The Spiritual Vitality Index

“We found them.”

The longer we stood there welcoming people—shaking hands, putting faces with the names we knew, making introductions—the more those three words echoed in our minds. After five long years, here they were, gathering at Willow Creek: the pastors of the churches representing the most vibrant, spiritually alive congregations among the five hundred churches that had, to that point, participated in the REVEAL survey.

We had invited this group together because the analysis of their REVEAL survey results indicated something special was going on in their churches. According to their numbers, they were among the top 5 percent of all churches surveyed in terms of their congregants’ spiritual growth. We knew the factual results were conclusive, and that something quite remarkable set these congregations apart from all the others we’d surveyed—including our own. But when it came to the leaders of those churches, we had to wonder: Would they be as remarkable as their survey results?

The only way to find out was to meet them in person. So we arranged an all-day meeting that started with a dinner the night before, on the Wednesday after Labor Day 2008. I (Greg) was so nervous I could barely stand still long enough to greet our guests. One after another, those who had accepted our invitation walked through the door—thirteen senior pastors, as well as members of their teams, representing just over half of the top twenty-five REVEAL churches.

By the first break the next morning, we were absolutely positive that these were the individuals we’d been looking for. Despite all our second-guessing, behind the impressive survey
statistics were equally impressive leaders—individuals who had much to share about how to help people grow in a relationship with Christ.

What convinced us? For one thing, in spite of their churches’ great diversity of sizes, locations, and cultures, we sensed these leaders’ hearts were all in the same Christ-centered place. As they interacted, they did not discuss church growth strategies; there were no conversations, for instance, that began, “We did this and our church grew by X percent.” Instead, they discussed the importance of embedding the Bible into the hearts of their congregants. They talked about helping people move from simply knowing Jesus to surrendering their lives to him. Their own personal devotion to that work was so extraordinary that it set this group apart from the hundreds of pastor gatherings I have participated in over the last two decades. Indeed, just being among them made that Thursday one of the greatest days of my life.

These church leaders also pursued common strategies—which was somewhat surprising. We thought we would find that some achieved their results through creative small-group strategies, others with far-reaching local and global serving programs, and still others through dynamic teaching. What we found instead was a group of leaders extraordinarily in sync with one another, pursuing very similar strategies to advance the spiritual growth of their people. They also shared a common passion: a single-minded focus on making disciples of Christ. We saw in them a living illustration of the verse: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37).

That’s why we considered this such a big deal. We had begun the REVEAL work five years earlier. As it developed, we started to dream of finding—through fact-based evidence—churches that were spiritually thriving. We believed that if we could find them, we could learn
from them. We could share what we learned with others. Five years of effort. Then, within a single day, we were in the midst of something quite incredible. We really had found them.

The chapters in part 3 are dedicated to unpacking what we believe is the greatest gift REVEAL has to offer—the story and strategies of how best-practice churches like these most effectively inspire spiritual growth.

The Story Behind “Best Practices”

Every journalism student quickly learns the tried-and-true checklist for capturing the facts, called the “Five W’s (and one H)”: who, what, where, when, why, and how. Interestingly, that formula originated more than a century ago, when Rudyard Kipling wrote:

I keep six honest serving-men:
(They taught me all I knew)
Their names are What and Where and When
And How and Why and Who.  

Now this verse-turned-media-staple can help to clarify REVEAL’s measurement of spiritual vitality within individual congregations. Using the “Five W’s (and one H)” formula, we can describe the facts that enabled us to identify REVEAL’s best-practice churches—an exercise that is important for two reasons.

First, the unique contribution of REVEAL is its quantitative foundation. (That’s a fancy way of saying we didn’t make this stuff up.) Every step taken toward this point of identifying best practices was fact-based, not opinion-based. So we hope you will read and study the stories

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1 Rudyard Kipling, “The Elephant’s Child,” Just So Stories (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1902), 65–84
of these churches with at least a measure of the kind of respect you would accord to reports of medical or scientific breakthroughs that have an objective basis for their results and conclusions.

In addition, ticking through the facts should help to reinforce the bull’s-eye focus of this work—which is not really so much about the church. It’s much more about the people who attend the church. REVEAL looks through its statistical microscope to assess the spiritual vitality of a congregation. It is through that lens—not the lens of church size or resources or notoriety—that we identified churches doing the best job of growing people into followers of Christ. It is our hope that an overview of that process will reinforce your confidence in the value and wisdom of the best-practice strategies pursued by these outstanding REVEAL churches.

Confidence, of course, should not be assumed. People want to “kick the tires” before they accept information and advice, especially on challenging issues. I (Cally) was recently reminded of that when, during a routine medical procedure, a friend discovered she had cancer of the appendix. She turned first to family and friends for comfort, then to the Internet for facts and advice from people in a similar circumstance. That readied her to seek out the medical experts who could recommend and carry out whatever next steps she chose to take. This process of due diligence—the gathering of facts, advice, and recommendations from experts—gives my friend the confidence she needs to pursue a course of action. While her faith in God minimizes her fear of what lies ahead, it is her confidence—based on due diligence—that gives her the courage to act.

Similarly, we hope you will trust the guidance offered by these churches because you understand the effort to find them was rigorous and comprehensive. Toward that end, we offer a synopsis of the facts, using the “Five W’s (and one H)” formula to make sure we communicate the full story. We’ll begin with “What?”
**What Defines Best Practices?**

It is important, first of all, to understand which factors we include in the measurement of spiritual vitality—and why they are included—because that quality is the yardstick for determining which churches are “best.” Every church that takes the REVEAL Spiritual Life Survey receives a measure called the Spiritual Vitality Index (SVI) in the report that summarizes their results (chart 11-1).

[Chart 11-1]

**Spiritual Vitality Index for Church ABC**

Chart 11-1: The number in the center represents the REVEAL Spiritual Vitality Index (SVI) for a typical church. It benchmarks key measures related to spiritual growth for an individual congregation against the total database. These measures fall into the three categories shown on the triangle: Personal Spiritual Practices, Faith in Action, and the Church’s Role. The SVI scale mimics an academic grading scale, so 72 reflects an average spiritual vitality score.

The SVI is the number in the center of the triangle. It is based on a scale of one to one hundred and indicates how a church’s congregation compares to the rest of the churches in the REVEAL database. This comparison is made in three categories of attitudes and activities vital to spiritual growth: the church’s role, personal spiritual practices, and faith in action.

*The Church’s Role.* This category assesses the congregation’s satisfaction with a few key church attributes that are most catalytic to spiritual growth—for instance, how the church helps people develop a personal relationship with Christ, understand the Bible in greater depth, and challenges them to grow.
**Personal Spiritual Practices.** This category assesses those spiritual practices most critical to spiritual growth across all three movements, including reflection on Scripture and prayer for guidance.

**Faith in Action.** This category includes factors significant to the more mature movements of spiritual growth, such as evangelism, serving those in need, and the degree to which congregants are willing to risk everything for Christ.

You may wonder why and how the factors in these three categories were chosen. The answer tracks back to the origin of every fact and finding in *Move*, which is the definition of spiritual growth based on Jesus’ words in Matthew 22:37–39. We define spiritual growth according to this great commandment, which means spiritual growth occurs when love for God and love for others increase. Based on the research, the factors in the Spiritual Vitality Index are those that are most catalytic to advancing growth in attitudes about love of God and love for others.

Using these catalytic factors, we compare the responses of each participating church to the responses of the 1000 churches in the REVEAL database. So, the Spiritual Vitality Index—which is the yardstick we use to determine which churches are “best”—is based on congregant responses to questions about the most influential catalysts of spiritual growth benchmarked against all the churches in the database. A church is considered “best practice” if it receives an SVI score of 85 or higher out of a possible 100, which means it ranks in the top 5 percent of churches in the REVEAL database. How to interpret SVI scores is explained in the following section.
How Does the Spiritual Vitality Index (SVI) Work?

One way to think about the SVI is to reflect back on your high school report cards. If you got an overall grade in mathematics of 80, that grade reflected assessments of multiple factors like class participation, homework, and special projects, as well as test scores. Similarly, the SVI of 72 on chart 11-1 reflects the impact of multiple factors related to spiritual growth. SVI scores are intentionally similar to academic grading scales, in that scores in the high eighties and nineties (top 5 percent) indicate strong spiritual momentum in a church, much like academic grades in the high eighties and nineties indicate top-of-the-class performance. Likewise, SVI scores between 75 and 85 are above average, and scores between 65 and 75—the range into which most churches fall—are average.

We sometimes feel reluctant to talk about numbers within the context of REVEAL. Even though I (Cally) know that statistics are key components of any well-grounded, credible research effort, I’ve wrestled with how to focus on the heart of spiritual growth and still deal with the necessity to share the numbers (see “The Cringe Factor,” page XXX). Reconciling these two factors—the heart and the numbers—played an important role recently in a situation with my son who, at 6 foot 10 inches tall, towers over most people. But the issue had nothing to do with his height. It was his weight.

When he left for college, his 220 pounds looked almost insufficient on his long, lanky frame. College added a few pounds, and by the time he married six years later, he weighed 240. Eight months after the wedding, he topped 280.

This significant weight gain suggested his problem was more internal than external, less about the number on the scale and more about a new life situation creating circumstances that led to poor choices, like eating too much fast food and not exercising regularly. His solution was not
to go on a crash diet—to merely change the number on the scale—but to join a weight-management program that included a significant support system of weekly counseling and encouragement.

Today, he’s back down to 220. But the number itself is far less important than the changes that have taken place in his attitudes and behaviors. His weight has changed because his heart has changed.

The Spiritual Vitality Index serves as a scale that helps you “weigh” the spiritual hearts of your people. Yes, the resulting numbers can identify problems and opportunities—and yes, they can track progress. But they can’t make that progress happen. The goal of REVEAL, therefore, is not to help church leaders ramp up their numbers. The goal is to help church leaders change hearts. (Although as hearts change, there is good reason to believe numbers will inevitably change as well.)

The beauty of the SVI—and its greatest distinction—is that it does not measure church health as much as it measures the hearts of the people attending the church. Two observations underscore this very important point:

*Traditional church operations and activities have no bearing on the Spiritual Vitality Index.* This means that organizational factors—like church finances, staffing, and infrastructure—play no role in the SVI assessment. Attendance or congregant satisfaction with organized church activities—like weekend services and small groups—also have no impact on the SVI. In fact, the SVI puts more weight on things that happen outside the church building than within its walls—like personal spiritual practices and faith in action, which includes evangelism and serving the underresourced. Individuals may participate in these activities, or decide to take a pass,
based on factors like family status or work requirements that have little to do with their church life. 

*The Spiritual Vitality Index takes into account people’s spiritual attitudes and habits that may have little to do with the church they currently attend.* Because the SVI puts so much weight on people’s attitudes and activities that occur outside of church settings, it takes into account spiritual attitudes and habits that may be derived from a personal history that has little to do with their current church. For instance, among congregation members who grew up in families that regarded church attendance as merely a weekly habit instead of a core value, personal spiritual practices are unlikely to be part of the daily routine. For those who grew up in a community with strongly reinforced Christian values, on the other hand, a solid grasp of core Christian beliefs may have been established early in life.

The key is that the 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. How, then, does the church fit into the picture? The mathematics grade referenced earlier can once again serve as an analogy. When you studied math, the expertise of the teacher and the school’s environment certainly contributed to your mastery of the subject. But unless you did the homework and put those skills to use outside the classroom, your command of the fundamentals and ability to usefully apply them later in life is likely limited.

So it goes with spiritual growth. While the local church is incredibly important as the principal motivator, teacher, and role model for spiritual growth, a person’s spiritual maturity is as much—or more—a reflection of what they do in their everyday lives than what they do within the church building.
Who Are the Churches at the Top of the Spiritual Vitality Scale? (And Where and When Did We Find Them?)

We opened this chapter by describing our excitement—back in the fall of 2008—as we met pastors and leaders from among REVEAL’s top-5 percent churches. These churches represented a good cross section of the twenty-five churches most effective at fostering spiritual growth within their congregations, and they have since provided the foundation of the information we present in the next five chapters. Certainly, they are not the only churches we could tap for such information, as many additional churches have earned this best-practice designation since 2008. Conversations with all of these pastors and leaders continue to enrich the inventory of insights derived from REVEAL—and to reinforce the validity of the survey’s overall findings.

The most remarkable characteristic of these churches is their incredible diversity (see Appendix 4: “Who Are the Best Practice Churches?” page XXX). They range from a church with weekend adult attendance of 220 located in the poorest zip code in Detroit, to a church from the Dallas suburbs where the 9,000 who attend on weekends support one of the highest tithing rates in the nation. Two churches are African American and seven are multicultural. Many are nondenominational, but four Assembly of God and two Baptist churches are included. Locations range from rural Montana to the gritty streets of Far Rockaway, New York; and while some come from the heavily churched Bible belt, one church is from a community where regular church attendance hovers at only 4 percent. A 400-person church on the outskirts of Chicago has the most dangerous street in the US in its backyard. This is an all-volunteer church with no paid staff. The senior pastor is a dentist.
You’ll soon get to know these churches and pastors through the stories and strategies they generously share. But before digging into how they create such extraordinary spiritual momentum, let’s reflect a moment on this portfolio of amazing geographic, denominational, and cultural diversity. Such a heterogeneous profile was neither intentional nor expected. It simply emerged from the research, bearing witness to a great God who works with equal effectiveness in the darkest, poorest corners as he does in the wealthiest, most privileged enclaves. The pastors who serve within all of these environments have much to share about how to best enable God’s Spirit to thrive—no matter what the circumstances of your church.

First, though, we need to cover one final element of our “Five W’s (And One H)”—the why.

**Why Measure Spiritual Vitality?**

Do you weigh yourself once a week? Check your blood pressure? Or watch the stock market? (It’s probably better to check your blood pressure *before* you check the stock market.)

Whether you’re calculating the length of a trip or assessing your child’s aptitude for college, the measurements you use all have one thing in common—they are arbitrary. Someone made them up. Throughout history, humankind has created measures to track progress, gauge effectiveness, and provide benchmarks of health, wealth, size, distance, and countless other quantifiable interests.

While it is true that every factor in the Spiritual Vitality Index is derived biblically from the great commandment and is also based on verifiable facts, the index itself is a human creation. It was crafted by a thoughtful, intentional, trial-and-error process aimed at measuring the spiritual well-being of the people within a congregation. Why invent the SVI? Three reasons:
To respond to pastor feedback. Many of the earliest REVEAL church pioneers expressed frustration with wading through a forty-plus-page report. Specifically, they wanted something that would sum up their findings and show how their people compared to other congregations. Now the SVI is near the front of each REVEAL report.

To identify best practices. Much of REVEAL’s early work was done to identify pastors leading churches that clearly excelled at spiritual growth, so that we could learn from them and perhaps even find a “silver bullet” or two that might be helpful in transforming churches into more effective agents for Christ.

To understand church patterns. Is every church unique? Yes. But one objective of this work was to identify patterns of church effectiveness related to spiritual growth. Could the SVI help churches understand spiritual effectiveness the way the Body Mass Index (BMI) helps doctors classify people as underweight, normal, or obese? While there are countless combinations of height and weight, the BMI classifies people into categories that indicate whether intervention is necessary. Could there be similar distinct classifications of church effectiveness? If there were only a handful of problematic patterns, it would be much easier to suggest solutions. It also would be easier to emulate patterns that consistently lead to genuine progress.

We quickly addressed the first two issues. Now, every church that takes a REVEAL survey receives a one-page, net-it-out summary featuring their Spiritual Vitality Index. In addition, the SVI identified best-practice churches, enabling us to share the lessons learned from them.
In response to the third issue—understanding church patterns—what follows are the most recent findings from the Spiritual Vitality Index. These are four distinct patterns of church effectiveness—patterns that, interestingly enough, bear some similarity to the BMI classifications for personal health and fitness.

**Four Patterns of Church Effectiveness**

Talking with pastors about their REVEAL survey results is always interesting. Recently, within the same week, we spoke with the leaders of a three-thousand-person church in Nebraska, two medium-size churches in California and Virginia, and the first REVEAL church in South Africa. Helping church leaders to connect the dots as they walk through their REVEAL results is an incredible gift and real privilege. Clearly all these pastors care deeply about their people. It’s heartwarming to hear them talk about their passion for helping people grow in a relationship with Jesus—and heartbreaking when things aren’t going particularly well.

Based on these countless conversations and our review of hundreds of REVEAL reports, distinct patterns of church effectiveness clearly do exist. Although most of REVEAL’s contribution relies on its meticulous adherence to quantitative data, it is *qualitative* interpretation that best showcases these patterns. So, starting with the most discouraging example, then building toward its knock-your-socks-off, high-energy counterpart, here are the four distinct church patterns, each one based on spiritual effectiveness.

**Pattern 1: The Apathetic Church (SVI score typically under 60)**

“It’s hard to know you’re stalled if you don’t know there’s a journey.” So said the pastor of a large church in Missouri during our conversation with his leadership team about their congregation’s SVI score of 54 out of 100 (chart 11-2).
Spiritual Vitality Index for an Apathetic Church

11-2_chart_vd.ai

**Chart 11-2:** This Spiritual Vitality Index of 54 represents a congregation in the lower half of the REVEAL database. The arrows pointing down next to the three categories of spiritual catalysts depict a congregation that measures more than 20 percent below the REVEAL database average.

His remark triggered bittersweet laughter among his colleagues because it summed up the irony of his congregation’s profile. Only 8 percent had chosen the word *stalled* to describe their pace of spiritual growth, yet the evidence was clear throughout the pages of their report that most of the congregation was spiritually immobile. Reinforcing this picture were facts about their Christian beliefs, which—in spite of regular church attendance over a period of years—were far below average. The down arrows on their chart show that personal spiritual practices were also well below average. And the category of faith in action (serving, evangelism, and attitudes about their willingness to risk everything for Christ) was similarly sobering. Their journey toward developing a relationship with Christ was nonexistent. Motionless.

In the spirit of the BMI analogy, an unfortunately high percentage of REVEAL churches (an estimated 20 percent) fall in this category that might be described as spiritually “underweight.” Typically, these are older congregations with a long-tenured history of regular church attendance; yet two-thirds of the congregants fall within the Exploring Christ and Growing in Christ segments. This pattern of spiritual growth (perhaps better described as spiritual standstill) is incredibly challenging. The roots of apathy run deep.
Pattern 2: The Introverted Church (SVI score typically in high 60s)

“Are they growing a relationship with the church or a relationship with Christ?” Leaders of introverted churches often pose such a question. Their congregations report strong attendance records and above-average personal practices, but fail to demonstrate an increasing love of God in their attitudes or in their faith-in-action behaviors (chart 11-3).

[CQ2]

**Spiritual Vitality Index for an Introverted Church**

11-3_chart_vd.ai

**Chart 11-3:** This Spiritual Vitality Index of 69 represents a congregation that is average, but the arrows pointing down indicate an introverted spiritual profile. While their personal spiritual practices are strong, their faith in action is not and they are unhappy with their church. These results tend to reflect a congregation that is inwardly focused on growing their faith but is not living it out.

We call them introverted because their faith is insular, typically focused on developing strong biblical knowledge, but lacking the emotional connection of a walk with Jesus. That connection is what turns us outward into the world as his ambassadors. Instead, these congregants turn inward, frequently expressing frustration with their church (note the down arrow on the Church’s Role) for lacking the capacity to advance their journey with greater inspiration and education. An estimated 15 percent of REVEAL churches fall into this category.

Their cry is for the church to “help me understand the Bible in depth.” But that’s not what they need. Using the BMI analogy, these people are spiritually “overweight.” What they need is spiritual exercise, not more feeding.
Pattern 3: The Average (and Average-Plus) Church (SVI score typically in the 70s)

“I’ve never been average in my life.” Hard-charging pastors do not often receive seventy-ish SVI scores with great joy. More often than not, their immediate reaction is denial—similar to the pastor who made this comment and who leads a bustling “average” church. Denial is understandable. These leaders frequently shepherd large, dynamic ministries. But the painful truth is that, collectively, their congregants are spiritually average (chart 11-4).

**Spiritual Vitality Index for an Average Church**

Chart 11-4: Most congregations fall within an average SVI range of 65–75 with no arrows on the triangle pointing either down or up. This means all the spiritual vitality measures included in the index are within 20 percent of the average for the benchmark database of 1,000 churches.

No arrows going up or down on the SVI triangle is the classic picture of an average congregation. That means none of their findings set them apart from the rest of the database, either positively or negatively. Beneath every average SVI lies a story. And often, that story centers on opportunities to re-energize personal spiritual practices, since these churches typically have high percentages of new believers (the Growing in Christ segment).

However, the real opportunity for average churches lies in the lower left corner of the triangle: the Church’s Role. Remember, the factors underlying this category are not the overall satisfaction measures for the church or senior pastor. The Church’s Role reflects satisfaction with the most critical things a church does to help people grow spiritually, such as challenging them to grow and take next steps or helping them understand the Bible.
Churches that do those things well produce an SVI profile called “Average-Plus” (chart 11-5). These churches have congregations that are spiritually average, but they also have something very important that most average churches lack: a strong platform of permission.

[CQ3]

**Spiritual Vitality Index for an Average “Plus” Church**

**Chart 11-5:** This average “plus” profile represents a congregation that is clearly happy with the church’s role in helping them grow spiritually, even if the rest of the SVI measures are average. This profile indicates that church leaders are greatly respected so congregants would be likely to follow them on whatever spiritual growth pathway they decide to advocate.

High marks on the Church’s Role mean a congregation has great love and respect for the church and its leadership, which suggests they give the church significant latitude and permission to lead them in new directions. Churches like the one depicted in chart 11-5—a large Wesleyan church in Michigan—can lead with confidence, knowing their people will gladly follow. So for the majority of churches that show up as average, the greatest opportunity may be to recharge its leadership corps around spiritual growth and turn up the arrows on the Church’s Role. People are much more likely to embrace spiritual guidance and direction from a church they hold in high esteem.

In the BMI context, this might be akin to upping one’s exercise from a jog around the block a few times a week to training for a marathon—moving from spiritually average to elite.
**Pattern 4: The High-Energy Church (SVI score typically 85 or above)**

“Christianity is not a spectator sport.” This quote from the pastor leading the Spirit of God Fellowship on the outskirts of Chicago defines the character of the top REVEAL churches. If you attend one of these churches expecting to just sit in a pew on Sundays, you will eventually be encouraged to go elsewhere. These churches are on the move, growing people up in Christ and releasing them to have impact for the kingdom. Their tolerance for spiritual lethargy is low (chart 11-6).

[CQ4]

**Spiritual Vitality Index for a High Energy Church**

11-6_chart_vd.ai

**Chart 11-6:** The arrows pointing up in all three categories of spiritual catalysts indicate a high-energy congregation that is committed to growing into Christ-Centered disciples. Their investment in personal spiritual practices, their faith in action, and their love of the church are all above average. The two arrows pointing up on faith in action represents attitudes and activities that exceed the benchmark average by more than 50 percent.

There is good news for all churches underlying this very impressive pattern of spiritual effectiveness—and that is the fact that these high-energy churches are not unique. They come in all shapes and sizes across the country, in many denominational formats and cultural combinations. Chapters 12 to 16 showcase lessons learned from them, specifically regarding four best practices and one overarching principle we call Christ-centered leadership. Whether these high-energy churches are small or large, rural or urban, black or white or mixed races and cultures, they pursue these four best practices: they get people moving, embed the Bible in everything they do, create ownership, and pastor the local community.
They get people moving. These churches clearly communicate a pathway of next steps that launches newcomers on a spiritual journey—a pathway that is strongly endorsed and supported by the senior leadership of the church. The pathway’s framework varies and is often customized to reflect individual church circumstances, but there is always a pathway. And the expectation that all congregants will experience and follow this pathway is unmistakable and unavoidable.

They embed the Bible in everything they do. Dedication to Bible engagement flows from the pulpit to the water cooler, with all leaders modeling biblical literacy and learning as a core value in the church and in their lives. This commitment goes well beyond providing Bible studies and classes. In these high-energy environments, God’s Word is the central axis around which every discussion, activity, and decision revolves.

They create ownership. Most churches encourage volunteerism to support ministry needs, but these churches take the concept of serving the church to a whole new level. They inspire congregants to own the vision of the church—to adopt it as a part of their very identity. “I don’t go to church; I am the church” could easily be their motto.

They pastor the local community. These are churches of high expectations. Church leaders and congregants alike are knee-deep in addressing local community needs, frequently partnering with other churches and nonprofit organizations to identify and resolve issues that would otherwise languish for lack of attention and resources. They are pillars of great influence, bringing the heart of Christ to their communities as a natural by-product of living out their faith in authentic devotion to him.
Wow. Feels a bit overwhelming, doesn’t it? And here’s the kicker—churches that do these four things radically well range from being incredibly well-resourced to having minimal means. They can be small, understaffed urban churches or rural churches, thriving in the middle of nowhere. How do they pull it off? What’s their secret?

Their strategies and success stories—as well as a few notable failures—lie ahead.

The Cringe Factor

There’s something about rating churches—and then ranking them in comparison to one another—that makes me (Greg) cringe. It’s just the wrong way to talk about churches. Long ago, one of my mentors taught me that comparison can easily undermine community. Whenever I compare myself to someone else, or compare one person or organization with another, I am in danger of destroying their precious common ground. And if there’s one thing that’s completely clear in Scripture, it’s that Christ desires unity among the members of his body. There’s no room for us to say (or even think), “I’m better than you.” That’s just wrong.

So how do we reconcile this cringe factor with the truth—which is that we intentionally looked for churches that seem to be doing a better job than others at helping people grow spiritually? Do we let ourselves off the hook because our motives are pure? Because we are willing to admit we don’t have all the answers? Because we just want to learn from them?

We think the simple answer is “yes.” We chose to tolerate—and ask you to tolerate with us—some uneasiness with this process because our quest itself is honorable. It’s not to publish a Who’s Who of best-practice churches. It’s not to give out Oscars for best performance. And it’s certainly not to keep what we learn to ourselves.
We want to learn and we want to share what we learn. In a description usually associated with economic (rather than spiritual) growth, we want everything we learn to be a “rising tide that lifts all boats.” Because all churches can do better. And all churches, we believe, would desire the opportunity to do exactly that.