

Measuring What Matters: Development and Validation of the Student Spiritual Growth and Influence Survey

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Abstract

This paper presents the development of the Student Spiritual Growth and Influence Survey, a quantitative instrument designed to assess discipleship among adolescents in the local church. To address the need for measurable, theologically grounded evaluation tools in youth ministry, the survey captures two primary constructs: Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Influence. Development of the instrument took place through a multi-phase process including construct design, item creation, expert review, and pilot testing. Findings demonstrate the survey's capacity to provide a meaningful snapshot of adolescent faith development and relational influences. The presentation will highlight the theoretical framework, development process, and practical applications of the survey, offering ministry leaders and researchers a scalable tool to evaluate and strengthen discipleship outcomes among teenagers.

Introduction

Ask a youth minister how the ministry is doing, and the answer will often begin with a number.

A leader might declare that we had sixty teenagers last Wednesday night. Another may say twelve students went on the mission trip. Still another could celebrate that we baptized eight teenagers last year. Those numbers matter. Attendance tells us whether teenagers are showing up. Baptisms identify young people who have publicly professed faith in Christ. Participation tells us something about engagement. A youth ministry leader should know these numbers.

However, these tell only part of the story. When ministry effectiveness is measured primarily by activity, participation can easily become a substitute for discipleship. Increased attendance may reflect genuine spiritual growth, but it may also indicate that teenagers enjoy the youth group experience. Attendance matters, but by itself it tells us very little about whether students are growing toward Christlike maturity.

One central goal of youth ministry is to help teenagers become more like Jesus. In *Youth Ministry Deconstructed*, I describe discipleship as a lifelong relational journey toward Christlike maturity. Teenagers are still works in progress, as are the adults who disciple them. The question, then, is not whether a student has completely attained Christian maturity, but whether there is evidence that the student is moving toward Christ in belief, practice, relationships, and daily life.

That goal should shape the way youth ministries define success. Ministry outcomes should reflect the Christlike characteristics leaders hope to see developing in young people. These outcomes may include a growing relationship with God, engagement in spiritual disciplines,

service to others, participation in the life of the church, and other expressions of faith in action. Clear goals and outcomes give leaders a way to ask whether their ministries are helping teenagers move toward spiritual maturity rather than simply keeping them active in a program.

With that goal in mind, I began developing the Student Spiritual Growth and Influence Survey (SSGIS). The question behind its development was simple: How do we know whether teenagers are growing spiritually, and what is influencing that growth? Answering that question is difficult because no number can fully measure spiritual growth. The Bible does not describe discipleship as a score. Spiritual formation is God's work in a person's life. Christian maturity includes beliefs, relationships, practices, character, obedience, service, dependence upon God, and participation in the body of Christ. No questionnaire can directly measure the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a teenager.

Jane Thayer faced a similar problem in developing the Christian Spiritual Participation Profile. Rather than claiming to measure spiritual maturity itself, Thayer developed an instrument that examined participation in processes associated with spiritual development. Her work was grounded in learning theory and focused on observable participation in spiritual practices associated with growth (Thayer 2004). That distinction became important in developing the SSGIS.

The SSGIS does not determine whether a teenager is spiritually mature. It provides a diagnostic snapshot of self-reported beliefs, practices, behaviors, relationships, and influences associated with adolescent Christian formation. A snapshot is limited, but it is also useful. It gives ministry leaders information to consider alongside conversations with teenagers, observations from parents and youth leaders, ministry participation, and other evidence. The SSGIS does not give

teenagers a spiritual report card. The purpose is to help churches ask better questions about discipleship.

Theoretical Basis

The SSGIS grew out of an extensive review of biblical discipleship, theological foundations, adolescent faith, spiritual formation, and youth ministry literature. The review focused on two related questions. What characteristics provide evidence that a teenager is growing as a disciple of Jesus Christ? What relationships and environments exert significant influence on that growth? The first question led to the broader construct of Spiritual Growth, and the second to Spiritual Influence.

Biblical and Theological Foundations for Discipleship

The theological foundation for the SSGIS begins with the biblical goal of discipleship: growth toward Christlike maturity. Scripture describes spiritual formation as a process through which believers increasingly reflect the character and life of Christ. Paul uses developmental language in Ephesians 4:13–15, describing believers as growing from spiritual childhood toward maturity measured by “Christ’s fullness.” Similar language appears in 1 Corinthians 3:1–3 and Colossians 1:28–29, while Romans 8:29 identifies conformity to the image of Christ as God’s purpose for believers. Christian maturity, therefore, finds its standard in the person of Christ rather than in participation in particular church programs or the completion of a prescribed set of religious activities.

This understanding of discipleship includes both an intended destination and an ongoing direction (Im, 2017). Christlikeness provides the destination by identifying the qualities and practices that should increasingly characterize the life of a disciple. Prayer, engagement with

Scripture, worship, service, obedience, and other expressions of Christian faith provide observable evidence of this growth. However, these behaviors alone do not define discipleship. In *Youth Ministry Deconstructed*, I described discipleship as “a lifelong relational journey toward Christlike maturity.” This definition emphasizes a continuing trajectory toward Christ rather than a point at which the believer has completed spiritual formation. The distinction matters especially when assessing adolescents, whose faith is still developing. The appropriate question is not whether a teenager has attained spiritual maturity, but whether there is evidence of movement toward Christlike maturity.

Biblical discipleship also involves more than internal belief. Jesus connects discipleship with observable patterns of life, including sacrificial love for others (John 13:34–35). Similarly, a believer should increasingly live a life marked by holiness (1 Peter 1:15–16). Growth toward Christlike maturity involves integrating belief and practice. Serving others in the name of Jesus is faith in action. This theological understanding provides an important basis for measuring spiritual growth across multiple dimensions rather than relying on a single religious behavior.

Adolescent Faith Development and Spiritual Formation

Adolescence also presents a distinctive context for spiritual formation. Teenagers move toward greater ownership of beliefs they often first received from parents, churches, and other significant adults. Spiritual formation during adolescence involves more than belief in Jesus. It also involves examining how faith becomes personally meaningful and how it increasingly shapes their beliefs, practices, decisions, and relationships (Fowler, 1981).

Research on adolescent faith formation provides additional categories for understanding this development. The National Study of Youth and Religion identified three broad dimensions that

can inform the assessment of adolescent faith: the content of religious belief, the conduct of religious activity, and the centrality of religion to life (Smith and Denton, 2005). Content concerns what teenagers believe and understand; conduct concerns practices such as worship, prayer, and Bible reading; and centrality concerns how much faith influences everyday life. These dimensions reinforce the need to examine adolescent spiritual formation from several perspectives rather than equating spiritual growth with church attendance or participation in youth ministry activities.

Spiritual formation also occurs within relationships. Teenagers develop faith within families, youth groups, and congregations, making their social environments an important part of understanding adolescent discipleship. Parents shape religious practices. Christian parents positively influence teens toward spiritual growth. However, unbelieving parents negatively influence students away from faith in Christ. Youth leaders, peers, and congregation members provide additional relationships through which teenagers experience Christian community and observe mature faith. These relationships matter beyond participation in youth ministry programs. Discipleship should occur across the three arenas of youth ministry: the youth group, the family, and the congregation. In the congregational arena, for example, teenagers encounter opportunities to study Scripture, worship, serve, and develop relationships with Christians from other generations.

Parents occupy an especially important place within this relational ecology. Bengtson, Putney, and Harris's longitudinal research identified both parental modeling and the quality of the parent-child relationship as keys to passing on faith (Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2013). They found that warm, affirming relationships are particularly important for transmitting faith across

generations, while parental modeling gives adolescents a visible expression of religious commitment. Faith conversations also matter. Smith and Adamczyk found that parents regularly discussing religious matters with their children as part of everyday life was especially influential in young adults' faith (Smith and Adamczyk, 2021). Adolescent spiritual formation, therefore, includes both the teenager's developing faith and the relational influences surrounding that development.

Method

The development of the SSGIS followed a multi-phase process designed to create a reliable and practical measure of adolescent spiritual growth and influence. The process moved from identifying the theoretical constructs to developing survey items, utilizing expert review, pilot testing the instrument, and conducting statistical analysis. Each phase helped refine the instrument while maintaining its intended purpose as a diagnostic tool for local church youth ministry. I am grateful to my research assistant, Sara Robinson; my grader, Emily Jarrell; and my seminary students for their assistance throughout this process.

Instrument Development

The instrument development timeline began with my 2020 research on the Youth Ministry Arenas. My mentor, Richard Ross, first developed the concept of arenas (Ross, 2017). We developed an assessment tool for youth leaders to evaluate their effectiveness in the three arenas (Odom and Robinson, 2021). While the Youth Ministry Arenas Assessment focused on leader perceptions, I began developing a framework to assess students themselves.

In 2021, my participation in the Student Assessment of Effective Faith Factors (SAEFF) influenced the theoretical development of the SSGIS. SAEFF was a Lilly Grant-funded study

examining factors associated with adolescent faith. I served on the expert panel that developed and reviewed the survey questions. That experience gave me practical insight into how difficult it is to translate theological and ministry concepts into statements teenagers can understand and answer. An idea may make sense theologically and still produce a poor survey item. A statement may seem clear to a youth minister but be interpreted differently by a fourteen-year-old. Two items may appear to represent separate concepts while teenagers respond to them as essentially the same question.

The SAEFF process also reinforced the importance of looking beyond religious activity. The expert panel's questions addressed spiritual practices, church participation, relationships, parent influence, and service (Jones, 2022). Several SAEFF findings proved particularly important for the SSGIS. Parental service and leadership in the church were associated with indicators of adolescent spiritual growth (Jones, 2022). These findings contributed to the Parent Influence domain.

The SSGIS did not reproduce the SAEFF instrument. Rather, my participation in SAEFF informed the conceptual process. I considered topics explored through that research alongside the biblical and theological framework, youth ministry literature, and the developing framework for *Youth Ministry Deconstructed* to create an instrument specifically for use as a local church diagnostic.

By 2022, the biblical, developmental, and relational understanding of adolescent faith provided the conceptual foundation for the SSGIS. Spiritual growth involves an increasingly personal relationship with God, engagement in formative Christian practices, and faith expressed through service to others. At the same time, adolescent faith develops within relationships with parents,

youth leaders, peers, and the larger congregation. These perspectives led to six domains organized under the broader constructs of Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Influence (Table 1).

Examination of these six domains is useful because churches can confuse what they do for teenagers with what is happening in teenagers. For example, a church may provide Bible study without teenagers personally engaging with Scripture. Leaders may offer service projects without service becoming part of a teenager's Christian life. A church may have a thriving youth group without teenagers developing meaningful relationships with the larger congregation. Therefore, the SSGIS examines both spiritual growth and influence.

Table 1: SSGIS Constructs and Domain

Construct	Domain	Primary Focus
Spiritual Growth	Relationship with God	Personal and internalized Christian faith
Spiritual Growth	Spiritual Disciplines	Participation in formative Christian practices
Spiritual Growth	Service	Faith in action
Spiritual Influence	Connection to Youth Group	Belonging and relationships in the group
Spiritual Influence	Connection to Congregation	Integration into the larger church
Spiritual Influence	Parent Influence	Parental relationships and spiritual influence

Spiritual Growth

The biblical goal of discipleship is movement toward Christlike maturity. The Great Commission calls the church to make disciples, baptize them, and teach them to obey everything Christ commanded (Matt. 28:18-20). Paul describes the purpose of ministry as equipping believers until they reach maturity measured by the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16). Therefore, discipleship involves more than conversion or participation in church activities; it entails growth toward Christlikeness. The SSGIS does not attempt to measure every characteristic of Christian

maturity. Instead, the Spiritual Growth construct focuses on three domains that provide observable indicators of a teenager's developing faith.

Relationship with God. The first domain addresses whether Christian faith has become personal. Pearce and Denton distinguish dimensions of adolescent religiosity, including religious content, conduct, and centrality. The centrality of faith matters for adolescent discipleship because teenagers are developing an increasingly independent sense of identity and belief (Pearce and Denton 2011). Therefore, the SSGIS asks teenagers about Christian identity, pursuing God's will, thinking about God outside church, how a relationship with God influences choices, public identification with Christ, belief in God's purpose, and dependence on God.

Spiritual Disciplines. The second domain measures participation in intentional practices associated with Christian formation. Practicing spiritual disciplines does not make a person spiritually mature. Rather, they are a means by which the Holy Spirit produces godliness in a believer's life (1 Timothy 4:7). Spiritual disciplines include Bible study, prayer, worship, Scripture reflection, memorization, fellowship, and fasting.

Service. The third domain recognizes that Christian maturity moves outward. Jesus described greatness in terms of serving others (Mark 10:42-45). Christian discipleship should therefore produce more than private devotion. Teenagers should increasingly see themselves as participants in the church's ministry and mission. The Youth Ministry Arenas research identified ministry service as the primary way churches help teenagers develop connections to the congregation (Odom, 2021).

Together, the domains of Relationship with God, Spiritual Disciplines, and Service provide three perspectives on spiritual growth. The domains measure personal faith, formative practices, and faith expressed through ministry to others. Spiritual growth, however, does not occur in isolation, so it is also necessary to examine the relationships and environments that influence a teenager's faith.

Spiritual Influence

A central theoretical assumption of the SSGIS is that adolescent spiritual formation takes place within relationships. True discipleship can occur only in the context of relationships. Youth ministry has sometimes functioned as though the youth group was the primary arena of adolescent discipleship. One unique aspect of the SSGIS is its framework based on the Youth Ministry Arenas (Odom, 2021). The arenas are the domains in which youth leaders operate. The framework itself grew from the recognition that youth ministry cannot be limited to working with teenagers. Parents are the most significant influence upon adolescent faith (Smith and Denton, 2005). Thus, a discipleship strategy for youth must include parents. Likewise, teenagers also need meaningful relationships within the church. Youth ministry must therefore intentionally connect teenagers to the larger congregation. The three arenas of youth ministry are: teenagers in the youth group, teenagers in families, and teenagers in the congregation. These three arenas, expressed through their relational or institutional influence, became part of the conceptual foundation for the Spiritual Influence side of the SSGIS.

Connection to Youth Group. The fourth SSGIS domain recognizes the formative potential of relationships within youth ministry. Teenagers need adults and peers who know them, listen to them, allow them to ask difficult questions, and encourage them toward Christ. Leaders should

intentionally develop godly relationships with students. A leader's proximity to teenagers provides opportunities for volunteers to model the Christian faith for young believers. The SSGIS therefore moves beyond asking whether teenagers attend youth group. It asks what kind of relational connection they experience there.

Parent Influence. The fifth domain recognizes the central place of parents in adolescent faith development. Smith and Denton's *Soul Searching* identified parents as the most important influence on adolescents' religious and spiritual lives (Smith and Denton 2005). Research on the intergenerational transmission of faith has reinforced this conclusion. For example, researchers found that parental modeling and the quality of parent-child relationships matter in transmitting religion across generations (Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2013). Smith and Adamczyk likewise emphasize the importance of ordinary parent-child interaction and conversation to growing faith into young adulthood (Smith and Adamczyk 2021). They found that relationship quality matters as much as the content parents teach. The SSGIS therefore examines several dimensions of parental influence: encouragement toward spiritual growth, guidance about future decisions, faith conversations, Christian modeling, relational warmth, visible church service or leadership, and encouragement to practice faith outside church.

Connection to the Congregation. The sixth domain recognizes that teenagers need relationships beyond parents, peers, and youth workers. They need meaningful connection to the body of Christ. The *Sticky Faith* research identified connection to the larger congregation through intergenerational relationships and worship as an important factor associated with lasting faith (Powell, Griffin, and Crawford 2011). Mark Cannister similarly argues that transformation occurs deeply when teenagers participate in the broader life of the church and develop

relationships with caring adults (Cannister 2016). The Youth Ministry Arenas research found the same pattern in practice (Odom, 2021). The SSGIS therefore distinguishes Connection to Youth Group from Connection to the Congregation. One asks whether teenagers feel a sense of belonging within youth ministry. The other asks whether they belong within the larger church. Together, the three domains represent a relational ecology of adolescent faith. Teenagers grow within a network of relationships that includes parents, youth leaders, peers, and adults throughout the congregation.

In 2022, I developed an initial pool of survey items to represent each domain. Item development moved from abstract concepts to experiences teenagers could report. For example, “congregational integration” may work as a theoretical term, but it is not language most middle school students naturally use. Items instead asked whether adults in the church know and care about the teenager, whether the student feels a sense of belonging, and whether relationships with adults contribute to spiritual growth. The process repeatedly returned to one question: If this construct is present, what would we expect a teenager to believe, practice, experience, or report?

Instrument Testing

A panel of experienced youth ministry practitioners reviewed the initial item pool to establish content validity. Panel members were either current seminary students or graduates of New Baptist Theological Seminary. The panel included youth leaders in volunteer, part-time, and full-time ministry roles from across the southeastern United States. Reviewers evaluated an initial pool of 66 statements for theological accuracy, conceptual alignment, clarity for adolescent respondents, and relevance to adolescent discipleship.

Panel feedback led to revisions, combinations, or eliminations. We retained seven items for each domain, producing a 42-item instrument. The items used a four-point Likert-type response scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Additional demographic and behavioral questions permitted comparison with variables such as grade, frequency of attendance, frequency of prayer, frequency of Bible reading, and parent church participation.

Pilot Administration

In 2023, a convenience sample of youth leaders was recruited to administer the SSGIS to students participating in their local church youth ministries. Participating youth leaders coordinated survey administration within their ministries and obtained parental permission for adolescent participation. The recruitment, consent, and data collection procedures followed the guidelines established by the Institutional Review Board at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS).

Pilot testing included 547 adolescents from thirty-seven local church youth ministries (Table 2). Participants lived in 11 states, with a majority from Louisiana (38%) and Mississippi (16%). Group response sizes ranged from one church of seventy-three students to one church with only three responses. Most churches (65%) had 15 or fewer participants.

Before analysis, we screened the data for invalid responses. Thirty-two core-item cells contained a value of zero even though the defined response scale ranged from one to four. These values occurred among twenty-four respondents and were treated as missing. Construct-level analyses used complete responses for the appropriate seven-item subscale. The complete-case sample for analysis of all 42 items was 523 participants.

Table 2: Pilot Participants

Church*	State	N
Church A	LA	23
Church B	LA	5
Church C	LA	7
Church D	LA	8
Church E	LA	48
Church F	LA	30
Church G	LA	6
Church H	LA	16
Church I	LA	11
Church J	LA	13
Church K	LA	8
Church L	LA	10
Church M	LA	19
Church N	LA	18
Church O	MS	9
Church P	MS	12
Church Q	MS	7
Church R	MS	17
Church S	MS	14

Church*	State	N
Church T	MS	3
Church U	AL	19
Church V	AL	9
Church W	AL	13
Church X	TN	73
Church Y	TN	16
Church Z	TN	7
Church AA	TX	8
Church BB	TX	7
Church CC	TX	6
Church DD	FL	5
Church EE	FL	17
Church FF	GA	4
Church GG	GA	12
Church HH	KY	10
Church II	NC	24
Church JJ	NV	11
Church KK	SC	22
	TOTAL	547

* Pseudonyms were used for all churches to protect identities.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the six proposed domains were evaluated independently using descriptive statistics, corrected item-total correlations, Cronbach's alpha, sampling adequacy, inter-item relationships, and factor evidence. Second, relationships among the six domains and the two proposed higher-order constructs were examined. Third, an item-level confirmatory factor analysis tested the hypothesized six-factor measurement model against simpler two-factor and one-factor alternatives. The purpose was not only to determine whether the survey worked, but also to identify where it did not work as well as expected.

Findings

The analysis examined the SSGIS's reliability and validity at both the domain and overall instrument levels. The analysis focused on the performance of the six domains, the relationship between Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Influence, and the contribution of individual items to their intended constructs. The findings also identified areas of strength in the instrument and several items that warranted further refinement.

Reliability of the Six Domains

All six SSGIS domains demonstrated strong internal consistency and adequate factorability. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from .832 for Spiritual Disciplines to .915 for Connection to Congregation (Table 3). Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) values ranged from .851 to .926, indicating adequate sampling for factor analysis. Bartlett's tests of sphericity were statistically significant for all six domains ($p < .001$), and the first factor accounted for 51.9 to 66.7 percent of the variance within each domain.

Table 3: Reliability and Factorability of the Six SSGIS Domains

Domain	N*	Cronbach's α	KMO	Bartlett's χ^2	First-Factor Variance
Relationship with God	534	.871	.870	1812.02**	58.4%
Spiritual Disciplines	536	.832	.854	1425.76**	51.9%
Service	532	.862	.851	1688.31**	55.9%
Connection to Youth Group	535	.901	.919	2100.30**	63.5%
Connection to Congregation	533	.915	.926	2300.56**	66.7%
Parent Influence	532	.894	.898	2201.07**	62.7%

* For the domain-level reliability analysis, we used listwise deletion within each domain, rather than across the entire 42-item instrument. That produced slightly different Ns. ** $p < .001$.

The two broader composite measures of Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Influence also demonstrated excellent internal consistency. The 21-item Spiritual Growth composite produced a Cronbach's alpha of .926, while the 21-item Spiritual Influence composite produced an alpha of .944. Across all 42 items, the alpha was .962. These findings support the six-domain structure. The individual domains were internally coherent, and the two larger measures demonstrated strong reliability.

However, reliability does not establish construct validity on its own. A set of items can correlate strongly and still fail to represent the construct it was designed to measure. Therefore, additional analysis was necessary.

Examining the Higher-Order Model

The theoretical framework proposed that Relationship with God, Spiritual Disciplines, and Service contribute to Spiritual Growth, while Connection to Youth Group, Connection to Congregation, and Parent Influence contribute to Spiritual Influence. Analysis of the six domain scores supported this organization (Table 4).

Table 4: Higher-Order Factor Model of the SSGIS

Higher-Order Construct	Domain	Standardized Loading
Spiritual Growth	Relationship with God	.805
	Spiritual Disciplines	.793
	Service	.787
Spiritual Influence	Connection to Youth Group	.876
	Connection to Congregation	.858
	Parent Influence	.646

Standardized loadings for Spiritual Growth were .805 for Relationship with God, .793 for Spiritual Disciplines, and .787 for Service. Standardized loadings for Spiritual Influence were

.876 for Connection to Youth Group, .858 for Connection to Congregation, and .646 for Parent Influence.

The two-factor higher-order model produced CFI = .955, TLI = .916, SRMR = .038, and RMSEA = .142 (Table 5). The two-factor model fit significantly better than the single-factor model, $\Delta\chi^2 = 24.07$, $\Delta df = 1$, $p < .001$. The estimated correlation between Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Influence was .930. The two constructs are statistically distinguishable but highly related. That finding verifies the strength of the theoretical framework. Teenagers do not develop spiritually apart from relationships. A teenager's relationship with God, spiritual practices, and service occur within families, churches, youth ministries, friendships, and other relationships. Therefore, Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Influence are distinct but highly interrelated dimensions of adolescent spiritual formation.

Table 5: Model Fit for the SSGIS

Fit Statistic	Two-Factor Model	One-Factor Model
χ^2	92.52	116.59
df	8	9
CFI	.955	.943
TLI	.916	.905
RMSEA	.142	.151
SRMR	.038	.043

Note. N = 523. The correlation between Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Influence was $r = .930$. The two-factor model provided a significantly better fit than the one-factor model, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 24.07$, $p < .001$. CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual.

For ministry leaders, the distinction remains useful. Spiritual Growth asks what appears to be happening in the teenager. Spiritual Influence asks about important relationships and environments surrounding that growth. While the higher-order analysis examined how the six

domains relate to the broader constructs of Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Influence, an item-level confirmatory factor analysis provided a more detailed examination of how well individual survey items represented their intended domains.

Item-Level Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A more demanding analysis tested all 42 items simultaneously. The model specified six correlated latent factors, with each item loading only on its intended domain. The six-factor model produced RMSEA = .073 and SRMR = .067, indicating reasonable absolute and residual fit (Table 6). CFI = .851 and TLI = .840 fell below conventional benchmarks. The results therefore do not support describing the original 42-item model as having strong global fit.

Table 6: Item-Level Confirmatory Factor Analysis for the SSGIS

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Six correlated factors	3016.88	804	.851	.840	.073	.067
Two item-level factors	5370.94	818	.693	.677	.103	.085
One general factor	5828.04	819	.662	.645	.108	.088

However, the comparison models tell another important part of the story. Collapsing the 42 items directly into Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Influence resulted in substantially poorer fit. Treating all 42 items as a single general factor again produced poorer fit. Therefore, the data provide partial support for the proposed measurement model. They support retaining the six-domain structure rather than reducing the SSGIS to one or two undifferentiated item-level measures. At the same time, the CFA identified areas where individual items and construct boundaries needed refinement.

Table 7: Composite Reliability and Average Variance Extracted for the SSGIS

SSGIS Domain	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE) *
Relationship with God	.883	.519
Spiritual Disciplines	.844	.449
Service	.871	.489
Connection to Youth Group	.907	.583
Connection to Congregation	.919	.619
Parent Influence	.903	.574

* AVE values of approximately .50 or higher indicate that a construct accounts for about half or more of the variance in its indicators.

Composite reliability was strong for all six constructs, ranging from .844 for Spiritual Disciplines to .919 for Connection to Congregation (Table 7). Average variance extracted exceeded .50 for Relationship with God, Connection to Youth Group, Connection to Congregation, and Parent Influence. Service was near the guideline at .489, while Spiritual Disciplines was lower at .449. Again, Spiritual Disciplines emerged as the domain requiring the most attention.

What the Weak Items Taught Us

Experience with the SAEFF, combined with the review and feedback of experienced youth ministry practitioners, gave us confidence that the initial SSGIS items clearly represented each of the six domains. The validation process, however, revealed an important lesson about instrument development. A question may appear clear and seem to represent an important aspect of adolescent faith, yet still fail to measure its intended construct effectively. Statistical analysis provided a needed test of assumptions about the items and identified several questions that required reconsideration. In some cases, the problem was not the importance of the concept being measured, but the way the item attempted to measure it.

Instrument validation is useful when it identifies problems. The clearest example involved fasting. The original Spiritual Disciplines item asked whether the teenager had fasted at least once during the previous year. Its standardized CFA loading was .299, considerably below the other items in the construct. Its corrected item-total correlation was .338, and removing it would increase the Spiritual Disciplines alpha from .832 to .853. The finding did not necessarily mean fasting should be removed from a measure of Christian spiritual practices. Statistical analysis can not determine the theological relevance of items; it simply identifies a problem. In this case, we determined the question wording contributed to the problem. The original item measured whether one event occurred during a twelve-month period. We realized the question wording was too restrictive. Whether a teenager had fasted once could depend upon factors such as teaching, church tradition, opportunity, or diet restrictions. Therefore, we revised the item to ask whether the teenager fasts from food or other things to focus attention on God.

The initial SSGIS included evangelism items within both Relationship with God and Spiritual Disciplines because sharing one's faith represents an important expression of Christian discipleship. However, the validation process showed that these items did not function well within their assigned domains. The problem appeared to involve their placement and wording rather than the importance of evangelism itself. Several of the original items measured specific evangelistic outcomes or experiences that could depend on opportunity or another person's response, making them less effective measures of a teenager's relationship with God or practice of spiritual disciplines. The revised instrument therefore removed evangelism from those two domains and placed it within Service, where evangelistic witness fits more naturally as an outward expression of faith. The revised item, "I look for opportunities to share the gospel with

people who do not follow Jesus,” focuses on the teenager’s orientation toward sharing the gospel rather than requiring a particular evangelistic outcome.

The revised Relationship with God domain now focuses on Christian identity, pursuing God’s will, thinking about God outside church, the influence of a relationship with God on choices, public identification with Christ, belief in God’s purpose, and dependence on God. Spiritual Disciplines now focuses on intentional practices: spending time alone with God, prayer and Bible reading, reflection on Scripture, Bible study with other Christians, Scripture memorization, intergenerational worship, and fasting. These changes improved domain coverage.

We also revised questions in the Service domain. The original instrument included participation in a mission trip to another state or country. Statistically, the item was acceptable but among the weaker Service indicators. Conceptually, it depended upon opportunity. A teenager cannot participate in a mission trip that the church does not offer or that the teenager cannot attend. The revised Service scale asks about serving through the church, using gifts and abilities, looking for opportunities to help people in need, community service or missions, willingness to accept responsibility, understanding service as part of following Jesus, and preparation for ministry. The question, “I feel prepared to serve in my church,” adds a developmental dimension. Previous Youth Ministry Arenas research found that exemplary youth leaders did more than give teenagers opportunities to serve. They trained and coached teenagers for ministry and leadership. The revised item therefore asks whether the teenager experiences the result of that equipping.

Parent Influence also required revision. The original instrument contained separate items asking whether teenagers had close relationships with their fathers and mothers. Those items measured relational closeness but did not consistently address parental spiritual influence. The current

instrument captures relational warmth through the statement, “I have a close and caring relationship with at least one of my parents.” This revision reflects an important distinction. Parental spiritual influence does not occur independently of the parent-child relationship. Bengtson, Putney, and Harris found that the quality of parent-child relationships plays an important role in successful intergenerational transmission of religion (Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2013). The revised survey also includes “At least one of my parents regularly serves or leads in my church.” This item preserves a finding from the research that informed the development of the SSGIS. SAEFF research found that parental church leadership and active participation were associated with adolescent spiritual growth (Jones, 2022). The current Parent Influence scale therefore measures encouragement toward spiritual growth, guidance about future choices, conversations about faith, parental modeling, relational warmth, church service or leadership, and encouragement to practice faith outside church.

Item analysis revealed a pattern in the original SSGIS. Several weaker items measured isolated events, church-provided opportunities, or outcomes that did not align closely enough with the intended construct. Stronger items measured continuing relationships, orientations, practices, and perceptions. Statistics identified the problem. Theory and ministry practice helped determine what to do about it.

Limitations

Several limitations should guide the interpretation of the findings from this pilot study. The study used a convenience sample of adolescents recruited through participating youth leaders rather than a random or nationally representative sample. As a result, participants may differ from the broader population of adolescents involved in churches, limiting how far the findings can be

generalized beyond the churches represented in the study. In addition, all participants attended churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Although the SBC includes churches from diverse racial and ethnic communities, the denomination has historically been predominantly White. Consequently, the pilot sample does not provide sufficient racial, ethnic, or denominational diversity to determine whether the instrument functions similarly across different populations of Christian adolescents.

These limitations primarily concern the representativeness of the pilot sample and the generalizability of the findings rather than eliminating the value of the validation process itself. The sample provided sufficient data to examine internal consistency, factor structure, item performance, and relationships among the proposed constructs within this population. The findings therefore provide evidence of the SSGIS's psychometric properties while also identifying areas requiring revision.

Implications

The SSGIS as a Ministry Diagnostic

The goal of the SSGIS was never to produce an academic instrument that remained on a researcher's computer. It was developed for the local church. The current live version of the SSGIS incorporates the revisions from the validation study. It still includes 42 items organized into six seven-item domains and two broader constructs. Churches can access the instrument through deconstructingym.com in a group-reporting format. Youth leaders establish an identifying code for their ministry (such as the last name of a youth pastor), and participating teenagers enter the code when completing the survey. Responses will then be aggregated for the ministry. Leaders receive a comprehensive thirty-page report including scores for Spiritual

Growth and Spiritual Influence, scores for all six domains, results for individual survey items, graphical displays, score interpretations, and ministry recommendations.

This approach continues a pattern established through the Youth Ministry Arenas Assessment. The earlier project also moved from research to an online ministry diagnostic that provided overall scores, subscale results, item-level information, and recommendations for ministry improvement. The SSGIS extends that work by moving the point of assessment from the youth leader to the teenager. That distinction matters. Youth leaders can tell us what they believe their ministries are doing. Teenagers can tell us what they are experiencing. Consider a church with a high Youth Group Connection score and a substantially lower Congregational Connection score. That finding should lead to questions. Do adults outside youth ministry know these teenagers? Are teenagers serving alongside adults? Are they worshiping with Christians of different ages? Do they have meaningful relationships beyond youth leaders? Are they becoming connected to the church or primarily to a youth program?

A lower Parent Influence score raises other questions. Are parents talking about faith? Do teenagers see Christian faith modeled at home? Do they experience their relationships with parents as close and caring? Do they see their parents serving and leading in the church? Are parents encouraging Christian practice beyond church attendance?

However, the scores themselves do not provide all the answers. It tells leaders where to begin asking questions. That is the purpose of a diagnostic assessment. Data should lead to conversation, and conversation should lead to intentional ministry decisions.

Ongoing Research with the SSGIS

The original pilot study provided evidence supporting the six-domain framework while also identifying items requiring greater conceptual precision. Those findings have already moved from analysis to revision and from revision to implementation. The current live version of the SSGIS reflects the revisions discussed in this paper. Teenagers completing the survey now respond to the revised items. Their responses are creating a new dataset that will allow continued evaluation of the instrument.

Continued administration of the live instrument therefore represents the next stage of validation. The revised SSGIS will be evaluated with the same level of scrutiny as the original instrument, including item performance, internal consistency, convergent and discriminant validity, and confirmatory factor analysis. The revisions emerged from the first validation study. New respondents provide the opportunity to determine whether those revisions actually improve measurement.

The research is also expanding through a companion instrument, the Parent Spiritual Growth and Influence Survey. The parent survey examines parents' spiritual growth and how they understand their influence on their teenagers' faith development. Pairing the two instruments creates an important research opportunity. Student responses provide one perspective on parental spiritual influence. Parent responses provide another. The comparison may tell us where those perspectives agree. It may be even more interesting to see where they differ. A parent may believe faith conversations happen regularly while the teenager reports little spiritual conversation. A parent may see church service as a powerful example while the teenager

experiences that service differently. Parents and teenagers may also report similar perceptions of relational warmth, spiritual modeling, and faith practice.

I look forward to sharing data from the revised SSGIS next year as I present research on developing and validating the Parent Spiritual Growth and Influence Survey. Together, the two instruments provide an opportunity to develop a broader picture of adolescent discipleship and the relationships that shape it.

Conclusion

Youth ministry leaders make decisions every week based on assumptions. We assume teenagers are growing because they attend. We assume parents are influencing faith because families attend church. We assume teenagers feel connected to the congregation because they participate in a church youth group. We assume our programs are producing disciples because discipleship is our stated goal. Assessment gives us a way to examine those assumptions.

The Student Spiritual Growth and Influence Survey grew out of a desire to help churches measure outcomes that more closely reflect their disciple-making goals. The six domains examine Relationship with God, Spiritual Disciplines, Service, Connection to Youth Group, Connection to Congregation, and Parent Influence. Pilot testing showed strong internal consistency across all six domains and supported retaining the six-domain theoretical framework. Confirmatory analysis also revealed weaknesses in specific items and overlap between constructs. The current SSGIS incorporates revisions informed by the pilot data, previous research, the theoretical framework, and continued consideration of how the instrument functions in local churches. The revised instrument is now available to help leaders evaluate their teenagers' spiritual growth and influence.

We cannot reduce spiritual formation to a survey score. However, we can ask better questions about teenagers' spiritual lives. We can listen carefully to their answers. We can examine the relationships surrounding them. We can test our assumptions about whether our ministries are contributing to the outcomes we say we value. The goal is better information that helps parents, youth leaders, and congregations become more intentional about helping teenagers grow toward Christlike maturity.

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