

» Greg Hawkins, MBA '88, asked congregants what they got out of attending Willow Creek Community Church and was shocked by their answers.

Marketing

Today he is promoting mass customization to thousands of other churches.

by William C. Symonds

FOUR AND A HALF YEARS AGO, Greg Hawkins—executive pastor of the mammoth Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago—received the kind of news most ministers would want to bury. Hawkins, MBA '88, who worked at McKinsey & Co. before Willow Creek, had commissioned one of the nation's foremost marketing experts to survey the church's members. At the time, he had never dreamed the study would uncover anything disturbing or controversial. After all, Willow Creek had been so successful that many considered it the most influential church in America. Yet he was being told the study had found that nearly one out of four of Willow's members felt stalled or dissatisfied, and that many of these were considering leaving. Hawkins knew that if these findings were released, they could ignite a firestorm both inside the church and among the many critics of evangelical megachurches.

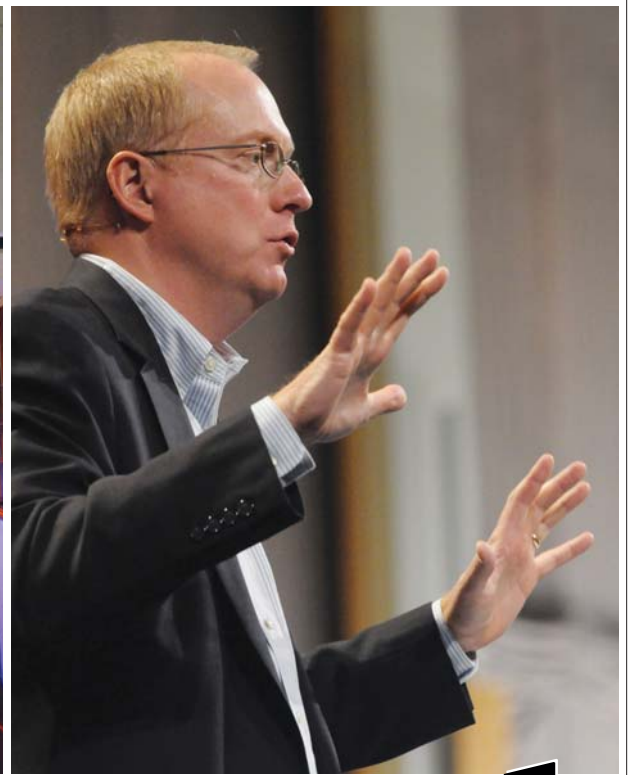
But Hawkins, who took a 90 percent pay cut when he left McKinsey for his first job at Willow in 1991, has never shirked from taking risks for his faith. So rather than bury the report, he launched an effort to use the research—known as Reveal—to help remake Willow Creek so that it could better meet the needs of dissatisfied parishioners. His campaign got off to a rocky beginning. Hawkins' first job was to persuade Bill Hybels, the charismatic founding pastor of Willow Creek, who had spent three decades building it into a mecca with five campuses, an average weekly attendance of 23,000, and a \$54 million annual budget. "When I first heard these results, the pain was almost unbearable," Hybels recalls. "You never like to hear that the people you have given your adult life to serve are on the side of the road and not progressing." Today, Hawkins's gamble seems to be paying off in a big way. Willow Creek has overhauled its former



one-size-fits-all approach in favor of trying to cater to the varying spiritual needs of its members. "Reveal has revolutionized the way I look at the role of the church," says Hybels. "It affects how we plan our services, the ministries we launch, and is the lens through which we look at everything." More important, because so many churches look to Willow for leadership, Reveal is reshaping evangelical Christianity to use mass customization.

The Willow Creek Association—the church's huge consulting arm—is urging its 12,000 member churches to use the Reveal tools. In October, Hawkins led the first conference on Reveal at Willow Creek, drawing over 1,700 leaders from 600 churches. "Initially, Reveal scared some people away," says David Loveless, senior pastor

PHOTO BY MESHANE FLEMING STUDIOS



God's Word

Willow Creek Community Church, headquartered in the Chicago suburb of South Barrington, Ill., left and above, draws more than 23,000 worshippers a week. Executive pastor Greg Hawkins, MBA '88, above right, encourages leaders of other churches to adapt consumer-survey techniques to increase the satisfaction of church members.

of Discovery Church, a megachurch in Orlando, Fla. "But now there are leaders all over the world who know about Reveal. I believe this will impact tens of thousands of churches in the next few years."

If so, it could accelerate the market-share shifts that have been reshaping American Christianity for decades. After World War II, American society was dominated by "mainline" Protestant denominations, notably the United Methodist, Presbyterian, Evangelical Lutheran, and the Episcopal churches. But since 1960, these denominations have lost about half their market share while the evangelical denominations and churches enjoyed robust growth and now outnumber them. (The U.S. Catholic Church has remained relatively stable, claiming about 22 percent of the population as members.) Evangelicals tend to ascribe to more conservative theological views than the mainline churches. Most believe that Jesus Christ is who he said he is (the son of God), that the Bible is the literal word of God, and that as Christians, they have an obligation to tell other people about their faith and persuade them to become Christians. Today, "the evangelicals are the most vibrant branch of Christianity," says pollster George Gallup Jr.

The most striking evidence of the evangelical success has been the

explosive growth of megachurches, defined as Protestant churches that attract at least 2,000 weekly worshippers. There are now some 1,200 evangelical megachurches, up from just 50 in 1980, according to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research.

"Willow Creek has been a leader in almost every innovation" that has fueled this growth, says Bob Buford, chairman of the Leadership Network, which works with megachurch leaders. "And with Reveal, Willow is helping these churches move to mass customization, which will dramatically increase their effectiveness and growth."

During his days as a Stanford graduate student in the late 1980s, Hawkins never dreamed he would end up on the cutting edge of Christianity. Sure, he was a believer who attended Bethany Lutheran Church in Menlo Park and faithfully read his Bible. "I felt a strong closeness with God and Jesus," he recalls, but also that religion was a private affair. Like most of his classmates, he assumed he was headed for a career in the upper reaches of corporate America. After all, as an undergrad at Texas A&M, he demonstrated his leadership potential as president of the Memorial Student Center, one of the most powerful positions on a campus with over 40,000 students. That gave him access to an elite alumni network, which led to a job as an analyst in McKinsey's Houston office. After two years at McKinsey, Hawkins applied to both Stanford and Harvard business schools and was accepted at both. He chose Stanford partly because he got a personal call from the admissions director inviting him to come, while Harvard sent its standard acceptance letter. Moreover, after talking with McKinsey colleagues who had graduated from Harvard and Stanford, "I found I liked being with the Stanford alums more," he says. He was also attracted by the culture they described as more

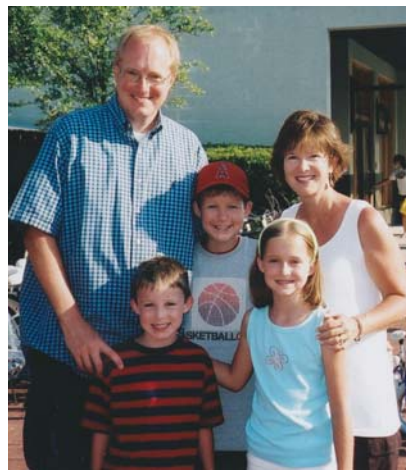
collaborative and less competitive.

"Stanford was a fantastic place for me," Hawkins recalls. Because he had majored in civil engineering at A&M, he enjoyed the more quantitative classes that some classmates found challenging—including macroeconomics and investing. Each quarter, he challenged himself to "really master one class" while also making time to broaden himself. He cultivated an interest in cooking—serving as food editor of the *Reporter*, the student newspaper—and began painting abstract art, a hobby he still enjoys. Nevertheless, "even after two years at Stanford, I didn't know what I wanted to do." So he went back to McKinsey, this time to the Chicago office, where he worked with clients ranging from New Zealand's Fletcher Challenge to Chicago's Inland Steel.

THEN ONE SUNDAY IN OCTOBER 1989, he accepted an invitation to attend a service at Willow Creek, which was just beginning to gain national attention. "It was one of those truly defining moments," Hawkins recalls. That Sunday, Bill Hybels delivered a clarion call to more than 3,500 people. "Ninety-five percent devotion to Christ is 5 percent too little," Hybels thundered, as he described the kind of commitment Jesus expected. Hawkins was riveted. "I had been waiting my whole life for someone to call that out of me," he says. And that soon spurred Hawkins to reconsider his career path. Within a little more than a year he left McKinsey and accepted a position as an intern at the church where he worked to expand its networks of small groups in which members gather to discuss their lives and faith.

Initially, Hawkins saw his internship as a one-year stint, but he met a woman at Willow—Lynn Leverentz—who would soon become his wife, and discovered that he had a deep calling for the work of the church. He also was really good at it. "From the first time I met him, I knew that he was a very unusual and talented guy," says Hybels, who asked Hawkins to join the leadership team. Soon his role was expanded to executive pastor, a job that requires him to oversee the paid staff, which now exceeds 500. This sudden rise would have been impossible in many Christian denominations, which require leaders to have extensive seminary training. In contrast, Hawkins has never formally studied theology. But Hybels sees value in business training. In fact, in addition to hiring Hawkins, he also tapped Jim Mellado, who has an MBA from Harvard, to lead the Willow Creek Association. "Both these men are devoted Christ-followers," Hybels says. "But they've had some of the best training in the world, and we've never faced a problem that has intimidated them."

As Willow's executive pastor, Hawkins is paid a modest salary compared to the millions he would have earned had he stayed in consulting for McKinsey. But his lifestyle is far more balanced than that of most executives. "He is one of the best fathers and husbands I've ever known," Hybels says. Hawkins has three children, ages 12, 10, and 7. "In the middle of events with thousands of people, you'll see him sneaking out the back to attend his son's football practice or a school function," says Hybels. And Hawkins regularly makes breakfast for his family and is home by 5 p.m.



Greg Hawkins with his family, from left, sons John and Jack, daughter Aubrey, and wife Lynn in 2008.

to help with dinner and homework.

Not surprisingly, Hawkins is also a big believer in strategic planning, which has been vitally important to Willow Creek since he joined the staff. Willow Creek was founded by Hybels in 1975 to serve people he called "seekers," defined as those who are curious about God but who often haven't been attending church. Prior to founding Willow, Hybels did his own market research in which he asked thousands of people living in the Chicago suburbs why they didn't go to church. They told him they found conventional churches "boring," too focused on money, and irrelevant to their lives. Willow catered to them by offering a church stripped of traditional trappings. There are no stained glass windows or pews in its auditorium, for instance, and worship services aren't structured with liturgies or rituals. Instead, every effort is made to relate the Bible to the lives of the people who attend. Willow offers a multitude of other programs, from small groups in which members can form close bonds to classes for people going through divorce, job loss, or other personal problems. By 1989, when Hawkins first attended, Willow had become one of the largest churches in America, with some 12,000 attending weekly services.

This growth attracted lots of calls from other churches eager to learn the secrets behind Willow's success. In 1992, Hybels launched the Willow Creek Association to teach other churches how to follow Willow's example. By 1998, management guru Peter Drucker, who was deeply inspired by Willow, was calling the growth of megachurches "the most important social phenomenon in American society in the last 30 years."

By the late 1990s, with weekly attendance reaching 18,000, Willow was bulging at the seams. So Hawkins led a strategic planning process that developed an ambitious expansion program. In 2000, Willow launched a capital campaign that raised \$81 million—a record for any church up to that point—to build a stunning, 7,200-seat sanctuary. Willow also opened four satellite campuses to better serve members who lived more than 30 minutes from its main campus in the affluent suburb of South Barrington, Ill.

In 2003, with the new sanctuary about to open, Hawkins was ready to fire up the strategic planning process again. Just then, his colleague Cally Parkinson introduced him to Eric Arnsen, a marketing guru she'd gotten to know during a 20-year career at Allstate. Arnsen had founded a firm that helped Allstate, Gatorade, Nike, and other brands better understand their customers. His ability to help companies predict consumer behavior was so powerful that in 2000, McKinsey bought Arnsen's company and made its intellectual property a core part of their practice. In 2003, when he met Hawkins, Arnsen had just left McKinsey.

As a devout Christian, Arnsen was willing to volunteer his time to apply the same research techniques to church members. Until then, most churches, including Willow, measured their effectiveness by asking how many people they were attracting and how many dollars they were collecting. By those measures, Willow was one of the most successful churches in America. Arnsen suggested that instead of looking at numbers, Willow should focus on the inner spiritual lives of its

members, especially how close they were to Jesus Christ. He then segmented members into four categories, from those “exploring Christ” to the “Christ-centered,” who are totally committed. Using this lens, his survey found that even as people grew closer to Christ, they tended to become less satisfied with Willow Creek. In other words, Willow was doing a better job of meeting the needs of seekers than of its more fervent believers. Yet Arnson’s research showed that half of Willow’s members fell into the two most fervent segments of believers: “close to Christ” and “Christ-centered.” Moreover, these committed Christians were the very people who were the most important to Willow’s long-term growth and vitality.

At first, this news came as a huge shock. “We went through our own stages of denial—anger, sadness, depression, the works—until we could finally embrace the brutal truth: We needed to change,” says Hawkins, who assumed the role of the leader and champion of Reveal. “But once we got through the denial, we changed Willow a ton.”

Hybels and Hawkins realized they had to customize their offerings to better meet members at various stages of the spiritual journey. For example, for 30 years, Willow offered a midweek service for all believers. Everyone received the same teaching. Now, after a brief worship service, members disperse to attend one of 15 to 20 courses, ranging from those for new Christians to demanding theology courses taught by seminary professors. Similarly, Willow’s thousands of small groups dropped the one-size-fits-all model. They are now using an approach akin to a university, Mellado says. “Reveal informs our whole strategy of resource allocation, and the whole point is to encourage life transformation.” In other words, the objective is to create more people who are totally committed to Christ, because these people are the most effective evangelists. So far, Willow’s leaders believe Reveal is working. “The feedback from Willow’s members has been very positive,” Arnson says. “People feel like their needs are being met more than before.” Willow plans a more scientific survey of member satisfaction this year.

NOW THE WILLOW CREEK ASSOCIATION is aggressively encouraging other churches to use Reveal. Since 1992, it has ballooned to a \$32 million organization with 12,000 dues-paying member churches from 90 denominations, including churches from such mainline denominations as the Methodists and Lutherans, and even some Catholic parishes. But while the Willow Creek Association used to focus on teaching other churches how to emulate Willow’s successes, now Reveal is becoming its core focus. So far, some 200,000 Christians who belong to 800 churches have taken the survey. The association sells the survey to other churches at prices ranging from \$375 for small churches to \$2,250 for churches with more than 2,500 members. Churches that use it “will be able to do a far more effective job



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of serving their congregations,” says Loveless, who has used Reveal to reinvent the megachurch he leads in Orlando. “In the 21st century, almost everything can be customized,” he says, “so why shouldn’t we offer that to people on their spiritual journeys?”

To be sure, Reveal won’t be universally adopted. Even if 10,000 churches sign up, that’s a small percentage of the nation’s more than 300,000 churches. “A lot of churches are backing off, since they don’t want to uncover the lack of effectiveness in their ministry,” Loveless says. And some liberal denominations are turned off by Reveal’s evangelical bent. But in a consumer-driven world in which one-size-fits-all models tend to falter, those churches who use it are more likely to flourish by satisfying and retaining members.

For Greg Hawkins, it has been a long journey from Stanford and McKinsey to his small, book-lined office overlooking Willow’s suburban campus. He may not be leading a great company, but as the leader of Reveal, he is transforming many churches, as well as the lives of their members. That is far more satisfying to Hawkins than any CEO job could be. Long ago, he discovered, “I was not cut out for the commercial space, since the profit motive is not something that gets me all jazzed up.” The potential to have a profound impact on American Christianity is his rich reward. ●

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