

## How Do We Know If We're Making Real Progress Toward God's Agenda for Us?

We are nearing the end of our fiscal year at Moon Valley Bible Church, and I'd like to interrupt our regular preaching schedule to provide a report on how we're doing as a church. This will be more like a fireside chat than a sermon.

Over the past four months or so, the leaders of Moon Valley have tried to come to grips with an important but elusive question: How do we know if we're making real progress toward God's agenda for us? How do you measure progress?

As I have looked back over the past twelve months, many things are encouraging. Let me briefly mention a few.

1. We brought Patrick Gibbs on staff as our Church Administrator, and he has saved our administrative bacon.
2. We had our first Marriage Retreat in Sedona attended by 30 couples, and 42 are signed up to go this year.
3. Our men's ministry got rolling with our first Men's Retreat in Prescott, and we've had a string of top-notch speakers for our Saturday-morning breakfasts.
4. We've upgraded and expanded our classrooms to allow a little more room for growth in our children's ministry.
5. We've put together a specific four-year plan to revitalize and expand our facilities which I'll be presenting at our Family Focus at noon today.
6. Worship service attendance this winter is running about 11% above last year.
7. We developed and launched a Sunday-morning class called *Fifteen* to help rightly divide God's Word and defend the faith.

8. We've enjoyed our most stable financial year, and we're going to make our budget without having to make any special appeals.
9. There has been increased participation in our mid-week children's ministry, owing primarily to kids inviting their friends.
10. We brought on Tom Cox as our Youth Pastor, and he's laying the foundation for a youth ministry that will last and grow; involvement of High School students in the ministry has increased significantly.
11. Our women's ministry had their first annual Mother-Daughter Retreat, and the Christmas Tea attracted 250 women, many of whom were unchurched.
12. We upgraded our auditorium and our Youth Room.
13. We now have heating and cooling for the bathrooms.
14. Last summer we featured, supported, and prayed for short-term missionaries on Sunday mornings.
15. And we had our first Children's Christmas musical that drew rave reviews and large crowds.

These are encouraging things, but do they constitute a real measure of success? Our stated mission is to love God in a way that reaches another generation. Are we loving God more and more? Are we reaching another generation more and more? How can we tell?

Our stated vision is that we want God to use us to nurture every person to become complete in Christ. Are more and more people becoming more and more complete? How can we tell? How do we know if we're making real progress toward God's agenda for us?

Before becoming a pastor, I spent nearly fifteen years as a corporate officer in a marketing research firm. We were all about measuring progress. Our business was to measure things for clients, and our own scorecard for how well we measured things included measurements like revenues, profit, and market share. The prevailing business

philosophy then and now is expressed by Larry Bossidy, Chairman of Honeywell: “You get what you measure for.”<sup>1</sup>

But that’s the business world. What about the church? Is it wise to try to quantify matters of the heart? A panel of church pundits—noted authors, pastors, and a researcher—recently reached a consensus that spiritual maturity can be measured to some extent, and that it should be.<sup>2</sup> Church growth theorist, Christian Schwarz seems to concur, saying, “. . . I know of no growing church that can do without the motivating power of concrete goals. Churches need precise, challenging, time-bound, and measurable goals in order to progress in their development.”<sup>3</sup>

Back in August of last year, the full-time staff of Moon Valley went on a retreat. Among other things, we discussed whether or not measurement of progress is needful and whether it is wise to try to quantify matters of the heart. We concluded that we all have our own measures of ministry progress, whether they’re formalized or not. It is common to hear someone say “So-and-so has really grown.” It seems to me that the person who says that must be observing or measuring something in the other person that serves as the basis for that statement. And most if not all of us have some sense about whether or not a church is healthy and making progress. So there must be something observable that serves as the basis for that feeling. So I would argue that the question is not really whether or not we measure progress. In one way or another, we’re all measuring progress. The question is whether, as a church, we are intentionally unified and biblical in our measurement of progress. It’s not “if” but “how.”

I have come to suspect that if we do not intentionally measure the right things, we will, by default, measure the wrong things. If we do not renew our minds with a biblical view of success, we will be conformed to the prevailing world view (Romans 12:2). And it seems that the prevailing world view of church success has little to do with life transformation and a lot to do with attendance, buildings, and cash. Randy Frazee, one of the panelists noted earlier, says, “. . . one danger of not assessing the maturity of our congregation is that we’ll then evaluate only the ABC’s: attendance, buildings, and cash.”<sup>4</sup> George Barna is more pointed in his evaluation of churches that are not measuring the right things, and thus, not seeing lives transformed. Based on research reported in *The State of the Church: 2005*, Barna says,

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, *Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done*, (New York: Crown Business, 2002), 94.

<sup>2</sup> Larry Crabb, Ken Fong, Randy Frazee, George Gallup, Jr., and Dallas Willard, “How do you gauge if your people are getting stronger?”, interview by Kevin A. Miller, *Leadership Journal* (Spring 2000), 59-64.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Frazee, “How do you gauge if your people are getting stronger?”, 60.

*Nothing is more numbing to the Church than the fact that it is mired in a rut of seemingly unfathomable depths. The various creative approaches attempted over the course of this decade have drawn much attention but produced little, if any, transformational impact. . . .*

*Related to this lack of laudable direction and courageous initiative is the failure of ministries to measure the outcomes that matter. Churches—and, by extension, the people associated with them—continue to evaluate the success or failure of a congregation and of individual lives according to factors that do not do justice to the life, death, resurrection and teachings of Jesus Christ. Churches measure attendance, donations, numbers of staff, numbers of programs and square footage as their primary indicators of spiritual health and growth. Jesus did not die on the cross for such incidental outcomes. . . .<sup>5</sup>*

The Apostle Paul seems to have in mind a measure of what ministry success looks like. It is to present every person complete or mature in Christ. In Colossians 1:28-29, he says,

*Colossians 1:28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.<sup>29</sup> For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me. (NASB95)*

Here, Paul does seem to have measurement in mind. “Every man” is a kind of head count. What Paul wants to see in “every man” is a full measure of spiritual maturity. So, if Paul is “striving” for the purpose of moving people from Point A to Point B—Point A being where everyone is now and Point B being every person complete in Christ—then, in the most basic sense, progress can be defined as more and more people becoming more and more like Christ.

The same idea is reflected in Ephesians 4:13, where Paul says the work of the ministry is to continue . . .

*Ephesians 4:13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.<sup>14</sup> As a result, we are no*

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<sup>5</sup> George Barna, *The State of the Church: 2005*, (Ventura, CA: George Barna and The Barna Group, 2005), 51-53.

*longer to be children . . . <sup>15</sup> . . . we are to grow up in all aspects into Him . . .  
 . (NASB95)*

Again, there is a head count suggested by the word, “all” in Verse 13. What Paul wants “all” to be is “mature,” which is the same Greek word translated “complete” back in Colossians 1:28 (τε,λειοι). And he explains the extent of maturity this way: “to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” The term, “measure” (με,τρον) literally means “the result of measuring.”<sup>6</sup> The term, “stature” (η` λικι,α) could be translated “maturity.”<sup>7</sup> The ultimate yardstick is “the fullness of Christ.” In Verse 14, he says, “we are no longer to be children (νη,πιοι),” which means we are to grow out of immaturity.<sup>8</sup> And we are to grow not just in some areas, but in “all aspects” of our lives. Paul does indeed seem to be measuring maturity, and the yardstick is Christ. So, it seems that measurement of spiritual maturity is indeed biblical and needful, and it boils down to more and more people becoming more and more like Christ.

During our staff retreat, just about everybody had some reservations about the prospect of trying to measure ministry progress. The reservations came from different directions.

For one thing, we were concerned about the danger of measuring the wrong things. For example, the most common measure of church health is arguably some measure of popularity such as worship-service attendance. It’s hard to dismiss head counts as entirely irrelevant because, as previously mentioned, Paul seemed to have them in mind, and the early church grew in head count daily (Acts 2:47). Nevertheless, snapshots at certain points in history would show some pretty good people doing pretty good work to be failures in popularity. Guys like Jeremiah. And Jesus.

We were also concerned about the danger of focusing exclusively or legalistically on imperfect measures that, at best, do not tell the whole story, and, at worst, can mislead. Some of the panelists noted earlier share our concerns. Larry Crabb says, “. . . there’s still a mystery about it. I would want to preserve a little mystery in our attempts to measure. . . . When you emphasize the markers exclusively, the danger is that people then can check themselves off as mature with a certain smugness. But if maturity is thought of as a relational concept and an ongoing process, then you never get to a point where you say, ‘I am now mature.’”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “μέτρον,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid s.v. (ήλικία).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid s.v. (νηπιος).

<sup>9</sup> Crabb, “How do you gauge if your people are getting stronger?”, 59-60.

The upshot, I believe, is that measurements of spiritual health, whatever they are, should be biblical and should be recognized as imperfect, incomplete indicators. They must be held loosely and interpreted with spiritual insight and wisdom.

The measurement of spiritual maturity is rare; very few churches do it. One of the panelists, George Gallup, Jr. says, "I've known only a few churches where there has been a serious attempt to assess the level of spiritual maturity."<sup>10</sup>

Last fall I did some research on recent, published attempts to measure the spiritual health of churches (See Appendix 1). I discovered that, in most cases, there was no attempt to measure spiritual maturity at all. Rather, the emphasis is on identifying factors correlated with numerical growth, on the assumption that if more and more people show up at church it must be good. The "more and more people" part of the biblical measure of progress is important, but we cannot divorce it from the part that says, "becoming more and more like Christ."

I suspect that very few churches even try to measure spiritual maturity because it's not easy. But the complete biblical measure of success is more and more people becoming more and more like Christ. That raises an important question: What is Christ-likeness? What does it mean to be complete in Christ? What does it look like?

At Moon Valley we've developed a biblical profile of what it means to be complete in Christ. We have 31 "Characteristics of Completeness" across four categories: motivation, virtues, beliefs, conduct. The profile is always on the back of the sermon insert in your bulletin. And in just about every sermon preached here, the message is tied to one of these Characteristics of Completeness. In the transcript for this message that will be on our webpage, I will append this list (Appendix 2), along with a brief explanation and Scriptural support for each Characteristic.

At Moon Valley our vision is that God would use us to nurture more and more people to become more and more like Christ, as represented by the profile just presented. We promote it. We refer to it. We splash it around in publications. We preach it. But we haven't really tried to measure it.

Within the past year or so, we've established Life Groups as our primary strategy for making disciples or moving people toward Christ-likeness at Moon Valley. Life Groups

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<sup>10</sup> Gallup, "How do you gauge if your people are getting stronger?", 60.

constitute our small-group program, but it's not exactly like any program I've ever seen. A Life Group is a small number of people gathered regularly to do four things that the very first church did, according to Acts 2:42-47.

1. They worship. They reflect on the truth of how good God is, and they respond to that truth together, in whatever ways they choose. Expressions of worship can include things like prayer, singing, and taking communion.
2. They connect. They enjoy one another, building meaningful, supportive relationships through shared experiences. They can eat together, play together, work together, laugh together, mourn together.
3. They grow. They graciously encourage one another to grow more and more complete in Christ through applying the Bible to their lives, and they learn from one another by seeing God at work in and through others.
4. They multiply. They lovingly serve one another; they engage their community with acts of love that show off Jesus; and they invite their neighbors to share in the life of the group, giving birth to new Life Groups along the way.

In a nutshell, a Life Group is Moon Valley Bible Church mobilized and deployed to reach another generation. It's the church next door—the church doing the abundant life together. We understand that some in our church family may be in a season of life where you simply can't participate in a Life Group right now. We certainly don't look down on you. In fact, if you'd like to experience a Life Group but can't attend one, let me know. Perhaps a Life Group could adopt you and serve you in some way, even if you can't be there.

Because Life Groups are so central to our strategy and because we believe that life transformation will occur primarily within these groups, it makes sense that the measurement of our progress should revolve around what's happening in these Life Groups. That is not to say that no measurable progress happens outside of Life Groups or that we don't care about anything else. We care deeply, for example, about our ministries to children and youth and men and women. But Life Groups constitute our flagship. And Life Groups do provide a simple and accessible unit of measurement.

The Elders of Moon Valley have decided to begin the process of trying to measure our progress by taking two general kinds of measurements: quantitative and qualitative,

objective and subjective, numbers to compare and stories to tell. We're looking for signs of life in Life Groups.

First, let me cover the qualitative measures, the subjective things, the stories to tell. There are basically three qualitative measures we're looking for.

1. We're looking for stories of life change within the Groups, including conversions.
2. We're looking for stories about how participants in Life Groups love one another.
3. We're looking for stories about outreach efforts by the Groups.

In order to gather these stories, we have placed hidden cameras in all the homes where Life Groups meet. Just kidding. It's a little more above board and respectful of your confidentiality than that. Recently, I emailed all Life Group participants, asking three questions.

1. Do you think that your participation in a Life Group has changed your life in any way? If so, how?
2. Do you think that the members of your Life Group have demonstrated love for one another? If so, what example stands out in your mind?
3. Do you think that members of your Life Group have reached outside the Group to demonstrate the love of Christ to others? If so, what example stands out in your mind?

The results were overwhelmingly positive. We've only been doing this for about a year and eighty-four percent indicate that participation in a Life Group has changed their lives in a positive way, and the list of expressions of love is long. Here are just a few stories I'd like to pass along. (A few more are listed in Appendix 3.)

One person says,

*Shortly before Christmas I had to have surgery and one of the women in my group took me to the hospital and picked me up. What touched me the most was when she helped me get dressed while I was still groggy from the*

*anesthetic. When she was putting my socks on I had this thought that Jesus was washing my feet. For a person like me who is extremely independent this was a very touching experience and demonstration of love.*

Another person says,

*Our life group has helped me to take a leap of faith and share my very personal issues in my life. It was tough at first, but the group was very accepting of my trials and has been a huge support for me. I found that when I did share others genuinely identified and empathized with me or were able to just show their love for me by praying or giving me a simple hug. It truly has been a life changing experience.*

Another person says,

*We have found encouragement, TPA, prayer and worship time with our Group to be so meaningful, that you feel you really miss out on something if you can't be there. It has also been great to see the growth in people in our Group, too (including us, I think!). . . There is ready encouragement, immediate prayer, thoughtful discussion, much laughter and many tears. There is a bond that looks more like family than just "friends from church."*

Another person says,

*Yes, most definitely it has changed my life. I am more focused on my study of the Word and more aware of my dependence on the Holy Spirit for applications, more in control of the new [me], more in constant prayer. I look forward to our time, I look forward to hearing how others are, how they applied, how they failed sometimes. We encourage each other and learn from each other.*

Another person says,

*Our participation in our Life Group has been a saving grace for us. Having relocated here . . . and not knowing anyone, our Life Group has allowed us to make friends and get connected with our new church. The Group has been supportive and loving. We so enjoy getting together with everyone*

*and sharing what is happening in our lives, listening to each other's struggles, needs, and praises. Our group has shared deep personal struggles and they have been prayed over and changes and blessings have been seen in many of the lives of our members. Some in our group have asked that we hold one another accountable in our walk whether it be a task that we have been procrastinating over or daily journaling and devotionals. . . . All in all our group has just been a wonderful experience. We look forward to the . . . nights when we go, and feel out of sync when we miss gathering with the group.*

Another person says,

*I definitely think that my participation in a Life Group has changed my life. I shared this with the members of my life group just last week. I have not had positive male role models in my life. In fact most of them have been abusive. But by observing the husbands in my group and seeing how they treat their wives, I have come to see that there are good men who love and respect women.*

Another person says,

*I feel a deep sense of joy as I anticipate the arrival of my Life Group.*

Another person says,

*I see a genuine compassion and a willingness to actually participate in someone else's suffering or hardship.*

Another person says,

*Being in a Life Group is great! It has changed my life by giving me a family that I can depend on to pray for me. It gives me accountability to be applying God's Word in my life and my group encourages me when I blow it. When we didn't meet over the month of December, I really noticed a big part of my life was missing. I thought I'd like the break, but I was really relieved when we started meeting again.*

In addition to the qualitative measures, we will also be keeping track of some quantitative measures—some objective things we can count and compare. Believe me, the last thing

I want to do is reduce our ministry to some kind of impersonal, inhuman head counting. But if Life Groups are so good, and I believe they are, we want to see them to grow in number. Here are the measures.

1. First, we want to keep track of the number of Life Groups. All other things being equal, more is better, and we want to multiply the number of Life Groups over time. We started one pilot Life Group about fifteen months ago to try to learn how to do it. About a year ago, we started some more. We now have a dozen Life Groups.
2. We also want to keep track of the number of people attending Life Groups. All other things being equal, more is better, and we want to experience growth in numbers over time. We do not intend to keep track of the attendance of individuals, just the overall numbers. We currently have about 170 people attending Life Groups regularly.
3. We also want to keep track of the number of people who are new to Life Groups. More new people is better. And, in the event that Life Groups ever reach a point where they are not growing numerically, this will tell us whether it's because no new people are coming or whether it's because the existing Life Group participants are leaking out the back door just as fast as the new people are coming in the front.
4. We also want to keep track of the number of unbelievers who came as guests to Life Groups. We want Life Groups to reach out to their unbelieving neighbors.
5. We also want to keep track of the number of Life Group participants who believed in Jesus for eternal life. We want to see more and more people saved through Life Groups.
6. We also will be keeping track of the number of Life Group participants who are baptized. Being baptized is an act of obedience, so more baptisms is better. This morning we're going to be baptizing a dozen people, at least four of whom trusted Jesus Christ right here at Moon Valley.
7. We also will be keeping track of the number of Life Group participants who become members of Moon Valley. Membership is an act of commitment to the body of Christ. So, more members is better.

8. We also will be keeping track of the number of Life Group participants who shared a specific life application from a biblical text. This goes right back to one of the stated purposes of Life Groups: to graciously encourage one another to grow more and more complete in Christ through applying the Bible to our lives.

We call the process TPA, which stands for text, principle, application. It's a simple process of drawing a principle from a biblical text and applying it to your life. It's not unique. It's not proprietary. It's not just another tool or gimmick. It's consistent with any text book I know concerning how to apply the Bible to your life.

Some have expressed frustration at how hard it is to apply the Bible to their lives. This is not at all surprising. I can certainly sympathize. There's a part of me that doesn't really want to apply the Bible to my life. Satan certainly doesn't want me to do it, and I can expect him to do all he can to discourage me from it. There's a part of me that would like to just learn more information about the Bible, and skip the application part. Applying the Bible to my life is a simple process, but it can be very hard. There's a part of me that thinks I'm too busy to be still before the Lord and ask Him what He wants me to do based on what He has said in His Word. There's a part of me that doesn't want to know what God wants me to do because I'd like to avoid the work and pain that it might involve.

But the truth is, applying the Bible to my life is an inescapable, indispensable requisite for becoming more and more like Christ. Noted author and seminary professor Howard Hendricks says,

*Observation plus interpretation without application equals abortion. In other words, every time you observe and interpret [the Bible] but fail to apply, you perform an abortion on the Scriptures in terms of their purpose. The Bible was not written to satisfy your curiosity; it was written to transform your life. The ultimate goal of Bible study, then, is*

*not to do something to the Bible, but to allow the Bible to do something to you . . .*<sup>11</sup>

So one of the purposes of the Life Group is to encourage one another to die to ourselves, and to allow the Lord to live through us by the application of His Word. You won't get demerits or some big guilt trip if you don't apply the Bible to your life every week. In every group of which I have been a part, some rarely if ever share a TPA. But I want to patiently and graciously continue to model it with the hope and prayer that as they see God at work in my life and in the lives of others, they'll want to see God at work in theirs. And that can take time.

9. Finally we want to try to measure growth in Life Group participants based on the 31 Characteristics of Completeness. We envision Life Group participants doing a self-evaluation once a year in which they rate themselves on each of the 31 Characteristics of Completeness. The rhythm of our ministry year seems to follow the school year, so I'm envisioning taking the first survey in May so that we can look back on the year. On each Characteristic, participants will be asked how they would rate themselves now and, by comparison, how they would rate themselves one year ago, to gauge progress.

All these measures aren't perfect, and they're not intended to set up any kind of competition or to foster any kind of legalism. It's a matter of stewardship. God has given us millions of dollars worth of assets and we're putting hundreds of thousands of dollars toward ministry every year. So we better come up with a reasonably clear answer to the question: Are we making real progress toward God's agenda for us?

As there are more and more Life Groups,  
 as there are more and more people in Life Groups,  
 as Life Groups reach out to more and more unbelievers,  
 as they see more and more people come to Christ,  
 as more and more apply the Bible to their lives,  
 as more and more become baptized,  
 as more and more commit to membership,  
 as more and more make progress on the Characteristics of Completeness,  
 as we celebrate more and more stories of life change,

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<sup>11</sup> Howard Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1993), 283-284.

as we celebrate more and more stories of how we loved one another,  
as we celebrate more and more stories about how we reached out to another generation  
with the love of Christ,  
then we can say, by the Grace of God, we are making real progress toward God's agenda  
for us.

## Appendix 1: Research on Measuring the Spiritual Health of Churches

One organization known as NCD International (NCD stands for Natural Church Development) has developed a quantitative survey that it says, “measures the health of a local church.”<sup>12</sup> It’s purportedly based on research done involving some 40,000 churches worldwide. From this research, eight “quality characteristics” have been identified as indicators of local church health: empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship service, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships.<sup>13</sup> The idea is that these eight characteristics constitute the essential nutrients of a church’s “soil.” To the extent that these nutrients are all present, the church will be healthy and grow. To the extent that some of these nutrients are deficient, growth will be inhibited.

The interesting thing about the NCD model is how the eight characteristics seem to have been identified. It appears that the eight characteristics were identified on the basis of their correlation with worship service attendance. That is to say, the foundational research addressed the question, “What measurable local church characteristics seem to be correlated with numerical growth?” So, the resulting eight “quality characteristics” are basically the things believed to be necessary to experience growing attendance. Indeed, the eight “quality characteristics” are in some ways biblical and helpful. But conspicuous by its absence is any discernible measure of spiritual maturity. The survey does not seem to address the question, “Are more and more people becoming more and more like Christ?” Rather, a primary promotional plug for the survey is, “Churches that have done three or more NCD Surveys, have increased their average growth rate [in worship service attendance] by 51% between the first and the third survey.”<sup>14</sup>

Others have also tried to measure the health of the church. In the wake of Jim Collins’ popular book, *Good to Great*, Zondervan commissioned Thom Rainer to follow his footsteps by doing similar research on “turnaround” churches that have been able to go from mediocrity to “greatness.” The result is Rainer’s recent book, *Breakout Churches*.<sup>15</sup> In the book, “breakout churches” are defined as 1) having a minimum of twenty-six conversions in at least one of the past five years, 2) having the ratio of worship attendees to conversions no greater than 20:1 for at least one of the past five years, 3) having experienced a decline in worship attendance in past years, followed by sustained growth in attendance for the past five years, including the most recent year, and 4) having the

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.ncd-international.org/profiles.html>; Internet; accessed 26 September 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Schwarz, 22-37.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.ncd-international.org/essence.html>; Internet; accessed 26 September 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Breakout Churches*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

same pastor through the “turnaround.”<sup>16</sup> To be sure, it would be hard to describe any church as “great” without conversion growth, and attendance growth is also desirable. Nevertheless, a measure of growth in Christ-likeness is lacking.

Stephen Macchia, in his book, *Becoming a Healthy Church*, identifies the ten “essential ingredients of a healthy ministry” based on visits to 100 churches and a survey of 1,899 respondents.<sup>17</sup> He says, “the healthy church (1) actively seeks the Holy Spirit’s direction and empowerment for its daily life and ministry . . . (2) gathers regularly as the local expression of the body of Christ to worship God in ways that engage the heart, mind, soul, and strength of the people . . . (3) provides training, models, and resources for members of all ages to develop their daily spiritual disciplines,”<sup>18</sup> etcetera. These ingredients are in some ways biblical and helpful, but they don’t really provide a measure of the bottom line: Are more and more people becoming more and more like Christ?

More recently, Macchia wrote a follow-up book, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple*, in which he does a good job of drawing from the Gospel of John a profile of a maturing disciple. According to Macchia, a “vital Christian” (1) experiences God’s empowering presence, (2) engages in God-exalting worship, (3) practices spiritual disciplines, (4) learns and grows in community, (5) commits to loving and caring relationships, (6) exhibits Christlike servanthood, (7) shares the love of Christ generously, (8) manages life wisely and accountably, (9) networks with the body of Christ, and (10) stewards a life of abundance.<sup>19</sup> I really like the profile because it speaks to spiritual maturity. But just how to measure this is not really addressed.

Another attempt to measure spiritual maturity is represented by *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool (CLPAT)*<sup>20</sup> developed primarily by Randy Frazee.<sup>21</sup> It’s a survey of 30 characteristics or “core competencies” of a spiritually mature person. These competencies fall into three general categories: beliefs, practices, and virtues. Each competency is defended as a biblical mark of maturity. For example, one of the competencies is love, a “virtue” supported by 1 John 4:10-12.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 213-214.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: Ten Traits of a Vital Ministry*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 25.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 27, 41, 59.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple: 10 Traits of a Vital Christian*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Randy Frazee, *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool: Training Guide*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Frazee has been Senior Pastor at Pantego Bible Church in Fort Worth, Texas, where the *Christian Life Profile* has been used for some years. Frazee joined Willow Creek as a teaching pastor in 2005.

As part of the *CLPAT*, congregants evaluate themselves annually by answering 120 questions using a 0-to-5 scale ranging from “Does not apply at all” to “Applies completely.” Each of the thirty core competencies is measured by four indicators, resulting in 120 questions. In addition to the self evaluation, each congregant is evaluated by a few fellow congregants on just the 10 competencies relating to virtues.

I believe the *CLPAT* is a laudable effort primarily because it’s an attempt to measure growth in Christ-likeness; it’s not just a head count. Gallup calls it, “. . . the best tool of it’s kind.”<sup>22</sup> Noted author Dallas Willard says it is, “. . . the best corporate plan for spiritual formation and spiritual growth that I know of.”<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, *CLPAT* is not without shortcomings. It appears to be administratively challenging. It can also be tricky to evaluate growth, particularly for shepherds who don’t happen to be statisticians. An overall average score on some measure of maturity could be misleading. For example, all other things being equal, aggregate maturity levels would go up if we could somehow get rid of the less mature people in the church (a strategy that has crossed my mind ☺). Conversely, aggregate maturity levels may go down simply because we’re winning more people to Christ, thus introducing more and more immature Christians into the average.

In addition, not everyone will participate in a survey like this. Furthermore, some will join and some will leave the church between surveys, making the ongoing samples partially overlapping. All this can make analysis messy.

At an individual level, there also may be a vexing dynamic in the self evaluation. It seems that the more I grow, the more I see how dark my own heart can be (Romans 7:19-24). Therefore, a mark of maturity may be that I increasingly realize that I’m not as loving as I thought was. My self evaluation might, therefore, go down as a result of becoming more mature!

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<sup>22</sup> George Gallup, Jr., introduction to Frazee, *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool*.

<sup>23</sup> Dallas Willard, introduction to Frazee, *The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool*.

## Appendix 2: Characteristics of Completeness

### I. MOTIVATION

**Jesus Christ:** My one desire is to know and be like Jesus Christ—bringing glory to God and enjoying His rewards (Philippians 3:7-14; John 15:1-11).

### II. VIRTUES

- A. **Love:** I have unconditional love for God and others (1 John 4:10-12).
- B. **Joy:** I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances (John 15:11).
- C. **Peace:** I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, others, and me (Romans 5:1; Philippians 4:6-7).
- D. **Patience:** I am longsuffering with my circumstances and with others (James 5:10; Proverbs 14:29).
- E. **Kindness/Gentleness:** I choose to do the right things in the right way in my relationship with others (1 Thessalonians 5:15; Philippians 4:5).
- F. **Faith/Faithfulness:** I trust in God and I'm faithful to fulfill all of God's will for my life (Hebrews 11:6; Proverbs 3:5-6).
- G. **Goodness/Integrity:** My life expresses the essential righteousness and goodness of God (Ephesians 5:8-10; 2 Corinthians 4:2).
- H. **Self Control:** I have the power, through Christ, to control myself (1 Corinthians 9:25).
- I. **Humility/Submission:** I choose to esteem others above myself, living in submission to Christ (Isaiah 66:2; Philippians 2:1-5).
- J. **Hope:** I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 6:17-20).

### III. BELIEFS

- A. **Trinity:** I believe that the God of the Bible is the only true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and that God is involved in and cares about my daily life (2 Corinthians 13:14; Psalm 121:2).
- B. **Salvation by Grace:** I believe a person receives eternal life and comes into right relationship with God by His grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone (John 20:31; Ephesians 2:8-9).
- C. **Authority of the Bible:** I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and actions (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Timothy 2:15).
- D. **Spiritual Warfare:** I believe in God's provision for victory over Satan and all enemies of my life (Ephesians 6:10-18; Hebrews 1:13-14).

- E. **Christian Life:** I believe in the significance of my position in Christ and His provision for living the Christian life (John 1:12; 10:10; Galatians 4:6-7).
- F. **Church:** I believe the Church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today (Ephesians 4:15-16; Matthew 16:18).
- G. **Stewardship:** I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God (1 Timothy 6:17-19; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20).
- H. **World:** I believe that man is a sinner who desperately needs God for life and eternity (Romans 3:10-19).
- I. **Compassion:** I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need (Psalm 82:3-4; James 1:27).
- J. **Eternity:** I believe that there is a heaven and a hell, and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom (John 14:1-4).

#### IV. CONDUCT

- A. **Worship:** I worship God for who He is and for what He has done for me (Psalm 95:1-7).
- B. **Prayer:** I pray to God to know Him, to lay my requests before Him and to find direction for my daily life (Psalm 66:16-20).
- C. **Biblical Community:** I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, in the lives of others, and in the world (Acts 2:44-47).
- D. **Family Living:** I invest my time and energy to develop a quality marriage, to purposefully train my children in faith, and to honor my mother and father (Colossians 3:18-21; Ephesians 5:22-6:4; Deuteronomy 6:6-9).
- E. **Bible Study:** I study the Bible to know God, to know the truth, and to find direction for my daily life (Hebrews 4:12; Colossians 2:7).
- F. **Disciplined Life:** I discipline all aspects of my life and body so that I can bring glory to God and accomplish His purposes for my life (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).
- G. **Giving Away My Life:** I give away my time, my money, my abilities, my talents—my life—with a focus on God and His priorities and purposes (Colossians 3:17; 2 Corinthians 8:7; Romans 12:1; Matthew 6:33).
- H. **Spiritual Gifts:** I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes (Romans 12:4-5).
- I. **Discipleship:** I am fulfilling Christ's commission to make disciples, reaching another generation (Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Timothy 2:2; 1 Corinthians 11:1).

- J. **Relationship with the World:** I am living a life, through word and deed, that confesses Jesus Christ in my world (Mark 16:15-16; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Colossians 3:22-4:6; Romans 13; Jeremiah 22:16).

### Appendix 3: A Few More Stories

Another person says,

*. . . we just want to say that this group has felt like a safe place to come and be real. We can do real life together with a church family that really cares. We enjoy the time and place to be able to know we can come and be accepted no matter what. It has also challenged us in our daily personal time with the Lord. TPA'ing isn't as easy as we thought it would be. We are looking forward to growing together as we "do life in our group!"*

Another person says,

*Life Groups definitely affect lives for the better. They act as a support group. They challenge you to learn and apply the Bible in your life. It becomes real. Another great thing that Life Groups do is help to bring you closer to others in the church. You no longer are an outsider looking in. You realize that everyone carries faults and fears; but we are not here to judge, but to love one another.*

Another person says,

*I recently learned that I will be losing my current job in the near future. When I summoned the courage to share it with friends from our Group, they immediately swooped in with support and encouragement not only in dealing with the loss but in encouraging me to seek out and obey God's will with respect to my next job.*

Another person says,

*[Life Group] has given me family—people with whom to pray, laugh, cry, and generally share the joys and trials of life. I feel valued and known and not so alone—and I can relax and be myself. And for a single person, even having people to eat a home cooked meal with can be a real treat!*

Another person says,

*. . . my participation in Life Group has changed me and continues to do so. As one who is a pretty private person, it is very hard for me to share my life with others. I feel supported and loved when I do so and that is indeed life-changing! . . .*

*I just feel like it is a place to come and be “real” and share what God is doing in the lives of one another. I can honestly tell you that it took me a bit to come to this realization . . . I wasn’t too comfortable at the beginning, and thankfully that has changed.*

Another person says,

*I attach a journal entry from a few weeks ago. . . . I wrote it shortly after your sermons on husband and wives from Ephesians: . . . I let the tears flow freely, without holding the feelings back. . . I hear about love and what it should be. What God designed love to be. About husbands proving their love. Protecting, providing for. Maybe the tears are for the years I thought being provided for meant neglect and abandonment. For years of wondering why I didn’t feel loved. . . I hear and see other people showing love to me. I see compassion in the eyes of others, even other men. I see men loving their wives. Respecting them. I slowly feel myself beginning to hope. . . Perhaps the tears are tears of gratitude. Gratitude to a Father who provides for me. Who provides examples of Godly love. Provides people who care about me, who love me, who don’t harm me. Provides brothers and sisters who love me where I am. Who seem truly moved by my pain. Who tell me I am beautiful. Who tell me I am loved by God. Who protect me from the enemy. I realize that in many ways God has brought me full circle. He has provided for me the loving family I never had.*