Transformational Research Identifies Eight Attributes of Growing Disciples

As LifeWay Research approached the Transformational Discipleship project, two primary questions needed to be answered to get a clear picture of the state of discipleship in North American churches.

One concerned the church as a whole: What is the state of discipleship within the Protestant church?

The other concerned individuals: How do people really grow in their Christian faith?

Starting in June 2012 and continuing throughout the year, LifeWay Research will begin to release new findings to answer these and other questions about individual discipleship.

In 2011, as part of their biggest discipleship study to date, LifeWay Research interviewed discipleship experts from eight countries, as well as surveyed 1,000 pastors and more than 4,000 Protestants from North America.

The intensive research revealed eight attributes of discipleship that consistently show up in the lives of believers who are progressing in spiritual maturity:

1. Bible engagement
2. Obeying God and denying self
3. Serving God and others
4. Sharing Christ
5. Exercising faith
6. Seeking God
7. Building relationships
8. Unashamed (transparency)

"The results unpack the state of discipleship in the North American church," said Scott McConnell, director of LifeWay Research. "Many church leaders across the country are rediscovering the need to pay attention to disciple-making."

According to Philip Nation, director of ministry development for LifeWay Research, one statistic from this project shows the importance of intentional discipleship.

"Christians are seven times more likely to disciple another person when they have first been discipled themselves," said Nation.

"Spiritual growth does not happen by accident," said Nation. "Rather, churches must be intentional in helping Christians grow. The need to return to an intentional plan of discipleship is obvious. The only decision forward is the manner in which we will accomplish it."

To help pastors, churches and individuals measure their development, LifeWay Research developed the Transformational Discipleship Assessment.

Using this online tool, people can complete the 80-question assessment to receive a report on their spiritual maturity using the eight attributes of biblical discipleship. The online tool also provides helpful and practical suggestions to help individuals take the next steps in their spiritual development.

McConnell said this new assessment tool zooms in to the personal level.
"It answers, 'Are you growing? Are you consistently following Christ?'" said McConnell. "The Transformational Discipleship Assessment helps people see how they are doing with those eight attributes."

Using the underlying research, a framework of discipleship leading to a "transformational sweet spot" was developed by Eric Geiger, Michael Kelley and Nation.

The three authors collaborated on the book Transformational Discipleship: How People Really Grow released earlier in May.

The subtitle of the book, How People Really Grow, is the key, McConnell said. "The authors bring in the biblical, practical pieces. The discipleship experts provide focus and recognition while LifeWay Research measures all those things with Transformational Discipleship Assessment, suggesting customized next steps for individuals and churches.

"Scripture describes what a mature disciple looks like, but no book reveals where a congregation is on that journey," he said. "You have to ask people about their beliefs, their desires and their activities. The Transformational Discipleship Assessment helps church leaders do that."

Transformational Discipleship is the next phase in a long-term research project, called the LifeWay Transformational Initiative. In this initiative, LifeWay Research is focused on discovering common traits of churches experiencing transformation in the lives of individuals, the church and the community.

The first findings were compiled in the book Transformational Church, released in June 2010 by B&H Publishing Group.

"Transformational Church provides a big picture scorecard for the church, whereas Transformational Discipleship digs into the details at the individual level," said McConnell.

Over the next five years, LifeWay Research will continue to study the issues of faith and growth in believers and the church as part of the Transformational Initiative, Nation said.

"We anticipate that the findings will enable leaders to better understand how churches can minister more effectively and believers can grow more deeply in their faith," he said.

Visit LifeWayResearch.com to learn more about Transformational Discipleship research. The Transformational Discipleship Assessment is available at LifeWay.com/TDA.