

THE WILLOWCREEK ASSOCIATION

The Role of the Church, Pastor and Individual in Spiritual Growth

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Using structural equation modeling, data from 155,000 people at 548 churches who responded to the REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey, researchers sought to determine how the church and senior pastor impact the spiritual growth of congregants relative to the impact of congregants' own efforts. Several models were estimated in an attempt to determine which variables best represented the interplay of the church, senior pastor, and individual and how best to represent spiritual growth. The final model included a Spiritual Guidance factor and a Spiritual Relationships variable to represent the church's role, a Spiritual Challenge factor to represent the senior pastor's role, and composite variables to represent the individual's beliefs and spiritual practices. The model depicted the effect of these variables on a Faith in Action variable that represented spiritual growth. Results indicated that while the influence of the church and senior pastor are important, the efforts of the individual have much greater impact on spiritual growth.

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The REVEAL study was launched in 2007 as an attempt to understand spiritual growth using applied research methods. Since then, more than 1,450 churches and 345,000 individuals have responded to the Spiritual Life Survey (SLS). The resulting dataset offers rich insights into the role of the church, the senior pastor, and the individual in advancing spiritual growth. This paper seeks to use the data to answer this question: How do the church and senior pastor impact the spiritual growth of congregants relative to the impact of what congregants do on their own?

Methodology

Participants

Data from approximately 155,000 participants at 548 churches that fielded the SLS between September 2008 and August 2010 were included in the analysis. These participants took the most recent version of the SLS following a revision of the survey in mid-2008. The demographic makeup of the participants was as follows:

- 62% women, 38% men
- 5% age 24 or younger, 24% age 25-39, 50% age 40-59, 21% age 60 or older
- 78% currently married
- 43% had children under age 18 living at home
- 90% white (non-Hispanic), 3% African-American, 2% Hispanic, 2% Asian
- 57% had a bachelor's degree or more education
- Household income level was evenly distributed across six categories ranging from less than \$30,000 to more than \$150,000; 53% earned \$50-150,000 per year

The churches attended by these participants ranged in size from as few as 50 weekend service adult attenders to as many as 7,000. The median adult attendance was 650 and the mean

was 915. Fifty percent of the churches were founded before 1970. Approximately 26% of survey respondents had attended their current church for 2 years or less; 29% had attended for 10 years or more. Churches from a broad range of Protestant denominations were represented, with the highest percentages being non-denominational churches (26%) and Baptist churches (13%). Eighty percent of churches were members of the Willow Creek Association.

Measure

The SLS is a lengthy multiple-choice questionnaire that includes items on the respondent's attitudes, beliefs, spiritual practices, church experiences, involvement in church activities, involvement in serving the community, and satisfaction.

Procedure

The SLS is administered online only. Most respondents spend 30 to 40 minutes completing the SLS. No identifying information is collected. Churches that sign up to take the SLS are provided with marketing collateral. They promote the survey opportunity as broadly as possible to all who are affiliated with the church and ask them to respond via a hyperlink to the survey. The survey link is available to each church for two weeks. Churches are encouraged to reach a response rate of 20% of their adult attenders, or at least 100 responses for churches of 400 adults or less. They receive periodic reports on the number of survey responses completed during the two-week period so that they can adjust their promoting of the survey if they are not on track to reach the desired response rate. Within 30 days of the close of the survey, the church receives a detailed report of findings.

Research Design

Previous research on the SLS used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate a five-factor model of items related to needs that congregants look to their church to meet and a six-factor model of items related to the congregant's perception of the senior pastor's leadership.¹ Two factors from the senior pastor model and one factor from the church model that previous research had shown to have the greatest impact on spiritual growth were included in a new structural regression (or hybrid) structural equation model. A hybrid model includes both a measurement (CFA) model and a path model. Spiritual Challenge and Preaching and Vision Casting, the senior pastor factors, were modeled as latent variables in the hybrid model, with three items loading on Spiritual Challenge and two on Preaching and Vision Casting. Spiritual Guidance, the church needs factor, was modeled as a latent mediator variable between the senior pastor and other possible observed mediator and endogenous variables. Six items load on the Spiritual Guidance factor. See Table 1 for a listing of the factor loading for each variable on each factor.

Table 1. Factor Loadings for Church and Senior Pastor Factors.

	Factor Loading
Senior Pastor: Provides sound doctrine rooted in biblical accuracy	0.39
Senior Pastor: Models and reinforces how to grow	0.75
Senior Pastor: Challenges congregants to grow	0.81
Church: Helps me develop a personal relationship with Christ	0.77
Church: Challenges congregants to grow	0.79
Church: Provides a clear pathway for me to help me grow spiritually	0.66
Church: Church leaders model and reinforce how to grow	0.73
Church: Helps me understand the Bible in-depth	0.67
Church: Encourages me to take responsibility for my own growth	0.84

¹ As reported in G. Hawkins and C. Parkinson (2009). *Focus: The Top Ten Things People Want and Need from You and Your Church*. Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association

The other variables considered for inclusion as mediator or endogenous variables were:

- Satisfaction with weekend services
- Satisfaction with the church's role in helping you grow spiritually
- Beliefs (composite of level of belief in the Trinity, the authority of the Bible, salvation by grace, and that God is a personal God)
- Spiritual practices (composite of degree of practice of reflection on Scripture, prayer, and tithing)
- Faith in action (composite of degree of engagement in evangelism and serving those in need, and stated willingness to risk everything that is important in your life for Jesus Christ)
- Spiritual relationships (congregant participation in a small group, spiritual friendships, and spiritual mentoring)

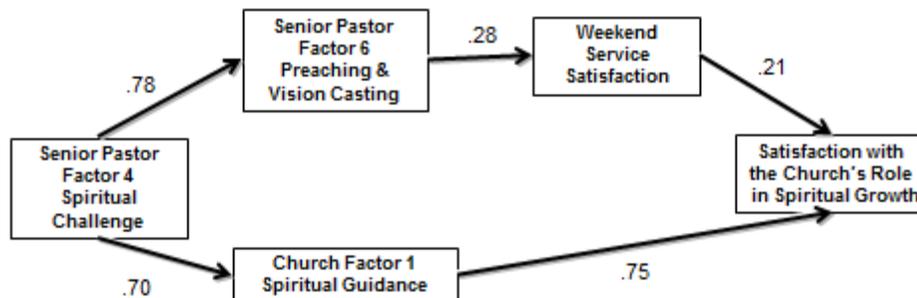
An exploratory approach was taken in examining the fit of models with different configurations of variables. Two commonly reported goodness of fit indices, the Bentler Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), were used to estimate goodness of fit for these models. CFI values of 0.85 to 0.89 indicate acceptable fit; values of 0.90 or greater indicate good fit. SRMR values of less than 0.05 indicate excellent fit, values of 0.05 to 0.09 indicate acceptable fit, and values above 0.09 indicate poor fit. R-squared, another important indicator of the quality of a model that estimates the percentage of variance accounted for in endogenous variables, also was considered in determining the acceptability of a particular model.

Results

Outcome Variable 1: Satisfaction with the church's role in spiritual growth

The initial model focused on understanding what variables influenced church attenders' satisfaction with how their church was helping them to grow spiritually. Figure 1 depicts the model that was tested and its path coefficients. Model fit was good (CFI=0.93; SRMR=0.06). The r^2 for the outcome variable in this model was 0.65, meaning that 65% of the variance in satisfaction with the church's role in spiritual growth was accounted for by the variables in the model. All path coefficients were statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level. The total indirect effect of the Spiritual Challenge factor through Preaching and Vision Casting and Weekend Service Satisfaction was 0.05 (indicating a very small effect). The total indirect effect of the Spiritual Challenge factor through the church Spiritual Guidance factor was 0.52, a medium effect. Both of these effects were statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level.

Figure 1. Influence of the church and senior pastor on congregants' satisfaction with the church's role in their spiritual growth.



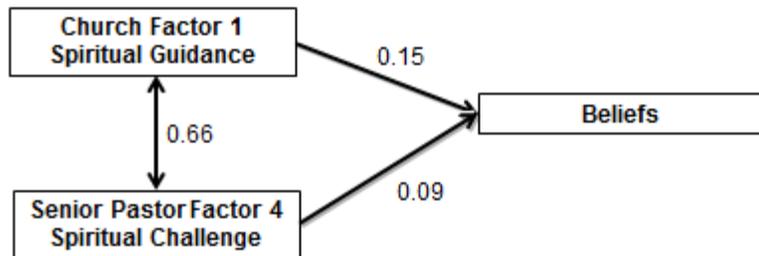
This model indicates that the senior pastor has a greater impact on a congregant's satisfaction with the church's role in his or her spiritual growth through the senior pastor's leadership of the spiritual guidance aspect of the church than through his or her role as a preacher and vision-caster at weekend services. Although this model was a good fit to the data and explained a substantial amount of variance in congregants' satisfaction with the church's role in

their spiritual growth, researchers were unsure that this outcome variable was the best measure of spiritual growth overall. As a result, other variables that were more behavioral and attitudinal in nature were tested to learn more about the church's and pastor's influence on spiritual growth. Additionally, the Preaching and Vision-Casting factor was dropped because the senior pastor's impact through the church was so much larger than his or her impact through preaching at weekend services.

Outcome Variable 2: Beliefs

A second model was tested to gauge the impact of the senior pastor and the church on congregants' spiritual beliefs. A composite variable was created that was the sum of the congregants' average score on level of belief in the Trinity, the authority of the Bible, salvation by grace, and that God is a personal God. In this model, shown in Figure 2, the church and senior pastor factors were modeled as correlated in order to determine their unique effects on congregants' beliefs. The fit of the model was borderline acceptable (CFI=0.84; SMSR=0.07). The church factor path coefficient was statistically significant ($p=.03$) but small; the senior pastor factor coefficient was not statistically significant ($p=0.20$). The church and senior pastor factors accounted for just 4.8% of the variance in congregants' beliefs ($r^2=0.048$).

Figure 2. Influence of the church and senior pastor on congregants' beliefs.

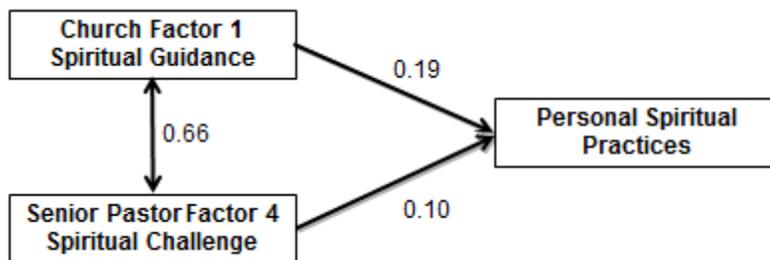


This model, while parsimonious, was deemed incomplete due to the low percentage of variance accounted for and the borderline acceptable fit.

Outcome Variable 3: Spiritual Practices

The third attempt at a suitable model was similar to the second model, but with Spiritual Practices as the outcome variable. This variable was the sum of the congregants' average frequency of practice of reflection on Scripture and prayer for guidance, plus the extent of their practice of tithing. As shown in Figure 3, the church and senior pastor factors were again modeled as correlated.

Figure 3. Influence of the church and senior pastor on congregants' spiritual practices.

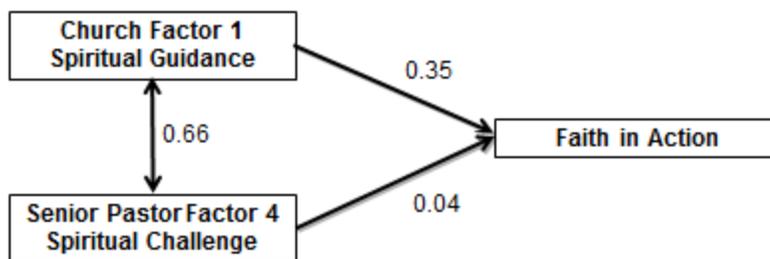


The fit of this model was acceptable (CFI=0.87; SMSR=0.07). The church factor path coefficient was statistically significant ($p=.005$) but indicates a small effect; the senior pastor factor coefficient was not statistically significant ($p=0.18$). The church and senior pastor factors accounted for 6.7% of the variance in congregants' spiritual practices ($r^2=0.067$). Given the small amount of variance accounted for, this model also was not acceptable as a depiction of the influence of the senior pastor and the church on congregants' spiritual growth.

Outcome Variable 4: Faith in Action

The fourth attempt at a suitable model involved faith in action as the outcome variable. This variable was the sum of the congregants' average degree of engagement in evangelism (having spiritual conversations with unbelievers), frequency of serving those in need, and stated willingness to risk everything that is important in your life for Jesus Christ. Researchers believed that these actionable behaviors and attitude represented the fruit of congregants' spiritual growth and thus would make for an appropriate outcome variable. As shown in Figure 4, this model was identical to models 2 and 3 with a change of the outcome variable to be faith in action.

Figure 4. Influence of the church and senior pastor on congregants' faith in action.

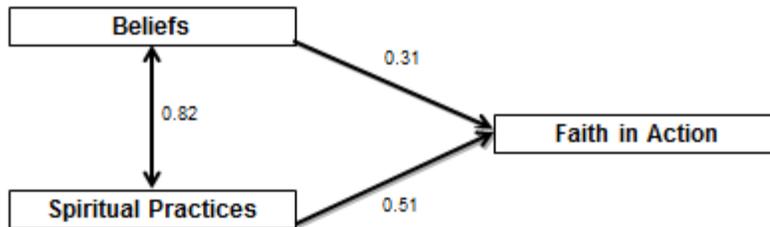


The fit of this model was acceptable (CFI=0.87; SMSR=0.07). The church factor path coefficient was statistically significant ($p<.001$) and indicates a small to medium effect size; the senior pastor factor coefficient was not statistically significant ($p=0.59$). The church and senior pastor factors accounted for 13.8% of the variance in congregants' faith in action ($r^2=0.138$). Given the larger percentage of variance that was accounted for in the outcome variable for this model, researchers determined that faith in action was the best outcome variable to represent congregants' spiritual growth.

In an attempt to improve on this model and determine the mechanisms through which the senior pastor and church influence faith in action, beliefs and spiritual practices were modeled as exogenous variables influencing faith in action in the model shown in Figure 5. The fit of this

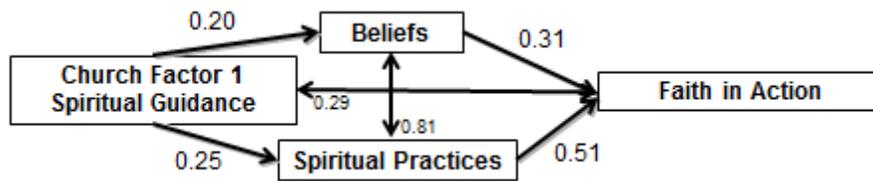
model was excellent (CFI=1.0; SMSR<0.001). All path coefficients were statistically significant at the $p<0.001$ level. The path coefficient for Beliefs indicates a small to medium effect for this variable on faith in action, while the coefficient for Spiritual Practices indicates a medium effect. This model accounted for 60.2% of the variance in faith in action ($r^2=0.602$).

Figure 5. Relationships between congregants' beliefs, spiritual practices and faith in action.



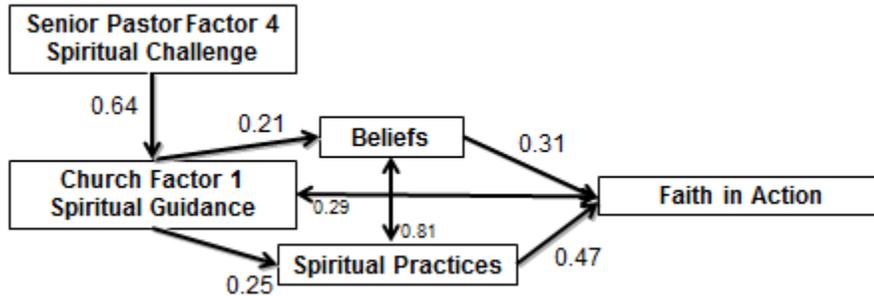
Building on this model, the church's role was included in the next iteration of the model to see how the Spiritual Guidance factor might fit as an exogenous variable that affected beliefs and spiritual practices. Its influence was modeled as correlated with faith in action, as shown in Figure 6. The fit of this model was good (CFI=0.92; SMSR=0.05) and all path coefficients were statistically significant at the $p<.001$ level. Both path coefficients for the Spiritual Guidance factor indicated a small effect. The addition of the Spiritual Guidance factor did not change the percentage of variance accounted for in faith in action very much ($r^2=0.599$). Spiritual Guidance accounted for 4.1% of the variance in beliefs and 6.1% of the variance in spiritual practices. While not large, both r^2 values were statistically significant ($r^2=0.041$, $p=.02$ for beliefs and $r^2=0.061$, $p=.004$ for spiritual practices). Researchers chose to retain the Spiritual Guidance factor in the model despite the small path coefficients because without it the model failed to represent the reality of church life for congregants, where churches do influence their congregants at least to some extent.

Figure 6. Influence of the church on congregants' beliefs, spiritual practices and faith in action.



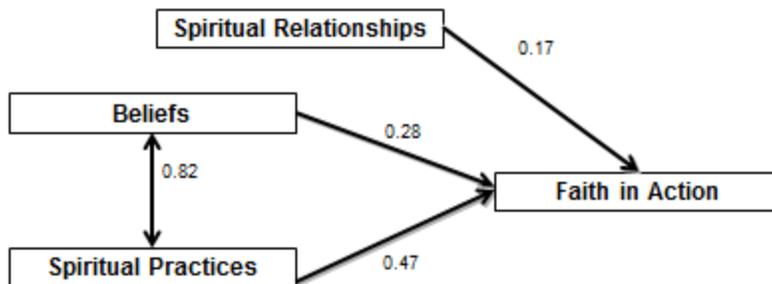
The next model tested re-introduced the senior pastor Spiritual Challenge factor for a similar reason—the pastor clearly does influence the direction of the church and so his or her role needed to be included in the model to increase its face validity. The fit of this model, shown in Figure 7, was acceptable (CFI=0.90; SMSR=0.08). All path coefficients were statistically significant at the $p<.001$ level. The path coefficient for the senior pastor Spiritual Challenge factor influence on the church Spiritual Guidance factor indicates a medium-size effect. The indirect effect of the senior pastor on faith in action through spiritual practices was slightly larger than through beliefs (0.07 vs. 0.04), but very small overall. These path coefficients also were statistically significant at the $p<.001$ level. The percentage of variance accounted for in faith in action was similar to the previous two models ($r^2=0.603$), as were the r-squared values for beliefs and spiritual practices remained small ($r^2=0.043$ for beliefs and $r^2=0.061$ for spiritual practices). All were statistically significant at the $p<.001$ level. This model was deemed the best of all those tested in this research effort so far because it accounted for both church and individual factors that influence practical expressions of spiritual growth.

Figure 7. Influence of the senior pastor and church on congregants' beliefs, spiritual practices and faith in action.



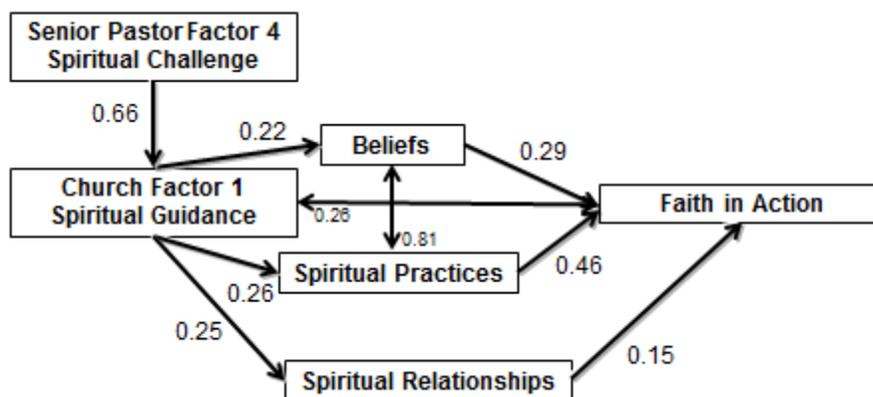
In an attempt to operationalize the church's role through the Spiritual Guidance factor, the Spiritual Relationships variable was introduced next. First, Spiritual Relationships was included in a revised version of the model that was shown above in Figure 5. Spiritual Relationships was modeled as an exogenous variable on faith in action, as shown in Figure 8. The fit of this model was excellent (CFI=1.00; SMSR<0.001). All path coefficients were statistically significant at the $p<.001$ level. The path coefficient for Spiritual Relationships indicates a small effect. This model was considered to be an improvement over the model in Figure 5 because it increased the percentage of variance accounted for in faith in action to 62.7% ($r^2=0.627$). The model also was tested with correlations between Spiritual Relationships and Beliefs and Spiritual Practices. Adding the correlations did not affect the fit of the model and the coefficients were small (below $r=0.30$). Therefore, the simpler version of the model was retained for the sake of parsimony.

Figure 8. Influence of spiritual relationships, congregants' beliefs, and spiritual practices on faith in action.



The final model tested was one that re-introduced the Spiritual Challenge and Spiritual Guidance factors into the model shown in Figure 8. The fit of the new model, shown in Figure 9, was acceptable (CFI=0.88; SMSR=0.08). All path coefficients were statistically significant at the $p<.001$ level. The indirect effect of the senior pastor on faith in action through spiritual practices was 0.09, slightly larger than the effect through beliefs (0.05) or spiritual relationships (0.03); all indirect effects were statistically significant at the $p<.001$ level but very small. The path coefficients for the church Spiritual Guidance factor were similar for the church's effect of all three variables and indicate small effects. The model accounted for 60.6% of the variance in faith in action ($r^2=0.606$). The r-squared values for beliefs and spiritual practices were similar to those for the model shown in Figure 7 ($r^2=0.046$ for beliefs and $r^2=0.067$ for spiritual practices). The model accounted for 6.1% of the variance in spiritual relationships ($r^2=0.061$). All r^2 values were statistically significant at the $p<.001$ level. This model was chosen as the best model to represent the contributions of the senior pastor, the church, and the individual to spiritual growth.

Figure 9. Influence of the senior pastor and church on congregants' spiritual relationships, beliefs, spiritual practices and faith in action.



Discussion

This paper began with a question: How do the church and senior pastor impact the spiritual growth of congregants relative to the impact of what congregants do on their own?

One of the consistent findings of the REVEAL study over its history has been that the efforts of the individual in fostering his or her spiritual growth have a far greater impact than the role of church activities. Participation in church activities has some impact, but when a church helps its congregants nurture and live out their faith day-to-day, spiritual growth is more likely to occur.

The findings of the research presented here offer further evidence that the individual's role is much larger than the church's role. The models shown in Figures 8 and 9 are equivalent in terms of the variance accounted for in faith in action. Adding the role of the senior pastor and the church (operationalized through Spiritual Relationships) to model 9 better represents what influences the spiritual life of congregants. These variables increase the face validity of the model and are important to a full understanding of the data. The notable findings of this study point to the important role of the church and the senior pastor in influencing congregants' beliefs and encouraging them to engage in behaviors that when practiced regularly will produce spiritual fruit. The senior pastor and the church clearly do play a key role in spiritual formation, shaping beliefs, encouraging congregants to engage in spiritual practices, providing a setting for the development of ongoing relationships with other Christians where spiritual growth can be further encouraged and mentored, and creating opportunities for congregants to put their faith into action through serving and giving.

However, the findings of this research show that the effects of the church and senior pastor are smaller than the effects of the individual's beliefs and spiritual practices. No matter how great a job a church and its leaders are doing to create an environment for growth,

ultimately it is up to each individual to make the most of available opportunities and prioritize their time such that they can regularly engage in spiritual practices and form spiritual relationships that will strengthen their faith and bear fruit that makes a difference in their lives and the lives of others. Without this intentionality and ownership, the full effect of the senior pastor and church's actions won't be realized and spiritual growth is less likely to occur.

Epilogue: Predicting Change in Congregations Over Time

The REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey is intended to be re-administered every 18 to 24 months to measure change at the congregation level over time.² At the time of this paper, 99 churches had taken the SLS a second time. Additional exploratory research was conducted to determine which variables measured at the time of a church's initial administration of the survey would predict their Faith in Action score at the second administration of the survey. Due to the small number of churches with data at both time points, regression analysis was employed instead of structural equation modeling.

Items from the first administration of the SLS were entered into a stepwise regression analysis as predictors of Faith in Action at the second administration of the survey. The items included as predictors were:

- Beliefs: Trinity, authority of Scripture, personal God, and salvation by grace (percentage of respondents within the congregation that very strongly agree)
- Spiritual Practices: reflection on Scripture, prayer to seek guidance, (percentage of respondents within the congregation that engage in these practices daily) and tithing (percentage of respondents within the congregation that give 10% of their income or more to the church)
- Spiritual Relationships: meeting with a small group, a spiritual mentor, or a spiritual friend (percentage of respondents within the congregation that do so once per month or more)

² It should be noted that REVEAL makes no attempt to determine how many individuals taking the survey at the second time point also took the survey at the first time point. Results at the two time points are viewed as reflecting changes at the church level, not the individual congregant level. In this sense, the study is not truly longitudinal and assumptions about direct causality cannot be made.

- Church needs: Helps me understand the Bible in depth, helps me develop a personal relationship with Christ, and challenges me to grow (percentage of respondents within the congregation that are extremely satisfied with how their church delivers each characteristic)
- Senior pastor’s leadership: provides sound doctrine, models how to grow, and challenges me to grow (percentage of respondents within the congregation that are extremely satisfied with the way their senior pastor delivers each characteristic)

The results of the analysis were statistically significant with four predictors, $F(4, 96)=25.09$, $p<.001$. The four-predictor model accounted for 50.1% of the variance in Faith in Action scores at Time 2. As shown in Table 2, the best predictor of future Faith in Action scores for a church consist of two spiritual practices, one spiritual relationship variable, and one church need.

Table 2. Beta Weights for Significant Predictor Variables.

Significant predictors	Beta
Reflection on Scripture	0.31
Tithing	0.28
Church: Helps me understand the Bible in depth	0.26
Meets with a small group once per month or more	0.19

An additional stepwise regression analysis was conducted using only the Beliefs and Spiritual Practices variables. This analysis was done to determine how the role of the individual at Time 1 influenced Faith in Action at Time 2. The results of the analysis were statistically significant with two predictors, $F(2, 96)=41.64$, $p<.001$. This model accounted for 45.8% of the variance in Faith in Action scores at Time 2. As shown in Table 3, Reflection on Scripture remained a significant predictor when the spiritual relationships, church, and senior pastor variables were removed from the analysis, while belief in the Trinity emerged as a significant

predictor. This model, which focuses more on the individual's role in spiritual growth, accounted for nearly as much variance in future Faith in Action as the model that included additional inputs from the church.

Table 3. Beta Weights for Significant Predictor Variables.

Significant predictors	Beta
Reflection on Scripture	0.35
Belief in the Trinity	0.42

These preliminary results from the first group of churches to take the SLS at two time points add further evidence for the validity of the models presented earlier. The role of the individual in taking ownership for his or her own spiritual growth is paramount, with engagement with Scripture being of particular importance. However, the church does have an important role in coming alongside congregants to aid their spiritual progress—namely, to help congregants understand the Bible in depth. Overall, the best predictors included items that tap into the role of the church (in helping congregants understand the Bible), the importance of spiritual relationships (in the context of a small group), and the effect of spiritual practices (reflection on Scripture and tithing) in influencing the way that congregants live out their faith. As additional churches take the SLS for the second time, a structural equation model will be tested to better determine the factors that influence growth in Faith in Action at the congregation level.

October 2013 Update

As of October 2013, 189 churches had taken the SLS at least twice. Given the increase in sample size, the regression analysis was repeated to determine if the preliminary results presented above would change in a larger sample. The same variables were entered into a stepwise regression analysis. The results of the analysis were again statistically significant with four predictors, $F(4, 186)=59.52, p<.001$. The four-predictor model accounted for 55.7% of the variance in Faith in Action scores at Time 2, an increase from the 50.1% seen in the original model with 99 churches.

As shown in Table 4, the best predictors of future Faith in Action scores for a church shifted from the original model. The model based on 99 churches included two spiritual practices (reflection on Scripture and tithing), one spiritual relationship variable (small group attendance), and one church need (helps me understand the Bible in depth). The model based on 189 churches consists of two spiritual practices (one of which wasn't seen in the original model), one belief (which was seen in the earlier model that included only beliefs and spiritual practices), and a different church need than was seen in the original model.

Table 4. Beta Weights for Significant Predictor Variables.

Significant predictors	Beta
Belief in the Trinity	0.37
Church: Helps me develop a relationship with Christ	0.21
Tithing	0.22
Prayer to seek guidance	0.17

A second stepwise regression analysis was conducted, again using only the Beliefs and Spiritual Practices variables to determine how the role of the individual at Time 1 influenced Faith in Action at Time 2. The results of the analysis were statistically significant with three predictors, $F(3, 186)=69.77, p<.001$. This model accounted for 52.6% of the variance in Faith in

Action scores at Time 2. The predictor variables found to be statistically significant were the same spiritual practices and belief that were found to be significant predictors in the overall model. See Table 5 for the beta weights for each variable.

Table 5. Beta Weights for Significant Predictor Variables.

Significant predictors	Beta
Belief in the Trinity	0.43
Prayer to seek guidance	0.22
Tithing	0.20

These results from this expanded dataset of churches who have taken the SLS twice indicate that the best predictors of levels of Faith in Action at Time 2 are characteristics of the individual church attenders who responded to the survey at Time 1. Churches with high percentages of congregants who profess a strong belief in the Trinity, pray daily for God's guidance, and give sacrificially to their church when the SLS is first administered will see the highest levels of Faith in Action in their second SLS report.