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Defining Spiritual Growth: Congregations, Community, and Connectedness

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Abstract

This article explores the concepts, means, and objectives of spiritual growth across four strands of Christianity. Based on focus group interviews and

congregational observations within four congregations (conservative Protestant, mainline Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, and an emerging church), we assess the ways in which regular attenders articulate concepts of spiritual growth, the practices that contribute to their sense of growth, and how a commonly shared vision about what spiritual growth is and how it takes place contributes to a sense of congregational community. We find both expected variation across strands of tradition, as well as similarities (particularly within Protestant groups) in framing spiritual growth as an open ended and somewhat ambiguous process in which the personal and emotional resources of the community support a sense of personal growth and well-being. Our findings also suggest some support for the notion that churches with strong and clear core messages of spiritual growth cultivate stronger congregational commitments—a topic we argue should be further explored in future research.

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