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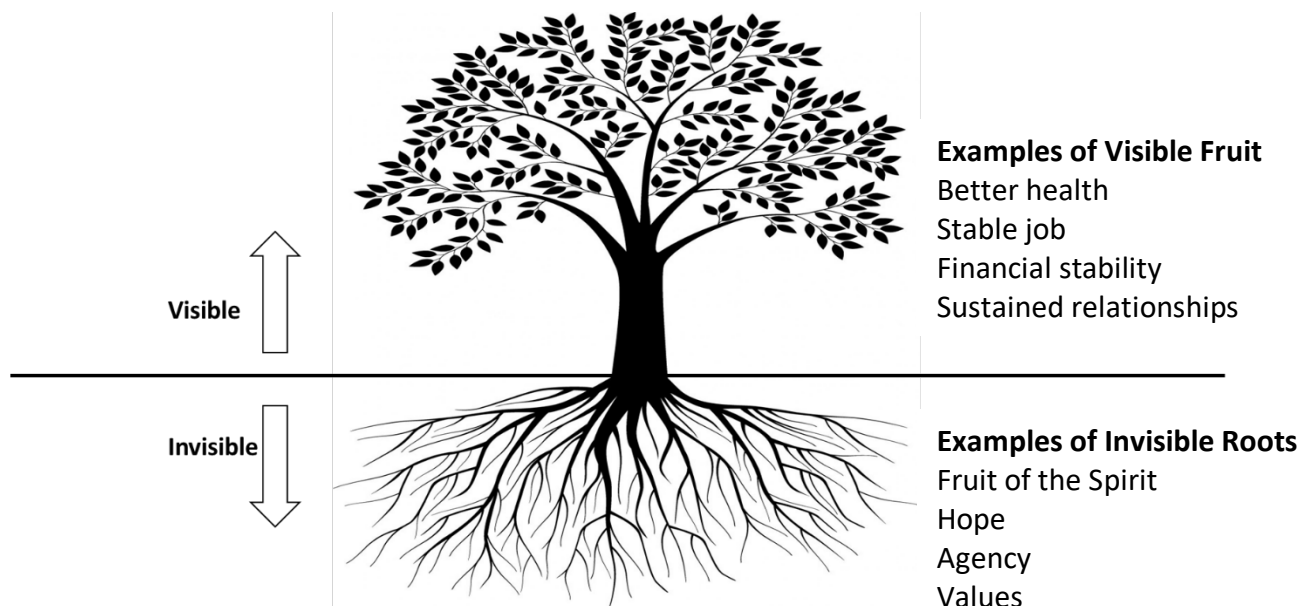
Evaluating Spiritual Change

Paradigm and Principles for A New Approach

Visible Fruits Grow from Invisible Roots

The mission of many organizations, and theoretically every church, is to nurture the invisible roots that nourish the human experience. The qualities known as the 'Fruit of the Spirit' (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control)' are valued in most every culture; a spirit marked by these things produces a life of vibrant fruitfulness. Other similar attributes such as hope, a sense of personal agency, or personal values provide clear but indirect influence on visible fruits such as personal health, flourishing relationships, and financial stability.

Because these 'roots' are a key component of human change, evaluation must gather feedback within this intangible and highly personal area. However, despite the number of organizations working toward personal and social transformation, evaluation theory and methodology is largely devoted to visible or intellectual outcomes. This paper seeks to address this gap by outlining a new paradigm and design principles for evaluating spiritual change.

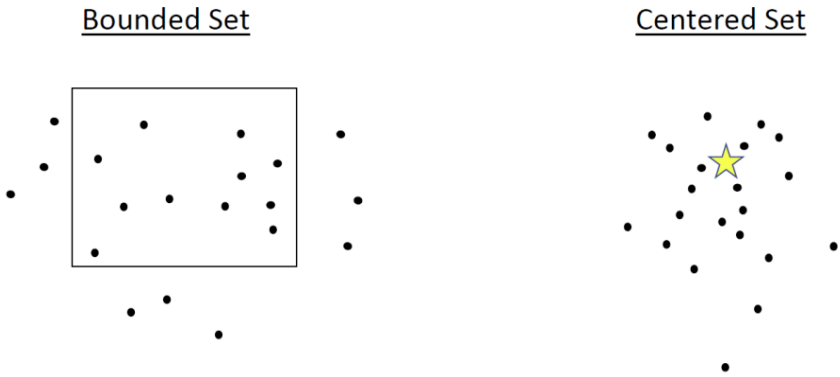


Toward a New Paradigm

Since the enlightenment, a first step toward approaching new problems has been to break them down into component parts to either identify the problem (i.e., a virus) or build a useful tool or process to reliably meet the need. This paradigm has been tremendously helpful, essentially serving as the mental model for advances in medicine, communications, and transportation, to name just a few. Most of evaluation methodology and practice has been built on a similar foundation, focused on clearly identifying one or more ‘causal agents’ that reliably contribute to the desired change. For example, random control trials and other experimental methods have long been used to dependably separate effective treatments from the background noise of individual variation and placebo effects.

Valuable as these methods have been, however, different problems need different approaches. The intangible, invisible and individual domain of spiritual growth cannot be effectively evaluated from within the same paradigm as agriculture, medicine or other tangible and visible domains. Missiologist and cultural anthropologist Paul Hiebert struggled with similar questions in the 1970s and developed a framework² that helps clarify this distinction. His insight was that most churches (and by implication, spiritual development programs) are structured with clear ‘boundaries’ for determining success, measuring it according to who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ of the specific group: membership, baptism, agreement to doctrinal statements, etc. In this paradigm, change or growth is determined by counting the number of people that cross the pre-determined and uniform thresholds. In contrast, a paradigm he called ‘centered set’ is based around a strong attractive force at the center which serves as a draw and unifying force, holding the group together without the presence of boundaries. An example can clarify this distinction: ranches in the USA feature fences to keep cows in, in contrast with ranches in dry areas of Australia which are too big for fences to be practical, instead featuring a well near the center of the ranch to effectively keep all the cows within close proximity.

Figure 1: Bounded set, centered set – different paradigms for group behavior and change



This distinction provides a helpful paradigm and important decision for project managers to consider before initiating an evaluation effort. If a ‘bounded set’ paradigm is selected, the evaluation

will be shaped around identifying various minimum thresholds, such as basic Bible knowledge or church attendance. Most of the evaluation efforts we surveyed in a recent literature review followed this approach. While these types of measures are very common, they pose several limitations, including:

- Failure to identify root-level transformation
- Risk of contributing to a reductionist approach to spiritual development
- Limited value in describing the growth of individuals
- More likely to be informed by in-group bias
- Require substantial training or discussion to ensure standardization and consistent use of the agreed definitions

In contrast, a ‘centered set’ paradigm contributes to a much different path toward evaluation goals. Within a centered set paradigm, the fullness and love of Christ (John 10:10) can be understood as the attractive draw at the center of the spiritual development effort, and consequently monitoring and evaluation can be designed to flexibly and responsively track the progress of individuals toward that center over time. For these reasons, we believe this approach offers a better framework for approaching evaluation of spiritual change, but like every measurement approach it has limitations, including:

- Requires educating stakeholders (many of whom implicitly assume a ‘bounded set’ approach)
- Highly individual; making group-level (aggregated) statements becomes more difficult
- Could be perceived as more relativistic or ‘soft’
- Not suitable for single point data collection; requires multiple data points to determine change over time

Principles for Evaluating Spiritual Change

Any evaluation project we engage involves tailoring the design to meet the needs of the specific project or organization. That said, the following six principles are offered to outline the direction we use for evaluation of spiritual change:

1. **Prioritize monitoring *contribution* toward program goals over claiming *causation*.**

Different monitoring and evaluation approaches and tools are needed for different contexts and goals. We have found the Cynefin framework³ very helpful because it considers context and distinguishes between simple, complicated and complex goals for evaluation. Within that framework, spiritual transformation is clearly exceptionally complex; it is influenced by a potentially infinite number of factors and operates within the intangible and personal domain of the human heart. The factors contributing toward spiritual change are not just different for each individual but are also constantly changing for that same individual: personal experiences, the Holy Spirit, parents, friends, curricula, teachers, media, pastors, school, extended family (to name a few) all contribute to change of different degrees and at different stages of an individual’s life. Given this

reality, determining that a program *caused* spiritual change raises considerable practical and theological questions that we feel are unhelpful. Instead of working to claim causation, we believe it is more true to the experience of participants, helpful to program leaders, and relevant to donors to focus on the development and refinement of programs that can demonstrably *contribute* toward growth that can be monitored over time in the lives of engaged individuals.

2. Prioritize useful *feedback* instead of uniform *measurement*.

Noted author Meg Wheatley⁴ distinguished between *feedback* and *measurement* as follows:

Feedback:

- Is context dependent
- Provides meaning that is determined by the system

Measurement:

- Has a pre-determined and static meaning
- Seeks information in pre-determined categories
- Focuses on prediction and control

We believe that feedback, especially within a center-set paradigm, will ultimately be more useful and avoid potential misunderstandings related to measurement. Toward this end, we encourage the development of ongoing monitoring systems which can contribute to and complement more episodic evaluation efforts.

3. Feedback that is useful to individual participants is the highest priority; meeting that need is the best way to serve the information needs of program staff and donors.

Helping individuals in their own spiritual growth implies tremendous complexity, involving inter-relationships between personal choice and a constantly changing environment. Our approach sees individual choice and goals as important factors to include, so our feedback systems are designed to prioritize the encouragement and guidance of individuals. Inasmuch as that primary goal is accomplished, the feedback process can become a cornerstone of the program itself, not a mere 'do the paperwork after the real work' data collection exercise. Furthermore, data that demonstrates individual growth (or lack thereof) is exactly what program staff and donors want to know, so appropriate reports based on participant feedback about their own experience and decisions will provide more rigorous and reliable evaluation data than typical program surveys.

4. The process of collecting feedback on spiritual change should be understood as a reflective practice that contributes toward core program goals.

The practice of *Examen* described by Ignatius of Loyola and John Wesley's *22 Questions* both underscore an important truth: intentional reflection on our spiritual health and journey is itself a key contribution toward the goal of spiritual growth. Expanding on the principles above, our approach seeks to support the intentional reflection of individuals as part of the program itself. In this way, participant feedback serves the dual purposes of promoting personal growth and providing stakeholders with highly significant data.

5. Feedback should inform and encourage the journey, not just mark the destination.

Consistent with the ‘center set’ paradigm described above, feedback should prioritize informing and encouraging the journey of individual participants toward the ‘center’ of the love and fullness of Christ instead of across various thresholds (i.e., Bible memory, church attendance, etc.) Because of this, we believe a flexible, primarily qualitative approach that allows individual participants to describe their journey in their own words will provide several benefits:

- It will be more appropriate to the varied contexts of individual participants.
- It provides more useful feedback for the individuals and program staff.
- This approach will result in an assessment that is more transparent than ‘destination-based’ measures.

6. Criteria are universal, but standards are individual.

In complex contexts, it is appropriate for the criteria (or categories) for measuring change (i.e., love, joy, peace, etc.) to be consistent across all participants. However, the standards, or what qualifies as growth or change, are unique to each individual because personal qualities (i.e., family, genetics, culture, etc.) influence multiple factors relevant to measurement, including:

- Starting point: everyone has a unique profile of needs that determines their individual ‘distance from the center’ on different dimensions of spiritual growth.
- Strengths: everyone has a unique profile of strengths that will help them make progress toward the goals at different rates and in different ways.
- Weaknesses: everyone has a unique profile of factors that inhibit their progress to the goals.
- Internal environment: everyone has a unique profile of internal factors (previous experiences, motivation, self-image, confidence, etc.) that lead to different responses to the program.
- External environment: everyone has a unique profile of external factors (living environment, influence of family/friends, other goals, distractions, etc.) that lead to different patterns of response to the program.

This principle can be illustrated with childhood report cards; even in the same family, a ‘C’ in math could represent a triumph of hard work and study for one child and cause for concern for another. The criteria parents use (math competency) is the same, but the standards applied (i.e., how they respond to a ‘C’) are ideally tailored to the individual child’s strengths and efforts. Our approach seeks to track and encourage the growth of everyone’s unique journey.

7. Monitoring feedback should support nested relational structures surrounding each participant (i.e., the program, family, church, community).

Spiritual transformation does not happen within a disconnected, individual context like a laboratory test tube; instead, it happens within an interconnected series of relational structures. Our approach seeks to support this reality and promote health within the full relational ecosystem of each participant’s experience.

Conclusion

Developing a new evaluation approach requires more work and testing than just developing a new survey; toward that end, pilot projects to test approaches designed within these parameters are underway. As with any exploration, we anticipate surprising opportunities and challenges as we journey toward the destination of more useful and relevant approaches toward evaluating spiritual change.

¹ Galatians 5:22-23

² Hiebert, P. G. (1978). Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories. *Gospel in Context*, 1(4), 24-29.

³ Snowden, D. J., & Boone, M. E. (2007). A Leader's Framework for Decision Making. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(11), 68.

⁴ Wheatley, M., & Kellner-Rogers, M. (1999). What do we measure and why? Questions about the uses of measurement. *Journal for Strategic Performance Measurement*, 4. Retrieved 1/18/18 from: <https://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/whymeasure.html>