

Willow Creek finds limits to its model: Spiritual growth not keeping pace

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Willow Creek Community Church, the suburban Chicago megachurch that has become a model for some of the nation's largest congregations, started more than a quarter century ago by asking the question: Why don't people go to church?

Now, church leaders are looking for new ways to keep them there after new research revealed that worshipers' spiritual growth did not keep pace with their involvement in church activities.

The findings, based on research at Willow Creek and similar churches, showed that increased involvement in church activities was not necessarily accompanied by a boost in spiritual growth, defined as "increasing love for God and others."

The research was enlightening not only for Willow Creek and its 17,000 weekend worshipers, but also for the more than 12,000 churches in the Willow Creek Association that look to the church for guidance on meeting the needs of spiritual "seekers."

"They [church activities] don't seem to be lifting them up the spiritual ladder to a new level," said Cally Parkinson, who helped manage the evangelical church's research effort.

Bill Hybels, senior pastor of Willow Creek, said it was "almost unbearable" to learn that almost a quarter of his congregation's people were either "stalled" in their spiritual growth or dissatisfied with the church, with many considering leaving.

"It is causing me to ask new questions," Hybels acknowledged in the foreword to *Reveal*, the 110-page book detailing the research results. "It is causing me to see clearly that the church and its myriad of programs have taken on too much of the responsibility for people's spiritual growth."

The initial study looked at Willow Creek and six other churches. It was expanded to include 23 additional congregations. In response to the findings, Willow Creek is retooling its programs and providing pointers to churches in the association.

Greg L. Hawkins, the church's executive pastor, said the research showed that Willow Creek was doing well in terms of evangelism, serving the poor and encouraging Bible reading. "But what we found was our people were hungry for even more," said Hawkins, who co-wrote *Reveal* with Parkinson. "They wanted to go deeper with the Bible. They wanted to go deeper with personal spiritual practices."

Willow Creek is now building an online "next-step tool" that will direct people to books, videos and other resources on the basis of answers to questions about their spiritual path. Willow Creek's midweek services for the first half of 2008 will focus on a chronological overview of the Bible.

While the findings may have startled Willow Creek leaders, they didn't surprise researcher Diana Butler Bass, author of *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, who has tried to identify signs of vitality among mainline Protestant churches.

"I have interviewed dozens and dozens of people throughout the United States who used to belong to churches like Willow Creek but left them in order to become Presbyterians or Lutherans or Episcopalians," she said. "Ex-members of the megachurches have sort of rediscovered a level of being Christian that they were unaware of."

Just as some mainline churches are emphasizing the importance of simple practices like prayer and Bible study, Bass said, churches like Willow Creek are having a similar revelation. "The littlest congregation in the world can do those kinds of things," she said. "It's through those pathways that those churches have actually found revitalization."

In recent months, Willow Creek undertook a churchwide teaching series on the New Testament book of James. Commentaries were available for those who wanted to study the text further. Worshipers were encouraged to take on a range of "challenges," including attending all of the related services, reading the biblical text on their own or joining small-group discussions.

Recently, the association completed additional research with 200 churches, 40 percent of which do not specifically target spiritual seekers. The network plans to spend \$500,000 to use the research as the basis for a fee-based system that will

funnel information to congregations. -Adelle Banks, Religion News Service