

Review of Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move: What 1000 Churches REVEAL about Spiritual Growth*

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Hawkins GL and Parkinson C 2011. *Move: What 1000 Churches REVEAL about Spiritual Growth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Introduction

One of the positive trends in contemporary conservative Christian circles is the renewed focus on discipleship and spiritual formation. Like the rest of the society in which it witnesses, the church is coming round to once again appreciate that quality is as important as quantity. So, it is now widely reaffirmed that the number of people attending church services or involved in Christian activities are on their own unreliable for gauging the spiritual health of the church. The quality of spiritual development, at both individual and congregational levels, is even more important.

This focus on spiritual formation of Christians is really not new. The historical landscape of Christianity is strewn with peaks and troughs of alternating emphases on evangelism at certain periods, followed by consolidating periods of emphases on discipleship. What is, however, new in the current wave of emphases on discipleship is, the concerted effort to also quantify spiritual growth itself. By and large, the tendency

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

in previous eras was to focus on exhorting believers towards spiritual growth, providing them with resources to help in that direction, and organising discipleship activities and church programmes to ensure sustained growth of individuals and congregations (e.g. Gumbel 1993; Tice and Cooper 2002; Warren 2002).²

In contrast, the latest trend seeks to actually quantify how spiritual growth manifests itself in individuals and churches; this appears to be inspiring a wave of interest in academic as well as popular arenas (e.g. Barna 2012; Gallagher 2009:232–261; Willard 2010:29).

Several impetuses are behind this most recent emphasis on quantifying a largely qualitative idea as spiritual growth. Firstly, society itself has moved in this direction of seeking ways to measure qualitative parameters. Even nebulous subjective ideas such as beauty, health, happiness, personal well-being, and quality of life are being quantified and indexed by researchers and government policy makers (Abdel-Khalek 2006:139–150; Arnesen and Norhelm 2003:81–86). The church seems to have taken its cue from this sociological trend.

Secondly, many churches are coming to grips with the sad reality of the marked mismatch between increased Christian activities and attendances at seeker-sensitive church services, and the diminishing degree of Christian identity and influence in society at large. It is not surprising, therefore, that many concerned churchmen have thrown an introspective searchlight on evaluating what exactly may be going wrong with our church programmes. Seeking to index personal and congregational transformation is an imperative component of this

² An exception to this is the Engel Scale proposed in 1977 for identifying twelve levels of spiritual growth (Engel 1977; cf. Erickson 1978). But such attempts were far and few between, relied too much on psycho-analytic concepts of maturation, and ultimately failed to capture the popular imagination.

introspection (Carlson and Lueken 2011; Hawkins, Parkinsons and Amson 2007).

Thirdly, the phenomenal successes of industries which have introduced statistical measures for quantifying, auditing, and improving various stages of production lines have made quantification of qualitative concepts very attractive to all sectors of the society. This phenomenon has been termed ‘MacDonaldization of Society’, a phrase coined by sociologist George Ritzer to describe a society ‘which emphasizes efficiency, predictability, calculability, substitution of nonhuman for human technology, and control over uncertainty’ (1983:101). In this social context, it seems reasonable for Christians also to seek to establish methods and measures of assessing the efficacy and efficiency of church activities, Christian resources, and discipleship programmes designed to support spiritual growth.

It is on the back of these societal trends that the Willow Creek Association, based in Illinois, U.S.A., organised an extensive cross-sectional study with the aim of establishing ‘ways to know whether the people in our congregations are truly growing more in love with God and extending that love to other people’ (p. 14). *Move: what 1000 churches reveal about spiritual growth* reports what the authors claim is the ‘astounding, paradigm bursting’ (p. 14) results of the study. The book also provides commentaries and plentiful ideas for church leaders to implement in order to ensure spiritual growth in their congregations. The following extended review summarises the contents of the book, and evaluates some of the merits of the study’s methodology and conclusions.

1. Summary of the Book

1.1. General comments

At almost three hundred pages, with helpful illustrative charts, regular bullet-pointed summaries, and periodic ‘real-life’ practical examples to elucidate various conclusions, *Move* is a very attractively compiled report of the study. The book is divided into three parts. The first part describes characteristics of four stages of Christian development, termed ‘the Spiritual continuum’. The second part addresses the various ‘catalysts’ which enable growth, or ‘movement’ of people between each stage of the spiritual continuum. The third part introduces a statistical index for identifying the ‘best’ churches. This index, called ‘the Spiritual Vitality Index’ is then used to address how church leaders could enable growth in their congregations. I shall first recap the methodology of the study, and then, summarise each of the three parts of the book, before providing my evaluation.

1.2. Methodology of the study

REVEAL was a four-year cross-sectional survey of the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and practices of church attendants, together with issues related to their degree of satisfaction with their personal and congregational growth parameters. A web-based questionnaire’, dubbed ‘the REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey’, was administered to 250,000 volunteer church attenders from over one thousand diverse protestant congregations from nineteen countries.

The details of the instrumental questionnaire itself remain patented and not publicly available for independent assessment. Judging by the results and information on the project website however, this was an extensive self-administered questionnaire requiring respondents to

evaluate various issues, as well as providing answers to hundreds of other questions. Important characteristics of the participating churches were also collected, matched with the answers of respondents who attended those churches and factored into the analysis of the data.

The key assumption of the study is its definition of spiritual growth as ‘increasing love of God and increasing love of others’ (p. 18). The questions and results are essentially shaped by this fundamental definition. The researchers admit that spiritual growth is complex, non-linear, and unpredictable. However, they quite reasonably argue that there is a generally observable progression of some indicators to enable assessment of this growth, at least for a group of believers.

1.3. Summary of part 1

The first part of *Move* describes ‘the Spiritual continuum’ by setting out the characteristics of the four different stages or categories of church attenders, namely, exploring Christ, growing in Christ, close to Christ, and Christ-centred.

The *exploring Christ* attenders, some passively, and other actively exploring becoming devoted Christians, have not yet made definite commitment to Christ, even though they are interested in things about God and the social fellowship that attending church provides. With appropriate targeting by church leadership, some of these attenders could progress to the next level of the continuum. Moreover, the ‘longer a person exploring Christ attends a church, the less likely they are to follow Christ’, five years being the apparent cut-off point (p. 37). Thus, identifying and ensuring all is done to address the spiritual needs of this group is paramount.

The *growing in Christ* attenders constitutes the largest sub-group of respondents of the study (38 percent) and the most active participants in church activities. Despite their participation, they are ‘somewhat less sure of their belief in salvation by grace, and the authority of the Bible, but their level of certainty on these key beliefs is almost double that of the *exploring Christ* segment’ (p. 57). Of key importance to this group is the fact that the passion and spiritual zest of the church leadership is extremely influential in catalysing the growth of this group.

The *close to Christ* group has a greater level of self-assurance as Christ followers, take ownership for their own spiritual growth, and are committed to personal spiritual practices, such as prayer and Bible reading. Members of this group also love to share their faith and invest a fair amount of their time and effort into doing so.

The Christ-centred believers are marked out by their leadership potential, qualities, and activities in the church’s life. They live a surrendered life to Christ and are keen to serve him in the church and the wider community. Even so, they still have areas needing improvement, especially in their financial giving and serving. Also of interest is the fact that the members of this category appear to be the least catered for and motivated by the church’s programmes.

1.4. Summary of part 2

The second part of *Move* describes the various ‘catalysts’ which enhance growth between the stages of the spiritual continuum. The authors define these catalysts as ‘twenty-five decisions that are critical to helping people stay on a path toward full devotion to Christ’ (p. 106). The catalysts are categorised into four classes, namely, (a) spiritual beliefs and attitudes, (b) organised church activities, (c) personal spiritual practices, and (d) spiritual activities with others. Depending on

the stage of the spiritual continuum to which a person belongs, some of these catalysts may be more important than others.

So, for example, the authors found that organised church activities tend to be more helpful in catalysing the two movements between the first three stages of the continuum. Church activities are not as important in moving people from the *close to Christ* stage to Christ-centred level. According to the authors, that was an unexpected finding.

Even more surprising to the authors is the finding that ‘the activity that commands most of the church’s resources—weekend services—shows up as only moderately important’ for enhancing spiritual growth beyond the first movement from ‘exploring Christ’ to ‘growing in Christ’ (p. 113). However, an important caveat to this particular finding is the fact that a significant proportion of the churches in this group, forty-three percent, did not have seeker-sensitive church services (p. 113 n.1). So, it may well be that this ‘surprising’ finding is a reflection of how ineffective the weekend services were in catalysing growth, rather than the conclusion made by the authors that weekend services were only moderately important in moving believers on, from the second to the higher levels of growth.

Also of interest is the finding that the most influential activity that catalyses movement from *growing in Christ* to *close to Christ* stage of growth is ‘serving those in need through the church’ (p. 144). Serving other people is indeed an interesting parameter in this study. On the one hand, it catalyses growth; yet, on the other hand, it evidences growth. This circular association between service and growth clearly makes predictions of causality between the two parameters difficult, even though that problem is not addressed by the book.

Another key element of the analysis is the category labelled as ‘stalled’ growth; thirteen percent of the quarter of a million respondents choosing this category to describe their self-assessment. This category represents respondents who were not satisfied with the progress they were making in their spiritual growth at the time of completing the questionnaire.

Indeed, on average, twenty-six percent of the respondents ‘are either stalled, dissatisfied with the church, or both’ (p. 171). This rather high proportion of respondents, who are stalled or disaffected within the church, understandably draws some anxious comments from the authors. However, and as I shall shortly observe, caution is needed when interpreting the exact meaning of ‘stalling’ in relation to spiritual growth. All the same, it is interesting to note that the ‘stalled’ group tend to be characterised by indiscipline regarding personal spiritual practices often due to the overwhelming demands of everyday life. They are ‘boxed in and trapped by their schedules and commitments’ (p. 180).

1.5. Summary of part 3

The third part of *Move* focuses on how church leaders could help in the growth of individuals and their congregations. It begins by describing a statistical index called the Spiritual Vitality Index (SVI), a percentage point indicating ‘how a church’s congregation compares to the rest of the churches in the REVEAL database’ (p. 196).

The exact statistical equation and method of computation of this index have not been published, and so, cannot be evaluated. However, the parameters used to compute the index are derived from the participants’ self-assessment of the degree of satisfaction regarding the role of the church, the personal spiritual practices of the respondents themselves,

and the activities which demonstrate faith in action. These self-assessments were then used to identify the key characteristics and best practices of congregations with the highest SVIs.

In so doing, the study identifies some of the actionable measures that congregations can take to enhance their SVIs, and hence, improve the growth of their churches. Spiritual Vitality Index ‘gives church leaders a current spiritual health snapshot of their congregation that is much broader than a measure of their experience with the church’ (p. 199).

Using the SVI, the authors identified four patterns of church effectiveness, namely, (a) the apathetic church with SVI less than 60, (b) the introverted church with SVI in the high 60s, (c) the average church with SVI in the 70s, and (d) the high-energy church with SVI 85 and above.

Based on these, the authors then recommend several ‘best practices’ for church leaders to adopt, implement, and monitor as a way of improving the SVI of their congregations. Examples of best practices are making biblical teaching prominent, ensuring ownership of growth by the congregation, enriching community-serving activities which provide avenues for congregants to share their faith, and continual stress on the imperative for spiritual growth in the congregation.

The book closes with a chapter on key leadership principles, and appendices detailing some of the features and identities of the participating churches. I shall now evaluate the study’s methodology and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the book.

2. Evaluation of the Study

2.1. General strengths of the study and report

The authors are to be highly commended for this study and its immense achievements. They quite rightly admit that some may question the rationale behind seeking to measure a qualitative concept such as spiritual growth. However, if anything, the study confronts a not uncommon complacent attitude in certain conservative Christian circles towards application of research methods to examine church dynamics in general.

The fact is, it is not good enough for churches and church leaders to provide exhortations and organize activities for spiritual growth, and merely hope that these are adequate in enhancing growth. Ways of assessing the efficacy of these programmes will, at least, help church leaders know where changes are necessary. As one of the advertising blurbs on the study website puts it, REVEAL ‘takes the guesswork out of church work’.³

A few reviewers have also, unfairly I believe, criticised the study as an exercise in legalism (Anonymous 2009; Ortberg 2012; Welborn 2007). I think this criticism is unfounded. It is true that spiritual growth is a result of God’s work in the human soul; indeed, I shall shortly have something to say about how the lack of prominence given to the work of the Spirit in the study may well be one of its weaknesses. However, that said, it is not immaterial that God has chosen to use humans as his agents to effect transformation in his children. Application of measures and methods suited for evaluating and enhancing the contributions of

³ Online article. Accessed from www.revealnow.com/.

the human agents in spiritual growth are therefore necessary and defensible.

Moreover, conservatives cannot ignore the following fundamental question: is what ‘their’ churches do really make a difference by increasing spiritual growth? Neither can ‘conservatives’ assume that merely choosing to do anything, even if well thought out, will naturally lead to spiritual growth. In attempting to grapple with this elemental issue of spiritual efficiency, the authors have at least asked the key question that must be answered in the present wave of emphases on discipleship.

The report itself must also be commended for its clarity of presentation, its numerous illustrative charts, and its simplicity of language. (I will have more to say about some of the weaknesses of the report shortly.) However, the idea of presenting the report of the study through a popular medium is, essentially, brilliant. This medium has at least ensured that the findings of such a vital study are accessible to the ordinary church attenders of whom, and for whom, the study was geared. I shall now make some specific comments on the strengths of the methodology.

2.2. Strengths of the methodology of study

A major incontestable strength of the study is its sheer statistical power. Surveying over 250,000 church attenders from 1007 protestant churches widely spread across the length and breadth of the U.S.A. and abroad, including denominations of different stripes, representing all ethnic groups, and comprising the widest variation of professional diversity, must have been an enormous undertaking. The dividends from the sample size are equally colossal. At least the sample size heightens the probability that the conclusions are reliable. The scale of the study is a

notable achievement and rightly deserves the widespread praise it has received.

Another positive feature of the study is the simplicity of the adopted definition of spiritual growth. By focusing on indices which enable the assessment of increasing love for God, and love of others, the authors were able to help the individual respondents to assess their own growth in Christ. As I shall shortly comment, this simplicity may well serve also as a weakness of the study in some respect. Nevertheless, there are some advantages in adopting a simple surrogate marker for measuring a complex phenomenon such as spiritual growth. Also commendable is the effective use of spatial metaphors for characterising and measuring spiritual growth.

The idea of the Spiritual Vitality Index is also a noteworthy achievement of the study. Even though the statistical underpinnings of the index need to be published and validated by independent parties, the general idea of establishing a measure through which congregations may assess if and whether they are serving their Christ-mandated task of enhancing spiritual growth of their members is an excellent one. Certainly, participating churches should find the assessment process extremely rewarding for directing how and in which areas they need to concentrate their resources for further improvements.

2.3. General weaknesses of the study and report

Two key caveats must be stated as preliminary to critiquing the study and the report. Firstly, the authors insist that this was never designed to be an ‘academic’ study. Thus, it would be wrong to expect a high degree of academic rigour in terms of research methodology. While this pragmatic approach is understandable, its effects cut both ways. On the one hand, it led to a much-simplified methodology and has yielded

several key items of information of likely benefit to the church. However, on the other hand, the lack of methodological rigour means that many of the conclusions must be taken with guarded tentativeness and, at least, some degree of reserve.

So, for example, though the book claims to have yielded ‘a new lens through which to view spiritual growth’ (p. 18), it is extremely doubtful if a single cross-sectional self-administered survey can indeed yield data suited for making conclusions on growth. The idea of growth always involves changes over time. Thus, the only way of determining if growth has indeed occurred is through a longitudinal study.

More will be said on this shortly. But, it is unsurprising that the ‘spiritual continuum’, which is suggested as representing the stages of spiritual growth, actually appears to categorise members of churches according to their spiritual needs. This methodological flaw may well weaken some of the conclusions of the study.

A second caveat regards the nature of the questionnaire itself and its unavailability to the general public. It is a matter of regret that non-interested parties cannot independently validate a study whose results are claimed to be ‘paradigm bursting’. Put another way, since the questionnaire remains patented, non-participating independent evaluators of the study cannot provide useful commentaries on the suitability and rigour of the questions. The present evaluation of the study may, therefore, not be complete and, even worse; some of the criticisms may turn out to be unfounded.

It is appreciated that there are significant costs involved in putting such a study together. However, conversely, it is also possible that any benefits from keeping the instruments out of the public domain may

ultimately be weakened by the lack of independent access to the questionnaire.

2.4. Weaknesses of the methodology

My major quibbles with the methodology lie in two areas, namely (a) its use of a cross-sectional survey for measuring a time-dependent parameter, and (b) its narrow definition of spiritual growth, which does not give enough attention to spiritual, psychological, and ethical elements of growth. I shall briefly expand on these two criticisms.

Spiritual growth occurs over time. Thus, a single snapshot cross-sectional study is definitely insufficient for measuring whether growth has occurred at all. Individuals can assess their own growth over time. But, assessment of a person's knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours at one point in time cannot be reliably used to estimate their growth. It would, therefore, have been better to label the measured outcome as the 'Spiritual health' of the respondents at the time of administering the questionnaire, rather than their growth. Certainly, the least that would be expected of a study to measure growth is a longitudinal research method in which sets of observations are repeated on the same subject over a period of time and compared.

The difficulties with the category 'stalled growth' illustrate why this quibble is important. Spiritual growth does not proceed as a linear graph. There are intermittent periods of stunting, temptations, doubts, even spiritual retrogressing, followed sometimes by accelerated periods of growth in insight and love for Christ. It is therefore an open question whether it can be categorically said that all periods of slow growth, stunting, temptations, or doubts are abnormal. It is even possible that respondents who indicated their dissatisfaction with their own spiritual growth or with their church at the time of the survey were merely

reporting their evaluation of their spiritual health in relation to an unrealistic ideal. They may have, indeed, stopped growing; but, it is also possible that they were, at the time, having a normal dry' experience of spiritual growth.

Accordingly, while it is possible that many of those who had stalled in their growth may be experiencing abnormal negative growth, it may not be so for all who self-report themselves to be in this category. The only way to establish if 'stalling' amounted to abnormal growth was to repeat the study after some time has elapsed. Stalling of growth over a prolonged period of time would certainly be an abnormal phenomenon.

The complexity of spiritual growth continues to make the phenomenon resistant to a full definition and thorough research. Even so, the choice of the pragmatically simple definition for spiritual growth appears to have resulted in the neglect of its other dimensions. It is, for example, well acknowledged that there is a psychological element of spiritual growth which exhibits itself in the individual's mental maturation, self-awareness, and appropriate emotional and empathic relationship with others. Excluding such parameters may well have weakened the study.

The authors may well respond that these psychological indices of development can be assessed through practical actions of love for others. However, the measures used by the survey to assess this element are liable to be muddied by other factors, making an assessment of the psychological element of growth difficult to ascertain.

The key role of personal numinous or miraculous experiences in spiritual growth is also well recognised. It is no small thing that Paul describes spiritual growth in terms of Christ being formed in believers (Gal 4:19). Exactly how this can be measured is open to question, but at least, self-reports of an individual's experiences of the grace and

numinous presence of God's Spirit could have been a key parameter to include.

Again, the authors may quite understandably argue that such miraculous experiences of increasing growth are inherent in the 'love for God' category in their definition. However, the love for God category is anthropocentric, and does not reflect the Christo-pneumatological nature of Christian existence and growth. Moreover, the lack of emphases on the miraculous nature of spiritual growth results in the loss of the organic nature of the phenomenon.

It is also unclear why the authors have not highlighted the ethical element of spiritual growth in the study and its report. One of the key images of spiritual growth is the bearing of the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5:22). Increased growth in Christian moral and virtue ethics is certainly one of the fundamental emphases of the New Testament, even more so in Jesus' teaching (e.g. Matt 7). The authors may well argue that love for others adequately summarises these elements. But the reductionism in such an answer leaves it unsatisfactory.

2.5. Other weaknesses

One weakness of the report, which has already been alluded to, but needs reiterating, is the authors' occasional resort to using 'hyped' claims. Some of the findings may have been surprising; but can we really call them 'astounding, paradigm bursting'? Another example is in order. Initially, the 'shocking' claim is made that 'Increased participation in church activities by themselves *barely moved* our people to love God' (p. 17). Yet, further in the book, it becomes apparent that church participation plays even a 'moderate' role in catalysing growth in those at the advanced end of the continuum. Given

the methodological problems highlighted above, some of these conclusions could have been made with some reticence. Certainly, some modesty in the claims of the book would have been preferable.

Conclusion

REVEAL was indeed a needed study. Its main achievement is drawing our attention to the significant shortfall between spiritual growth and church activities, which were designed to enhance that growth in the first place. *Move*, the report of the study, further makes significant contributions to our understanding of the situation in a proportion of conservative churches in America and beyond. I highly recommend this book to church leaders keen to understand some of the dynamics of spiritual growth among their members.

There are weaknesses to the methodology and the presentation of the findings. However, the least of its achievements is offering a basis upon which to build more sophisticated, but nuanced, web-based studies to quantify and describe spiritual growth.

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