and strong scores for the Embed the Bible principle but lower scores for Faith in Action and Pastoring the Community, tended to have a higher SVI and improvements in most best practices on their second survey. Self-Motivated Churches, which are marked by congregants who are highly engaged in spiritual growth but dissatisfaction with their church's efforts to help them grow, also showed meaningful gains in four of the five best practices.

² For more on the church archetypes, see C. Parkinson & N. Scammacca-Lewis, *Rise: Bold Strategies to Transform Your Church*. NavPress, 2015.

Extroverted Churches, where congregants' engagement in the spiritual practices was notably lacking in their first survey, grew considerably in the Get People Moving best practice—a critical example of churches implementing change where it is needed most. Even Vibrant Churches, whose first survey results included high SVI scores, strong congregant engagement, and high levels of satisfaction with the church, made progress in the interval between survey waves. Their congregants showed significant increases in the frequency of their personal spiritual practices.

Three types of churches had survey results that did not change very much over time. Not too surprisingly, these types were Complacent, Energized, and Average. In all three types, congregant satisfaction with the way their church implements the best practices is average or better. Leaders of all three types likely face challenges in implementing change when congregants happy with the status quo.

It is important to note that the 200 churches whose data were analyzed did not know their church archetype following their first survey—they took the survey before the archetypes were developed. Even without that specific information, their REVEAL results were clear enough to guide church leaders in knowing where to begin the often overwhelmingly difficult task of changing the culture of their church.

Changes in archetype are evidence that the transformational change that leaders were working toward has occurred. The shift from a less spiritually vibrant archetype to the Energized archetype is one that we have seen in a number of churches that have taken the survey two or more times over a period of years. It reflects a broader trend that we see in the churches who have taken multiple surveys—the first and most significant change that occurs in a church's results reflect changes in congregant satisfaction with the way the church is implementing the best practices. Changes in congregant beliefs and behaviors typically are smaller, though often statistically meaningful. Our theory is that congregants quickly notice and appreciate the changes that their church makes in response to the results of their first survey, but it takes more time for these changes to be reflected in the hearts of congregants and in what they do outside of church-sponsored activities.

Case Study: Memorial Park Presbyterian Church

In 2006, when Dr. Dean Weaver became the senior pastor of Memorial Park Presbyterian Church in Allison Park, Pennsylvania, he came prepared to serve. Memorial Park faced some major challenges at the time, but Dean was convinced that he was right where God wanted him. During his first 18 months, Dean was preoccupied with transitions—nearly half of the church's 40 staff members had resigned for various reasons. He turned these vacancies into an opportunity to retool the entire staff, repositioning some individuals and adding people who could reinforce the church's new direction. As part of these efforts, Dean launched a strategic planning process that included having the church take the REVEAL survey in 2009. Nearly half of the 800 adults who

typically attend weekend services at Memorial Park responded to the survey, which represents a very good response rate for a church of this size.

Memorial Park's results indicated some areas of concern. For starters, the percentages of congregants in the first two stages of spiritual growth were high, with the Exploring Christ segment at 13 percent and 55 percent in the first two segments combined. Another red flag was that only 1 in 5 congregants read or reflected on Scripture on a daily basis, indicating that one of the key catalysts of spiritual growth was not a part of most congregants' experience outside of church services. Most telling of all, Memorial Park scored an SVI of 60—a full standard deviation below the mean, placing them in the bottom quartile of the REVEAL church database.

Although they did not know it at the time, when Memorial Park first responded to the REVEAL survey, their results were consistent with the Complacent Church archetype. The high percentage of congregants in the early stages of spiritual growth, low levels of congregant engagement in spiritual practices, and average marks for satisfaction with the way the church helps you grow spiritually are all symptomatic of churches in the Complacent archetype.

Even without this information, Memorial Park's REVEAL results were clear enough to show the church leadership that they needed to pursue a transformation of the culture at Memorial Park to get their people moving forward on their spiritual journeys. One way they began pursuing this transformation was by bringing together five very gifted congregants to become the church's "crunch team," initially responsible for taking the survey's raw data and attempting to come up with further—and even more specific—conclusions. "They were asking, 'Is there anything else we can draw from here that would be beneficial to us as a church?'" Dean explains. "Then they took the interpretations from REVEAL and their own insights and communicated them to the church's leaders—sitting down with the board of elders and the staff leadership team and saying, 'Okay, here are the REVEAL results, this is what it means, and here are some preliminary recommendations of what to do with it.'"

This small core of key influencers would continue their work through the three years between the first and second time the church took the REVEAL survey, analyzing and interpreting various church initiatives. "They would come in and sell their conclusions to our elder board, then to the leadership team on staff," Dean explains. "Once the staff leadership team was on board, they would take it to the deacons, a bigger group. And after that, we'd go through it with our college of elders, a much larger group. By the time we had explained everything to all those different key influencers, we had a core of about 250 people on board and ready to answer any questions that came up from anyone in the church."

Churches that see major shifts in their survey results over time tend to pursue strategies like Memorial Park's "crunch team" to drive significant change in their church's culture. When churches respond to unfavorable results by making smaller tweaks to their church's spiritual growth infrastructure, little or no change typically occurs in their survey results over time.

Implementing cultural transformation is no small task, but it pays significant dividends, especially for Complacent Churches.

Memorial Park responded to their REVEAL results by making changes aimed at improving their implementation of two best practices. First, they created ownership through transparent leadership. Dean says his inclination is to “call it like I see it.” And although no one specifically directed congregation members to do likewise, the example of his and his team’s transparency and authenticity began to move others in a similar direction. Something of an epiphany took place at the church’s first-ever couple’s retreat. “We were in a room,” Dean remembers, “and the guy leading one of the small groups said, ‘Hi, my name is Roger.’ In unison, everyone responded, ‘Hi, Roger,’ like it was an AA meeting. Like they all knew the drill. And they all looked at each other with this look on their faces like, ‘Are you?’ ‘You?’ ‘You?’ ‘Yeah, me too.’” “When people began realizing the new paradigm was to be real with one another, Dean acknowledges that “it was a little scary.” In fact, some people left the church at that point, preferring a more conservative environment than what he describes as the “authentic, genuine, missional church” he and his team had in mind.

Ownership also grew as congregants to start putting their faith into action without first asking for official permission. There was the young mom, for instance, who along with some neighborhood friends held a carnival to fund Bible purchases for an orphanage in need. And the former elder with a passion for missions, whose long-held but unimplemented ideas became what Dean describes as “changes in perfect alignment with the strategic plan we had and the vision of who we now were.”

The second best practice Memorial Park focused on was embedding the Bible in every aspect of church life. Church leaders knew that encouraging greater Bible engagement must become a priority. They launched various initiatives aimed at getting congregants into Scripture. First, Dean began preaching a year-long series on the book of Acts—demonstrating both his passion for biblical teaching and sharing that book’s scriptural parallels to Memorial Park’s new focus.

Next, the church launched its “Academy of Faith,” providing weekly classes designed for those in each of REVEAL’s four spiritual maturity segments. For those Exploring Christ, there was a “101” class called “Honest Answers to Hard Questions.” Similarly, 201, 301, and 401 classes were specifically designed for those who self-identified into the Growing in Christ, Close to Christ, and Christ-Centered segments. Memorial Park’s church leaders designed a three-year scope and sequence with fall, winter, and spring terms. Classes were offered on both Wednesday evenings and Sundays—covering the Old Testament in the fall, the New Testament in the winter, and discipleship in the spring. Class content was independent of weekend services, which would include yet another year-long Bible-based series, this time on the book of Romans. The goal of these strategies was increasing the frequency with which their congregation encountered Scripture both in church activities and on their own.

Memorial Park re-took the REVEAL survey in 2012, three years after their initial survey, and verified with quantitative data the progress its leaders suspected. Congregants expressed stronger Christian beliefs and were engaging in spiritual practices with far greater frequency. Fewer congregants were in the Exploring Christ segment and more were in the Close to Christ and Christ-Centered segments. Satisfaction with the church's role in promoting spiritual growth rose from 55 to 68 percent. The church's SVI increased from 60 to 72. Because of these changes, Memorial Park shifted from the Complacent archetype to the Energized archetype.

At Memorial Park, Dean and his leaders, including the "crunch team," are far from finished with their pursuit of church-wide improvement. They know that more areas calling for attention remain. The emphasis on Scripture remains as strong as ever. Currently, Memorial Park has made Scripture Union's E100 Bible-based plan available to everyone in the church, including the children's ministry. "The Exploring and Growing segments increase their reading frequency and the Close to Christ and Christ-Centered segments enjoy pursuing greater depth," Dean says. "We've made it a guilt-free Bible-reading opportunity that has fit this congregation really well."

What's Next for REVEAL

The REVEAL team continues to explore the wealth of data from those who have responded to the survey to glean insights that can help local churches promote spiritual growth and measure their progress over time. We are developing resources for churches to use to promote Bible engagement and other spiritual growth activities in ways that are targeted to where a congregant is on his or her spiritual journey. One such resource, focused at the congregant level, is an app that will allow individuals to understand where they are spiritually and provide targeted Bible engagement plans and other spiritual activities. At the church level, we are developing resources targeted for each archetype that have been shown in other churches of the same archetype to lead to an increase in SVI and a positive change in archetype.

The survey itself continues to be refined to hone in on the information that is most useful to churches in understanding where their congregants are and how to help them move forward toward maturity. As more churches take the survey for a second or third time, we will continue to mine, research, and share what we learn about how churches successfully implement change. The REVEAL team remains committed to providing church leaders with a combined view of their congregants and their church so that they can identify ways to increase the spiritual vitality of their congregation and help every member take the next step in spiritual growth.