

Willow:

Let's start off with a brief history of REVEAL and what's been happening the last couple of years.

Greg:

In the fall of 2003, I had a conversation with Cally and she mentioned some work she had done with Eric at Allstate that looked at the heart and minds of their customers, and together we wondered if his research methods could work at Willow. I was intrigued to find out if this kind of research could help meet a need I had been feeling for over five years of trying to understand how we allocate the church's resources, both people and money, to accomplish our mission of turning irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ. We didn't have a good way of knowing if the things we were doing were really producing disciples of Christ or not. We're all deeply passionate about helping people become fully devoted followers, but we weren't sure if all our investments and efforts were optimized. That was the genesis of REVEAL.

Cally:

REVEAL has happened in phases. Phase I included data from seven churches and 5,000 surveys. The goal of Phase I was really to define the framework and see if we could figure out the most predictive and effective lens to help us understand how spiritual growth worked. The output of that was the "spiritual continuum." In Phase II, we increased to about 15,000 surveys and 25 churches. This phase was really to say, "OK, we've got this. Now let's see if it works across different kinds of churches." We had 25 churches — small, large, all over the country, and with different kinds of approaches to church. And now with Phase III, we've surveyed 420 domestic churches and 91 international churches in 16 countries plus the U.S.

I think what's important to underscore is that spiritual growth has a lot of different interpretations by people. And from the beginning, we had to come to grips with what it is that we're talking about. We really just leaned very simply into the Great Commandment: love of God and love of others. What is it that seems to catalyze people's acceleration in their love of God and their love of others?

What's important here, going back into the history, is that Jim Mellado [president of the WCA] would say that pastors for 2,000 years really have had only three ways to measure if they're being successful. One way was: how many people show up? Another way was: how many baptisms or conversions do you have in a year? Another way was with regards to resources: how many volunteers or how much money's coming in?

Eric:

Initially what we spent almost three years trying to empirically validate is, "What does spiritual growth look and feel like?" We weren't sure, but we had a number of different hypotheses. What good research does is try to take those hypotheses and prove or disprove them and shed new light on what other areas of knowledge should be explored.

We started out with people within Willow, primarily here at South Barrington, and moved to the other campuses. But it was always with that objective in mind, not necessarily what church we were working with, but

how we thought more broadly about this notion of spiritual growth. What became very apparent early on was a kind of migration or progression. We weren't quite sure what that was and as we kept looking at it, we started to learn that there were stages or phases that people went through that wasn't linear. It wasn't a linear progression because there were clearly people who had moved into it. There were certain people who stayed where they're at and other people seemed to regress, or maybe not move on at all.

After three years of research, we discovered a definitive we call "the view": how spiritual growth really works. At that point, it was a snapshot because we looked at people at a point in time. What's happened after the first book, *REVEAL*, into the second book, *Follow Me: What's Next for You* (see page XX), is the concept of what are the drivers of change and what are the barriers of change?

Now you have this view and you understand that there's this spiritual progression. But what are the catalytic things that drive growth or prevent it? The difficulty in all of this is the topic of spiritual growth and relationship with Christ. A person's engagement and involvement with the church is probably one of the most complex areas because it involves things that you do, things that you believe in, and ways that you express yourself.

Amidst all this complexity, the first question to ask is, "Are there some things that we need to understand about what this view is?" And secondly, "Are there some things that we can learn around movements, the change that occurs in people?" It's not prescriptive and we clearly don't have a formula, but there are patterns. And then the third set of questions comes down to: "Do they occur in churches at the same rate? Does this occur more in an individual than a church? And, what is the connection of your relationship with Christ, with your engagement, and relationship with your church?"

Willow:

How can REVEAL and the latest research help pastors and church leaders become more effective in their ministry roles?

Greg:

The current research is very powerful because what it does is provide a very clear picture of what catalyzes spiritual growth at the different stages of someone's spiritual journey. As a church leader, you are always trying to figure out how to allocate resources optimally and the current research provides fabulous insights that I, in my role as executive pastor, can make much more effective decisions on how we do group life; the kinds of classes we offer; the support we offer to people in their times of need; the direction of our weekend services and topics taught; and how we think about our worship experience. What it's doing is creating a great deal of confidence in us as leaders because before you would try things based on your own experience, intuition, or sense of what might be effective. Now, we're able to take our experience and clear wisdom from Scripture to make strategic

decisions on how we spend our time and money. It's been a wonderful gift to have that ability.

Cally: There was always this gut level discontent that we were coming to grips with our success or lack of success, our effectiveness in allowing people to accelerate in their love of God, and accelerate in their love of others. And what was so insightful about Eric's approach to this work — and I saw it when I worked with him in the marketplace — is that he said, "OK, we're going to look at those activities that people do, how often they attend, and whether they're in small groups. And we're going to look at their demographics too, like their age and life stage.

But we're also going to also explore their attitudes, their motivations, the needs that when they walk in a church door, in their spirit, in their heart. What do they need from their church? What are they looking for? And we're going to throw that in the mix and see what is it in all of this that seems to accelerate love of God, love of others, and can we come up with a frame of reference that will allow a pastor to understand whether or not he's being effective in doing that?

Eric: What you're trying to do is see something that you can't see — seeing the unseen — and then you take it another step further and ask, "Not only can you see the unseen, but can you see and measure the unseen?"

You start with: "What are you trying to measure?" The second question is, "In what lens are you looking through?" Because it's not about the church leader; it's a congregant view. The major difference that this research tried to do was to be able to look through a congregant's view — what they value, how they interpret — rather than get a report back from a church leader or a church pastor.

Willow: **The Spiritual Life Survey has been used with more than 157,000 congregants in more than 500 churches of diverse sizes, locations, and denominations and is now available to any interested church. What is the Spiritual Life Survey and how could a church benefit from participating in the survey?**

Greg: The Spiritual Life Survey provides a clear snapshot of where a congregation is spiritually and the spiritual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of a congregation. Pastors and church leaders have a picture of what's really going on below the surface in their people which allows them to make key strategic decisions and clarify their priorities.

Cally: The Spiritual Life Survey is web-based. On our website, there's a comprehensive set of guidelines for how to do it and marketing collateral, like templates for emails, handouts, and postcards. We've learned from

churches about how to create the sort of level of response that a church needs to feel comfortable that the findings are representative of their congregation.

A senior pastor can look at it his congregation on any given Sunday and say, “I know what my congregation is doing, at least relative to church activities, but do I really know what’s going on with them spiritually?” So, I know my church, but do I know my *people*?

Our challenge and our greatest gain since last year’s Summit has been to reinforce in many ways and expand upon the original findings that were in the first book, *REVEAL*. One of our biggest efforts has been to ask ourselves if we can we take that lens of the framework, and what catalyzes growth, and can we create a tool for pastors all around the country that is the equivalent of the finest market research tool out there in the corporate world and provide them with that tool at a tiny fraction of the cost they would incur to do it themselves? Can we give them something that would really provide insights in a very economical way and provide that perspective that would allow pastors and churches all around the country to say, “OK, I can get the same level of insight that I see in these aggregate findings, and that was created for Willow, for my own congregation.” We’re ready to do that now.

Willow:

Once a church completes the Spiritual Life Survey, a customized report is generated. What’s included in the report and what can a leader learn about his or her church?

Cally:

From the research of Phase II, we created a church report because the deliverable for a church is not the survey, but the insights from the survey. Those insights have to be in something that a pastor can look at, digest, and understand in a pretty clear way.

Terry:

The report is very diagnostic, not prescriptive in nature, and very intentional based on conversations that we had with a number of these churches after we had given them their reports. We found that when we tried to do that prescriptive piece, which we did with about 30 reports, and then we followed up with those senior leaders and senior pastors, oftentimes, we just were not intimately familiar enough with the context to truly allow us to be prescriptive because we would look at data and come to a conclusion, only to find out later that the church was going through a large capital campaign, or that they had just founded another regional church, or that they had just had a big shift in their senior leaderships — all things that we didn’t know.

So when you’re looking at the data, it was out of context for us. What we found with these senior leaders, through those conversations, is they were quickly able to put it in their context and make it prescriptive. In fact, oftentimes, soon after we had talked with these senior leaders, a lot of them had already taken the data and shared it with their senior leadership. Some

had already shared it with their congregation. Many of them were ultimately already moving to making changes based on that data.

The most important thing about the survey is that there's definitely a benefit from doing it one time, but the power really is multiple points in time. The way the product is aligned is that you would use this over multiple years because it's one thing to understand where you are right now — a good frame of reference. But you also want to know, "Okay, if I begin to make changes, are they having an impact or not?" So, now go out 12 months or 18 months later and take the exact same survey again.

Willow: **The issues a large church faces are very different than a smaller church. How do the reports help all churches, no matter the size?**

Cally: One of our great challenges was with a small church. Even if we get 50 percent of them responding, we're not going to have as many responses to work with as we have with a church of 2,000 for example. So we really had to figure out how to provide the same, or an equivalent, level of insight to a small church as we could to a large church, when you couldn't divide up those responses and have statistically meaningful information to convey. We created a small church report that's a little bit different than the larger church report, and they both work. So we're ready to go!

Terry: The other thing that we did for those smaller churches is compare them to other small churches in the dataset for all the reports [we provide this comparison of a church's data to the aggregate]. Small churches tend to be different so comparing them to all these larger churches just doesn't seem to work quite as well for them.

We really made two changes in that smaller church report. We had to change the views a little bit, given the smaller sample sizes. And we also changed the comparison set to other small churches sort of like me. As this database goes from hundreds and goes into thousands and thousands, we want to give people the ability to be able to, for example, only look at churches in the South or to look at other Baptist churches or to look at other seeker churches. Because you can understand that at some level, having this big sort of aggregated view is nice, but I really would like to understand it in the context of other churches like mine.

Our, long-term goal would be to provide lots of different cuts that people could look at. Yes, I'm going to look at it in total, but then I want to look at a church that I think is a little closer to mine.

Cally: We hope churches will use this as a benchmarking tool so their primary comparison, ultimately, is to themselves and where they were two years ago.

Willow: **Generating these reports sounds like quite an operational undertaking. How long does it take for a church to get a report?**

Cally: We are able to take the survey responses from a given church and download that data into a PowerPoint template, which is the report. Then we send a PowerPoint presentation to a church and a pastor can use it for communication to his congregation or senior leaders. We can do that pretty much in a turnkey way.

Terry: Moving forward, our goal would be from the time a church would come out of the field, meaning all their congregants would have taken the survey, we could easily deliver a report within a month without a problem. We have a platform where all the data resides and we can, at this point in time, based on some programs that some internal people did here, generate a report once we have the data within a very short period of time.

After we generate that report, it then goes through two rounds of review from other people before we actually launch it.

Willow: **The first REVEAL Conference is coming up October 14-15 at Willow Creek. What is the vision for the conference?**

Greg: We're very excited about the REVEAL Conference because at the heart of this work is a deep desire to understand how spiritual growth works itself out in a person's life and then specifically the role of the local church to help catalyze that movement.

Now that we've surveyed more than 500 congregations, we're culling through the information to understand some of the best practices that are occurring among churches. We want to highlight some of these best-in-class churches at the conference and learn about some of the insights that they've arrived at. What's clear in the analysis is that there are definitely some churches that appear to be doing a much better job than other churches. The question we're all asking is, "What are those churches doing?" As we've started to interact with them, we're learning some fascinating things that I think will be quite profound for the folks coming to the conference. The conference is not to talk about research primarily or what Willow is doing. It's to say, "Through the REVEAL lens, what have we learned about some of the most effective churches we've studied?" We have access to small churches, medium-sized churches, and large churches and we want to share insights that could work for any size church and also share what's unique in a small church or large church.

The conference is not highly theoretical, but very practical. We want to take the research, drive it to a best practice conclusion and drive that conclusion to a next step for leaders to take. It will be a great event for senior pastors to bring their senior leadership team, elder boards, and key leaders because we

are going to be talking about church strategy. It's about overall church strategies for producing disciples of Jesus Christ.

Cally: And, what we found through a lens that Eric and Terry came up with is that there's real insight on how those churches are able to accomplish that. We have found very effective churches that are large, and medium-sized, and small, and in the Northeast, or in the South, or in California. There are some common themes. At the conference, we'll address some of the things we're learning by looking at these individual churches, and groups of churches, and how they seem to go about creating spiritual growth.

Willow: **The new book, *Follow Me*, describes what drives — and derails — spiritual growth and moves people from one segment to the next of the spiritual continuum. What else can leaders learn from reading this book?**

Greg: In REVEAL, we focus on the lens, how to see differently, and the beginning conclusions of how we might produce spiritual movement. Many people asked, "So what really moves people across these different spiritual growth stages?" That's been the focus of our research the past year. This new book is very different because we explore much deeper of what seems to drive spiritual movement with a very strong bent to helping pastors begin to implement insights in their own church. People have asked, "How can we take these results from REVEAL and implement them in our church if we haven't been able to survey our church yet?" We're learning that these overarching principles of what causes spiritual movement are true across church sizes, formats, and denominations. We feel confident recommending some strategies and ideas to church leaders even if their congregation has not been surveyed. We think the book is a useful tool and one that can help a congregation as they move forward in surveying their own church.

Terry: The book speaks about all the inputs that went into the survey itself. If you looked at the survey as having large buckets to it, the book has sections to it — one that looks at core Christian beliefs, another section that look at core Christian practices, and then expressions of those sorts of things in terms of serving, evangelism, and tithing. If those were just sort of the big three buckets of things you were looking at, we then looked at that in terms of the original *REVEAL* view and framework.

We were able to place how those beliefs, how those behaviors, and how those practices changed as someone moved along that journey. It becomes very helpful for a senior leader or senior pastor who's trying to understand why — I sort of know how to do church, but I'm not sure what I need to be doing. If you just picked up this book, it would be really clear as to what I need to be doing.

I think the big “A-ha” with REVEAL has been that it’s not one size fits all. When I’m out there and I’m looking at my congregation, they’re not all at the same point in time. Can I deliver a message and just have one message with one application? The answer is probably not. Maybe it’s one message, but it has to have multiple applications because there are people who are at different parts of this journey.

What’s really nice about *REVEAL* and *Follow Me* is it helps senior pastors to understand the what behind this spiritual journey and that everyone isn’t at the same point in time. The first book laid that out and the second book shares with you what, specifically, that means.

Cally:

Follow Me looks at 50 factors at different stages of spiritual growth and explains, “What are the most influential catalysts for movement from one segment to another?” What are the top five for moving someone from exploring Christ to growing in Christ? What are the top five for moving someone from a growing place to a really intimate day-to-day relationship with Jesus Christ? What are the top five for taking you from that intimate place, where you’ve still got your own agenda, you still are driving that car, you just have Christ right next to you talking to you everyday. But what is it that really triggers you to surrender the wheel of that car to Jesus totally? And, that’s what the book’s all about.

Terry:

If you’re a senior pastor or a senior leader, and you’re working with a limited set of resources and trying to understand how to get the maximum benefit for those resources, this is where that book will really help. What are the sort of classes I need to put in place? What are the sorts of offerings that I need to do that are going to take that limited pool of resources that I have and make them work to their fullest? I think the book will help leaders figure that out.

If you look at senior pastors and senior leaders, they are just inundated with so many things. It’s just easy to get off track because you’re given hundreds of tracks to go down.

The book provides this sort of refocusing on what ministry’s about, and here are just some things that a leader needs to remember, like the importance of making disciples of Christ. The people who are on this journey are at different points in time, and a leader needs to meet the church members where they’re at. If senior leaders and senior pastors would pause and think about that more, it would have a huge impact in the end.

Willow:

At last year’s Leadership Summit, Bill Hybels said, “This has been one of the biggest wake-up calls of my life.” He was referring to the findings from REVEAL. How has all the REVEAL research impacted Willow Creek? What changes have been implemented as a result?

Greg:

From the first survey of Willow Creek in 2004, we've had a lot of our key assumptions challenged about the way we thought about spiritual growth and how we support that in our church. As we've processed this information on our own and now with others who have taken the survey in their churches, some patterns are emerging for us that we are putting into play.

The first one for us is increasing our attention toward equipping our Christ-Centered members with skills and resources so they can fully live out a Christ-Centered life. We want to equip them with evangelism training, give them opportunities to serve those in need, and we want to challenge them with deeper biblical content. By understanding what these folks need, we can help catalyze that need which catalyzes their own spiritual growth. There's just been increased clarity of what this group of people need from the church so they can live missional lives and accomplish His purposes in the world.

Second, we've found that we need to offer a broad variety of community experiences. Biblical community is very important for us for spiritual development and certain organized small groups help as do other forms of community life that take place outside of an organized small group that need to also be supported. We're making changes in our group life ministry to reflect what we're learning.

We're also morphing our midweek services, which have been an extended worship time and biblical teaching. We'll continue to have worship time, but people will be dismissed to one of more than 20 different classes they can attend. The classes are targeted around needs that we understand about the spiritual continuum that can help catalyze someone's movement. We're very excited to be able to meet these needs instead of relying on one teaching to meet the more advanced needs. We also want to offer all these opportunities online and through audio and video so people can receive that content whether they're on campus or not and equip people where they are on their spiritual journey.

Willow:

REVEAL has created quite a buzz in the media and on several blogs. What's some of the feedback you've been hearing?

Terry:

I think it's really difficult to pick up REVEAL and understand the depth of what we are doing. There have been two main types of criticism. One, there are some people who want to really lean into the whole seeker movement and Willow's role in whatever that means. That tends to be where we hear the biggest buzz. Two, we have heard some comments around the methodology, but more from a scientific standpoint in terms of what we're doing. We've been very upfront and transparent on both of those fronts in terms of responding to that and have not avoided that. I think we've been very forthright about what our mission is and what it's not.

Cally: I'm convinced God put me in this place after I went through an experience with the Christian media and national media while serving as the media person on the church side. One year, we decided to close the church on Christmas Day (a Sunday) and that turned into this big national lightning rod. I got some great experience dealing with the media on controversial issues! Now I'm into REVEAL and we have all this controversy.

Greg: The groups are clearly divided. There's a group of people who are very curious and seem to have an appetite for learning and want to be in a dialogue with us about REVEAL. It's provided some stimulating dialogue. And then there's a group of people who don't want to dialogue — they just want to attack and attack Willow Creek in particular for its style of ministry. That motivation is one I don't understand. It's been hard to see happen because our spirit is one of curiosity and exploration, trying to add to the understanding about spiritual growth. There are so many people who have benefited. It's been fun to be a part of a community that's having this conversation because we're really committed to help church leaders be more effective.

Willow: **What is your dream for REVEAL and its future impact on churches and leaders?**

Cally: My dream is that we'll be able to provide senior pastors a tool that allows them to really know what one or two things that are most critical to advancing the spiritual development of their congregation and have insight and confidence in that one thing to put their resources against.

I just have this image and this vision of a senior pastor, every Monday morning with his staff around him, like his children's ministry person who wants the best children's ministry of all, or his small groups person who wants that best small groups ministry, or his programming person who's into the worship experience. And, they all want the best, best, best, right? And, he's sitting there saying, "Where do I invest to really advance the spiritual growth of my congregation? Which one of these things makes the most sense to me?"

That's my ultimate dream: that we'll have senior pastors with not only that insight, but then will act on it. And because they act on it, we will see an explosion of spiritual growth that will advance God's Kingdom in an incredible way. It goes back to Willow's dream and commitment to the local church: the local church is the hope of the world. We're going to put a tool in the hands of the local church that has the power, we believe after this last year in particular, to really accelerate God's Kingdom.

Eric: My dream is a little different. It kind of goes back to the reaction of the first book. Whenever we try to do this kind of research, we try to find out what those groups of people are. And, what we found is that people could identify

themselves very clearly in the book. There were a number of people who said, “Oh, I didn’t realize that there are people who could grow further and faster than me. There are people who have been through the same situation as me. Or there are people who I’m feeling like this, but I don’t know others who are like me.” The future’s really going to be around how does an individual change, and then, secondly, how does your church composition change.

Cally: Eric talked to somebody out in the secular world that read the book and said, “You know, I’m really sort of in the close to Christ space, but I had no idea there was another place to go.”

Eric: The other part of the future vision we like to think is “Not using best practices, but truly advancing best practices,” where a leader realizes that his church needs to have a mentoring group or needs to have some type of spiritual accountability because it gets lost in a large church. Or being able to look at — some people call it white space, other people will call it an unmet need — where there are things that you either don’t offer or haven’t developed yet that are really very important as you look at it.

If you look with a critical eye at what the book says, it says, “There are a lot of resources early on in the spiritual journey, not as many resources later on.” The ideal dream is that you have resources throughout the entire journey and resources that your church can provide that are relevant to an individual. Do we have offerings, or things that can help growth, and then are there things that connect directly back to the church and the individual?

Greg: Quite honestly, I don’t have a big, giant dream because the truth is, REVEAL has been a gift from God to us as a team. It’s been very clear He had the idea to do this work. He put the right people in place to see it happen and in many ways. The team and I feel we have a responsibility to steward what has been revealed to us. We’re taking this one day at a time, being attentive to how the Spirit is leading.

We’re excited about what we’re learning and not just trying to create knowledge for knowledge sake, but truly trying to understand what’s happening on a deeper level so we can help pastors and church leaders have more effective churches.

That really is the dream — to see each church reach its full redemptive potential. We want church leaders to have a higher degree of confidence that the kinds of actions they’re taking are actually bearing fruit in helping people far from God become a disciple of Jesus Christ. The dream is maybe we’ve stumbled across something that, with God’s help, could help thousands of church leaders in this country and around the world to be more effective in the mission we’ve been given by our Savior: to fulfill the Great Commission.

It's been an exciting adventure and one of the greatest things I've ever done in my entire life. I feel an incredible privilege to be allowed to hear from now more than 150,000 church attenders about their relationship with God and what they're really hungering and thirsting for, which is a deeper intimacy with Jesus Christ. If we can be a part in helping people find that, it would be one of the most extraordinary blessings of my life.