

What We Can—and Can't—Learn from Willow Creek's REVEAL Study

About 5,000 words

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Willow Creek has discovered survey research. Its REVEAL study examines fundamental church issues such as spiritual growth, participation rates, and member satisfaction, and the results of this study are put forth as changing the way that we think about church. In this essay, I examine the REVEAL study, exploring what we can, and can not, learn from it. More generally, I use REVEAL as a case study of methodological issues that commonly arise in church surveys. I conclude that REVEAL raises challenging questions but may be guilty of over-interpreting its data.

Willow Creek Church, one of the dominant players in the American Evangelical scene, recently published REVEAL: Where are You? by Greg L. Hawkins, Cally Parkinson, and Eric Arnson (2007). This book summarizes several years of research done at both Willow Creek and several other churches, research promised to “transform your church.” REVEAL has been successful, selling tens of thousands of copies. The REVEAL team is currently surveying hundreds of other churches in preparation for a follow-up book. REVEAL might well become a well-known brand name in American Christianity, and, given its popularity, it should inspire a variety of other survey-driven examinations of American churches.

The success of REVEAL has implications for church leaders. Beyond its substantive findings, it also portends the need for leaders to become proficient in understanding and evaluating social research. In addition to the many different skill sets already required of church leaders, it looks like they will also need to make sense of this type of research. In this essay, I review and critique REVEAL as social research, addressing what we can and can not learn from it. In doing so, I address issues that commonly arise in church surveys. My goal is to help the reader both better understand REVEAL and become a more informed consumer of this type of research.

As a preface, let me point out a cultural difference between academia and the church. In academics, if you think something is important, you give it your critical attention. If you do not value something, you just ignore it. In the rest of the (saner) world, critical attention means something else, usually less appealing. It is in an academic sense, then, that I review Reveal—as an expression of my appreciation of it.

The Methods of REVEAL

REVEAL used e-mailed surveys to collect data from about 5,000 church-goers at seven different churches. While it does not identify these churches, it describes them as “geographically and culturally diverse” (Hawkins, Parkinson, and Arnson, 2007, p. xx). The survey questionnaire asked questions about church-related attitudes, practices, satisfaction, and activities. While the survey itself contains hundreds of questions, REVEAL emphasizes two in particular.

Spiritual continuum. REVEAL emphasizes a concept that it terms a “spiritual continuum,” which it uses to represent relational closeness to Christ. In this measure, respondents describe the depth of their spiritual life, and based on these answers they are placed into one of four groups. The first group represents people who have not yet crossed the line into Christianity—those whom

we might call “seekers.” Their self-identified faith status is summarized by the statement: “I believe in God but I’m not sure about Christ. My faith is not a significant part of my life.”

The remaining three groups all identify themselves as Christians, and REVEAL divides them up into groups based on the centrality of their faith in their lives. These groups are:

- those growing in Christ: “I believe in Jesus, and I’m working on what it means to get to know him.”
- those close to Christ. “I feel really close to Christ and depend on him daily for guidance.”
- those who are Christ-Centered. “God is all I need in my life. He is enough.”

These four groups represent a continuum from less faith to more faith in Christ. Presumably, people who are Christ-Centered are more spiritually mature than those who are close to Christ who in turn are more mature than those who are growing in Christ, who are more mature than those who exploring Christianity.

Spiritual growth. The other emphasized measure is termed “spiritual growth.” This is a combination of attitudes and behaviors that are good for Christians to hold and do. They include tithing, evangelizing, serving others, reading the Bible, praying, loving God, and loving others.

REVEAL collected data with a cross-sectional survey, meaning that all the data were collected at one point in time in the respondents’ lives. Such “snap-shot” research designs are commonly used in social research, however they have inherent weaknesses. They have trouble describing processes over time—think of trying to document a child’s growth by taking only one photograph. Also, they have trouble establishing temporal ordering—the order in which things occur—and this makes it difficult to test for causality. These limitations matter for REVEAL because the central question that it asks—does attending church services significantly change a person—is both longitudinal and causal in nature.

The Results of REVEAL

The overriding question of REVEAL is what churches can do to promote spiritual growth among their members. REVEAL’s answer to this question can be summarized in four findings.

1. The weak effect of church activities. REVEAL starts with the assumption that increased church activities results in increased spiritual growth. If churches are doing their jobs, then increased

involvement in their activities should result in people growing spiritually. This may not be the case, however, because REVEAL finds only a weak, positive association between involvement in church activities and some forms of spiritual growth and no association at all with other forms. They term this lack of strong association a “stunning discovery” (p. 36), and it leads them to cast about for stronger predictors of spiritual growth.

2. The strong effect of the spiritual continuum. While participation in church activities does not associate with spiritual growth, REVEAL argues that progress on the spiritual continuum does. As such, the “Christ-centered group” shows higher levels of spiritual growth than those who were “close to Christ” who in turn showed more than those “growing in Christ” who were followed by those “exploring Christianity” (pp. 38-41; 44-47).

3. The varying influence of the Church. From the above findings, REVEAL concludes that the impact of church involvement varies by progress on the spiritual continuum. The main activities of the Church, such as Sunday services and small groups, are most important for people who are exploring Christianity and those growing in Christ. As Christians become more Christ-centered, the church should move toward providing opportunities, especially for service (pp. 41-43).

4. Some Christians are dissatisfied or stalled. REVEAL finds that not all of its respondents were happy with their church and their spiritual walk. Instead, about one-quarter of the sample described themselves as either spiritually stalled or as dissatisfied with the role of the church in their lives. Those who reported feeling stalled had relatively low levels of prayer and scripture reading. The dissatisfied group reported high levels of tithing, serving, and evangelizing (pp. 47-56).

Reaction to REVEAL

REVEAL has had a profound impact on Willow Creek Church, and, by extension, perhaps substantial portions of the U.S. Evangelical Church.

In discussing REVEAL, Bill Hybels, lead pastor of Willow Creek, summarized the findings this way:

“Some of the stuff that we have put millions of dollars into thinking it would really help our people grow and develop spiritually, when the data actually came back it wasn’t helping people that much. Other things that we didn’t put that much money into and didn’t put much staff against is stuff our people are crying out for....”

Hybels confesses:

"We made a mistake. What we should have done when people crossed the line of faith and become Christians, we should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become 'self feeders.' We should have gotten people, taught people, how to read their Bible between service, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own.

In other words, spiritual growth doesn't happen best by becoming dependent on elaborate church programs but through the age old spiritual practices of prayer, bible reading, and relationships. And, ironically, these basic disciplines do not require multi-million dollar facilities and hundreds of staff to manage" (Out of Ur, 2007).

REVEAL presents its message as valuable to all churches. It writes that its findings will "undoubtedly change the way you think about church—and what it really takes to make a difference." A quick Google search indicates that many, many people are talking about REVEAL, and so, given the potential importance of this book for the American church, it is worth asking whether we can believe its findings.

Strengths of REVEAL

Here are some things that REVEAL does well. Most obviously, the REVEAL study collects data about the church. Now, I realize that there are important matters in the Church that can not be resolved with survey data; still, surveys give valuable information for relatively little cost. Frankly, it's beyond me why any church would not routinely collect data about itself and its members. (I suppose that's why I'm a sociologist and not a pastor). REVEAL's use of church surveys should encourage other churches to do the same.

REVEAL also addresses empirical questions with empirical data. I have been in countless meetings and discussions that hinged on questions such as "what do people in the church think about this" or "how many people are doing that." These are empirical questions, and they can be answered by surveys. If we care about questions like these, why not take the time to answer them properly?

REVEAL collects both qualitative and quantitative data. Some people seem to be infatuated with

numerical data, but qualitative narratives collected with in-depth interviews are also quite useful. Using both—numbers and words—is a powerful approach for any area of study.

REVEAL addresses interesting, applied questions that matter to Christian leaders. Sociologists and other academics do study religion, and routinely use powerful research methods, but our questions can be irrelevant for the Christian practitioner. Certainly some academics in the study of religion have written successfully for a larger audience, but most seem quite content just filling up the shelves of university libraries. In contrast, REVEAL addresses questions that matter for the Church.

REVEAL draws an over-riding conclusion from its data that seems valuable for the church--that Christians of different maturity levels need different types of input from their churches. That is, church ministry is not "one-size-fits-all." At some level, I think most churches already know this, that is why they have Sunday school for kids and classes for new believers, but having such a prominent voice as Willow Creek state this principle is useful.

Finally, REVEAL presents their data in a clear, lucid manner. Not too many survey-based books are this popular because they tend to be inaccessible to the general reader. In contrast, REVEAL's graphs, charts, pictures, and statistics are easy to understand for the non-expert.

Concern #1. Dimensions of Religiosity

Now for what can be improved with REVEAL. I start with what may be an unfair question--unfair because I certainly don't know the answer, and there may not be a single, correct answer to it. What should be the main outcome variable of church surveys? That is, what is the ultimate goal of the Church, and how would we measure it. There are multiple answers to these questions, and it is worth noting how REVEAL does so.

The Reveal study identifies the goal of the church as producing spiritual growth, which it measures as "spiritual behaviors"--such as prayer, tithing, evangelism, and serving others--as well as "spiritual attitudes"--love for God and love for people. These seem reasonable, and not many Christians would argue against them, but there are other possible outcomes as well.

Sociologists have spent a lot of time analyzing the underlying dimensions of religiousness, and

they have come up with a variety of answers. An early, classic statement comes from Rodney Stark and Charles Glock (1968) who identified 8 dimensions of "religiosity." They are:

- 1) Experiential--feelings of having communed with God, having received revelation or direct experience with God.
- 2) Devotional--private devotion, private prayer.
- 3) Ritualistic--participation in group worship services and other activities.
- 4) Belief--the extent to which the person believes in the theological beliefs of the group.
- 5) Knowledge--the extent to which the person knows the beliefs and doctrine of the group.
- 6) Consequential--how people's lives--their attitudes and behaviors, are changed by their religious involvement.
- 7) Communal--one's social integration into the religious group, how many friends they have who are fellow believers.
- 8) Particularism--the degree to which the person believes that their faith is the true path to salvation.

Presumably Christian churches want their members to score high on most, if not all, of these dimensions. However, Reveal emphasizes only the consequential dimension of religion as a desired outcome. It uses another dimension—the experiential dimension—as their main predictor variable (what they term a “spiritual continuum.”)

As such, REVEAL leaves unexamined significant aspects of the Christian walk. This limited focus does not invalidate the findings of REVEAL, but examining a broader range of outcomes would produce a richer, and possibly different, story.

Concern #2. Measuring a Spiritual Continuum

At the heart of the REVEAL study is the “spiritual continuum”—which they present as the key to promoting spiritual growth. Unfortunately, the variable “spiritual continuum” has some awkward measurement properties that undercut its usefulness.

It is unclear if these stages are indeed sequential. Clearly stage 1—exploring Christianity—precedes the following three, but one could make a strong case that stages 2, 3, and 4 are all facets of spiritual maturity. Mature Christians should be working on getting to know Jesus better,

depending on him for daily guidance, and having Christ at the center of their lives. In fact, it is hard to imagine spiritual maturity not involving all three stages.

Stage #4, which REVEAL puts forth as the pinnacle of spiritual maturity, is awkward because it implies a perfection that may not fit with true spiritual maturity. People in this stage are represented by the statements “God is all that I need in my life” and “everything that I do is a reflection of Christ.” As I understand spiritual maturity, it is associated with understanding our own weaknesses and failings. The more that we grow, the more that we realize how much we still need to grow. A person claiming that everything they do is a reflection of Christ would strike me as someone who has a lot of growing left to do

Concern #3. Causal Direction

REVEAL makes some particularly strong, and perhaps overly strong, causal assumptions. In particular, it assumes that relational closeness (i.e., the spiritual continuum) predicts spiritual growth (i.e., spiritual behavior and attitudes), and so churches should focus on increasing relational closeness. The authors write that “spiritual growth is all about increasing relational closeness to Christ” (p. 38). Simply put: the more we feel close to Christ, the more we act and believe like Christians.

This causal assumption, that “closeness” prompts “growth,” is reasonable, but so are other assumptions. As shown in Figure 1, Model 1 (i.e., continuum → growth) represents the approach taken by REVEAL—feeling close to Christ leads to more Christian attitudes and behaviors. However, it could be the reverse—maybe doing Christian things, like reading the Bible, makes us feel closer to Christ. This would be Model #2. Maybe relational closeness and spiritual growth are mutually interdependent such that increasing one increases the other (Model 3).

*** Figure 1 about here ***

It is important to realize that REVEAL, with its use of cross-sectional data, can not test these competing assumptions. As such, their assertion of Model 1 (as opposed to Models 2 or 3) has no empirical grounding. They may be right, they may be wrong, and we can not tell from their data.

Personally, I find Model #4 to be most compelling. The Church wants to increase both maturity

and growth among its members, so it casts about for whatever programs, teachings, and strategies would accomplish this (represented by “X”).

Ultimately, as per Concern #1 above, it may be of little value to separate “relationship with Christ” (i.e., spiritual continuum) and spiritual growth since the church wants to increase both.

The authors of REVEAL have downplayed the need to test causal relationships; instead, they seek “actionable correlations”—empirical associations on which the Church can act without needing to explore the nuances of cause and effect. The problem with this approach is that for a correlation to be useful, it must make some causal assumption. If this assumption is wrong, the correlation may be wrong too.

Here is an example of the potential pitfalls of disregarding causality. One would observe that a strong correlate of church growth is the number of cars in the parking lot during church services. Big churches have many cars, little churches have few cars, and growing churches have more cars over time. If we do not care about causality, we could just assume that more parked cars spurs church growth. Perhaps churches should rent cars on Sundays or pay neighbors to park their cars in the church parking lot. Obviously, the causal logic here is faulty, for parked cars reflect, rather than cause, church growth, but this example illustrates the need to go beyond simple correlations and into causal relationships.

Concern #4: Is the Willow Creek Model Flawed?

Critics have seized upon REVEAL’s findings as evidence that Willow Creek’s well-known seeker-sensitive model is flawed and ineffective. It is not just critics, either. These findings have caused considerable distress for the leadership of Willow Creek. Bill Hybels refers to the findings of REVEAL as painful because it indicated that Willow Creek was not doing as well as it had thought (Hawkins, Parkinson, and Arnson, 2007, p. 3).

This reinterpretation of the Willow Creek model is based primarily on REVEAL’s finding of little correlation between church participation and spiritual growth. As shown in Figure 2, reprinted from REVEAL (p. 35), the relationship between church activity and spiritual growth is modest at best.

*** Figure 2 about here ***

Given the wide influence of Willow Creek in American Evangelical Christianity, it is worth knowing whether its model is actually flawed. However, the type of data collected by REVEAL does not lend itself well to addressing this question, so the best answer is probably that we do not know, at least based on REVEAL.

The relationship between church activities and spiritual growth might well be more complex than is assumed in REVEAL. Yes, church activities should influence spiritual growth, but the reverse might be equally true. Maybe spiritually immature, new Christians are those people most attracted to the many activities of the church. As they grow spiritually, they settle down into fewer activities, focusing on those that fit them well. If so, increased spiritual growth would lead to reduced church activities. Perhaps there are two counteracting causal mechanisms at play: Church activities increase spiritual maturity and spiritual maturity decreases church activities. If so, we would observe little overall correlation between church activities and spiritual maturity even if church activities are effective.

Another wrinkle arises in that the effects of a given church activity are not limited to those who directly participate in it. People talk to each other, and they learn from each other. In a religious community, such as Willow Creek, what is taught to one group of people affects others as well. As such, the impact of programs on high-activity people would probably be spread to low-activity people as well—spouses, friends, and family. This effect on low-activity people could change their behavior to make them more similar to high-activity people. At the church-wide level, this would result in a weak association between church activities and maturity among those who participate in them. Why? Because the activities influence those who did not directly participate as well. As such, a cross-sectional study such as REEAL might incorrectly assume that church activities do not foster spiritual growth.

While REVEAL does not lend itself well to testing church effectiveness, there are several research strategies that would. One approach would look at church-level data. For example, find 100 churches, 50 that subscribe to the Willow Creek model and 50 that do not. How are they different? How are they the same? (Ideally you would randomly assign which churches follow the Willow Creek model, but that might be difficult). One could also observe individuals who have just entered the church and record how they change over time. It would seem that Willow

Creek should try these more powerful research designs before substantially changing such a successful institution.

Concern #5: Is Stalled Bad?

REVEAL finds that about a quarter of their sample described themselves as spiritually “stalled” or dissatisfied with their church. Clearly, this is a significant problem for Willow Creek, right? Well, maybe not.

*** Figure 3 about here ***

The problem with interpreting this statistic is the lack of a suitable comparison group, so we do not know if it good or bad. Let's say I told you that a sports player was successful in two-thirds of what they attempted, and then I asked you if this is good. Well, you would need to know how well everyone else does. If it is free throws, this is not very good. If it is completing passes, this is very good. If it's getting on base, it is the best ever.

It may be the nature of Christian life that a quarter of Christians are stalled or dissatisfied at any given time.

or

It may be that this number is high, suggesting that Willow needs to improve

or

It may be that this number is low, suggesting that Willow is doing a great job.

It gets even more complicated. Church involvement is voluntary, so how do we interpret the continue involvement of dissatisfied, stalled people? Their involvement suggests other benefits or ties keeping them in church. Maybe Willow Creek should be commended for holding on to those people having spiritual diffulties.

Let us take an extreme example. Suppose that we found a church in which 100% of its attendees reported themselves as satisfied and growing. According to the logic of REVEAL, this would be excellent. Maybe it is, but maybe it is not. Maybe the church unintentionally drives off anyone who is having troubles or is otherwise unhappy. This produces high survey scores, but it misses the larger purpose of the church.

This finding raises a broader question about the nature of spiritual growth, and that is whether being “stalled” is bad. At least in my experience, spiritual growth is not linear, but rather it goes up in fits and starts: sudden increases followed by plateaus. Feeling stalled or dissatisfied may just be an inherent part of any spiritual walk. In fact, I can think of few areas of life in which growth is linear—learning a sport or hobby, growing together as a married couple, advancing in a career all seem to follow distinctly non-linear patterns. Not only is sometimes feeling stalled the way things are, maybe it is the way things should be.

There is yet another issue, and that has to do with the statistical principle of regression to the mean. This principle holds that whenever people have extreme scores on a measure, either very high or very low, we can expect them to become less extreme, on average, over time. This happens because extreme scores have both stable and unstable causes, and the unstable causes change.

Here are some everyday examples of regression to the mean:

- In college football, the top twenty teams at the end of one season will probably not do as well, as a group, in the following season. Conversely, the bottom twenty teams, as a group, should do better.
- Very tall parents will usually have children who are shorter than they are, and very short parents will usually have taller children.
- The top mutual funds this year probably will not perform as well next year, and the worst mutual funds will probably perform better (though maybe not well).

What does this mean for studies such as REVEAL? Church surveys should regularly find that, as a group, the most active, mature church members are getting worse, and the newest, least experienced members are getting better. This is not necessarily a flaw in ministry plans but rather simply a reflection of regression to the mean. Certainly churches can, and maybe should, target dissatisfied believers, but their existence is not necessarily a cause for great concern.

Suggestions for the future of REVEAL

The REVEAL team has long-term plans for data collection, and they are currently collecting data from hundreds of churches. REVEAL addresses some big questions, and as they move forward

in their research, they might consider altering their research design to collect more powerful data in answering these questions.

1) Longitudinal data. The REVEAL study collected cross-sectional data, i.e., data collected at one point in time. It makes sense that REVEAL began this way because these data are relatively inexpensive to collect, and so they are a common first step in exploring a phenomenon. If I were to make one, over-riding critique of REVEAL, it would be that they do not attend to the limitations of cross-sectional data, and as a result they end up over-interpreting the data—drawing stronger conclusions than warranted.

Here is what a longitudinal data set might look like for REVEAL. They could recruit 1,000 people who attend Willow Creek—some who have just started attending, some who have been there for years, and some in between. REVEAL could interview them, wait a year, and then interview them again. This type of study would get at what happens to people when they attend Willow Creek, and I do not know of any church that currently collects this type of rich data.

2) Church-level measures. As REVEAL collects data from multiple churches, it would do well to collect data about the churches themselves as well as from the people who attend the churches. Church-level data could include the size of the church, the size of the surrounding community, the number of pastors, whether they have a “seeker-sensitive” approach to ministry, budget information, the percentage of leadership who are women or racial minorities, and any other church characteristic that might affect peoples’ experiences.

With church-level measures such as these, REVEAL could then conduct what is called a multi-level analysis. This type of analysis examines both individual- and church-level characteristics as they relate to some outcome, such as spiritual growth. The classic example of multi-level analysis is educational studies. If a child succeeds in education, it may be because of who the student is—smart, hard working, high goals, etc—or it may be due to the school they attend—low teacher/student ratio, highly educated and well-paid teachers, smart classmates, etc. Educational studies address this question by collecting data from multiple students at multiple schools and then testing the relative impact of personal and school characteristics. This same logic could be applied to church surveys, and it would identify whether it is the person, the church, or both that affect individual outcomes.

As a summary, we might view REVEAL, and the Willow Creek brand associated with it, as a sea change in Evangelical Christianity's use of data. Collecting survey data is a powerful but underutilized tool in the world of American Christian churches. By conducting REVEAL, Willow Creek has modeled to other churches the use of surveys, and given Willow's influence in American Christendom, this message should take hold. Like any study, REVEAL has its weaknesses—notably a propensity to over-interpret its data. Nonetheless, it represents a reasonable pilot study for future, more definitive studies in this area.

References

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Figure 1: Possible Causal Relationships between the Spiritual Continuum and Spiritual Growth.

Spiritual Continuum and Growth

- 1) Continuum \longrightarrow Growth
- 2) Growth \longrightarrow Continuum
- 3) Continuum \longleftrightarrow Growth
- 4) Continuum \longleftrightarrow Growth

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graph TD; X((X)) --> Continuum; X --> Growth; Continuum <--> Growth;
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Figure 2: Church Activities and Spiritual Growth.

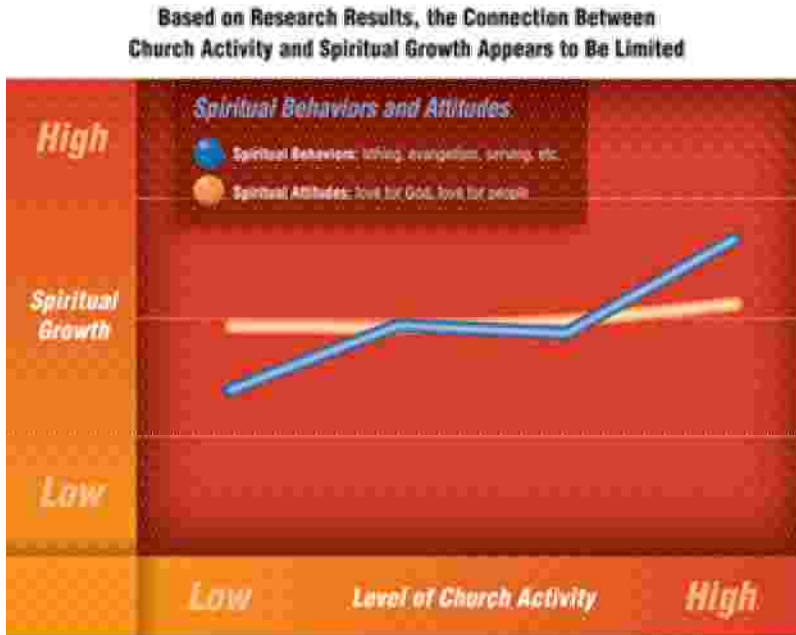


Figure 3: Stalled and Dissatisfied Segments of REVEAL.

