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Many Churchgoers and Faith Leaders Struggle to Define Spiritual Maturity

America may possess the world's largest infrastructure for nurturing human spirituality, complete with hundreds of thousands of houses of worship, thousands of parachurch organizations and schools, and seemingly unlimited products, resources and experts.

Yet, a new study from the Barna Group identifies an underlying reason why there is little progress in helping people develop spiritually: many churchgoers and clergy struggle to articulate a basic understanding of spiritual maturity. People aspire to be spiritually mature, but they do not know what it means. Pastors want to guide others on the path to spiritual wholeness, but they are often not clearly defining the goals or the outcomes of that process.

The research was conducted by Barna Group in partnership with Living on the Edge (www.livingontheedge.org) and included a nationwide, random sample of adults and a similar national survey among Protestant pastors, exploring definitions of, perceptions about, and perceived barriers to spiritual maturity.

Five Challenges

The study showed five significant challenges when it comes to facilitating people's spiritual growth.

1. Most Christians equate spiritual maturity with following the rules.

One of the widely embraced notions about spiritual health is that it means "trying hard to follow the rules described in the Bible" – 81% of self-identified Christians endorsed this statement, and a majority agreed strongly (53%). Even among those individuals defined by their belief that salvation is not earned through "good works," four out of five born again Christians concurred that spiritual maturity is "trying hard to follow the rules."

2. Most churchgoers are not clear what their church expects in terms of spiritual maturity.

An open-ended survey question asked churchgoers to describe how their church defined a "healthy, spiritually mature follower of Jesus." Half of churchgoers simply said they were not sure, unable to venture a guess regarding the church's definition. Even among born again Christians – that is, a smaller subset of believers who have made a profession of faith in Christ and confessed their sinful nature – two out of five were not able to identify how their church defines spiritual maturity. Among those who gave a substantive response, the most common responses were having a relationship with Jesus

(16%), practicing spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study (9%), living according to the Bible (8%), being obedient (8%), being involved in church (7%), and having concern for others (6%).

3. Most Christians offer one-dimensional views of personal spiritual maturity.

A second open-ended question probed self-identified Christians' *personal* definition of what it means to be a healthy, spiritually mature follower of Jesus, regardless of how they believe their church defines it. One-fifth of self-described Christians were unable to offer an opinion. Other identified elements included: relationship with Jesus (21%), following rules and being obedient (15%), living a moral lifestyle (14%), possessing concern about others (13%), being involved in spiritual disciplines (13%), applying the Bible (12%), being spiritual or having belief (8%), sharing their faith with others (6%), and being involved in church activities (5%). Born again Christians were similar in all respects to self-described Christians except they were more likely to mention having a relationship with Jesus (30%) as the sign of spiritual maturity. Further reflecting a lack of depth on the subject, the open-ended questions typically produced, on average, just one response from survey respondents, despite the fact that interviewers repeatedly probed for additional or clarifying comments.

4. Most pastors struggle with feeling the relevance as well as articulating a specific set of objectives for spirituality, often favoring activities over attitudes.

The research among pastors highlighted several inter-related challenges. First, while nearly nine out of 10 pastors said that a lack of spiritual maturity is the most significant or one of the largest problems facing the nation, a minority of pastors believe that spiritual immaturity is a problem *in their church*. A second challenge is that only a minority of churches has a written statement expressing the outcomes they are looking for in spiritually mature people. A third challenge is that pastors often favor activities over perspectives in their definitions of spiritual maturity. Their metrics for people's spirituality include the practice of spiritual disciplines (19%), involvement in church activities (15%), witnessing to others (15%), having a relationship with Jesus (14%), having concern for others (14%), applying the Bible to life (12%), being willing to grow spiritually (12%), and having knowledge of Scripture (9%).

5. Pastors are surprisingly vague about the biblical references they use to chart spiritual maturity for people.

One of the reasons churches struggle with making disciples may relate to the lack of clarity that pastors have about the underlying biblical passages that address the process of spiritual maturity. This is most clearly reflected in the huge proportion of pastors who give *generic* responses when asked to identify the most important portions of the Bible that define spiritual maturity. In fact, one-third of pastors simply said "the whole Bible." Other generic responses included "the gospels" (17%), the New Testament (15%), and Paul's letters (10%). In all, the survey showed that three-quarters of pastors mentioned some type of generic answer to this query. In addition, one out of every five pastors gave a *semi-generic* response, such as "Romans" or the "life of Christ."

As for *verse-specific* responses (mentioned by just one-fifth of pastors), the most common passages included: Galatians 5, John 3:16, Ephesians 4, Matthew 28, and Romans 12:1-2. Just 2% of pastors specifically identified the Galatians 5 passage relating to the “fruits of the Spirit,” which includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. *Theme specific* answers represented just 7% of responses, including the Sermon on the Mount, the Great Commission, the Great Commandment, and the Beatitudes.

Five Opportunities

The research also identifies a number of opportunities that can be leveraged to address the problems related to spirituality maturity.

1. Christians and pastors have clarity about the major boundaries that must be addressed to tackle the problem.

What are the perceived reasons that people do not grow spiritually? Self-identified Christians were asked about the obstacles they experience while pastors were queried to see how well they understand the barriers facing their congregants. Church leaders believe the three primary obstacles to people’s engagement are lack of personal motivation (32%), other competing obligations and distractions (26%), and lack of involvement in activities that nurture growth (19%). In this respect, they do not seem too far off in their perceptions. Born again Christians identify distractions (24%), lack of motivation (20%), and lack of involvement (13%) as challenges they face, even if two of the three are mentioned less frequently by adults than pastors. Born again Christians, however, are more likely than pastors to identify sinful behaviors and habits as tripping them up (14% of believers versus 8% of pastors).

2. While most Americans are relatively content with their spirituality “as is,” millions aspire to grow spiritually.

Most adults think of themselves as both spiritually healthy as well as spiritually satisfied, which is both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that most people’s satisfaction can lead to complacency. One opportunity is to connect with the 18 to 20 million Americans who describe themselves as spiritually unhealthy or as dissatisfied with their personal spiritual maturity. Still, a majority of adults say they are “completely” (14%) or “mostly” healthy when it comes to spirituality (40%); nearly two-thirds of Americans describe themselves as “completely” (22%) or “mostly” satisfied with their spirituality (43%). The opportunity among these individuals is to help them move beyond complacency and embrace a deeper understanding of spiritual growth.

3. Compared to older believers, Christians under the age of 40 are less satisfied with spirituality and less “rule oriented.”

Young Christians show signs of spiritual openness that older adults do not. People under the age of 40 are different than those Christians over 40 by being less satisfied spiritually and also rating their spiritual health less favorably. In addition, the generational difference over rule-following was striking: most Elders (ages 63+) and Boomers (44 to 62) strongly endorsed the spiritual metric of rule-following (66% and 56%, respectively);

however, fewer than half of Busters (25 to 43) and Mosaics (18 to 24) embraced this view (45% and 33%). Among the young, this signals a dangerous propensity to rethink the Bible's standards, but it also shows unique responsiveness to grace and forgiveness.

4. Pastors realize they need more help when it comes to assessing spiritual health.

Just 9% of clergy said they were completely satisfied with their ability to measure and assess the spiritual health of their congregation. Still, few pastors (8%) were expressly dissatisfied, leaving a majority of leaders moderately satisfied. Perhaps churchgoers would become less complacent about self-evaluation as pastors embrace more effective forms of evaluation for their congregations.

5. Pastors tend to be harder on themselves than are congregants.

About 1 out of 10 pastors said the church itself was a barrier to people's growth, while none of the churchgoers offered a similar critique. Similarly, when asked to rate the church's ability to help people grow spiritually, pastors were significantly less likely (6%) than churchgoers (33%) to give the organization high marks, reflecting the fact that pastors are often their own toughest critics. The opportunity is to forge a greater sense of partnership and mutual esteem between leaders and laity to address the challenges, to work against self-deception in the process, and to craft deeper, more appropriate routes to spiritual maturity.

Implications

David Kinnaman, President of the California-based research firm, directed the research project. He pointed out several implications of the study:

“America has a spiritual depth problem partly because the faith community does not have a robust definition of its spiritual goals. The study shows the need for new types of spiritual metrics. One new metric might be a renewed effort on the part of leaders to articulate the outcomes of spiritual growth. Another might be the relational engagement and accountability that people maintain. Of course, spirituality is neither a science nor a business, so there is a natural resistance to ascribing scientific or operational standards to what most people believe is an organic process. Yet, the process of spiritual growth is neither simplistic nor without guidelines, so hard work and solid thinking in this arena is needed.”

“As people begin to realize that the concepts and practices of spiritual maturity have been underdeveloped, the Christian community is likely to enter a time of renewed emphasis on discipleship, soul care, the tensions of truth and grace, the so-called ‘fruits’ of the spiritual life, and the practices of spiritual disciplines. A related challenge is that as spiritual formation becomes ‘trendy’ it will inevitably become ‘watered down’ with products that over-promise or are simply counter-productive. Leaders have to take on this issue more effectively, and part of that task is weeding out the good from bad.”

Research

This report is based upon nationwide telephone surveys conducted by The Barna Group with random samples of adults, age 18 and older, and Protestant clergy. The survey among adults was conducted in August 2008 among 1005 adults randomly selected from across the continental United States. The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the aggregate sample is ± 3.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The survey among pastors included 611 clergy, with a maximum margin of sampling error of ± 4.0 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Statistical weighting was used to calibrate the sample to known population percentages in relation to demographic variables.

“Born again Christians” are defined as people who said they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior. Respondents are not asked to describe themselves as “born again.”

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