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Measuring What Matters

How do you gauge if your people are getting stronger?

A LEADERSHIP Forum

The gap between what Americans say they believe and what they do is great and growing. The same is true of Christians. Values don't always translate into actions.

A group of Christian leaders known for their skill in discipling, and headed by Texan Bob Buford, is developing a tool, the Christian Life Profile, to assess the spiritual maturity of a church's attenders and aid the pastor in leading the church to deeper and more active faith.

LEADERSHIP editor-at-large Kevin A. Miller joined the group at the end of a two-day planning session. He brought to the discussion another pastor, whose West Coast church is making disciples in unusual places.

Around the table:

Larry Crabb, a licensed Christian psychotherapist for more than 25 years, is currently on faculty at Colorado Christian University. Crabb's newest book is about the church, *The Safest Place on Earth: Where People Connect and Are Forever Changed*.

Ken Fong is senior pastor of Evergreen Baptist Church in Rosemead, California, a multicultural congregation that ministers throughout Los Angeles.

Randy Frazee pastors Pantego Bible Church in Fort Worth, Texas. His is the pilot church for the Christian Life Profile Project.

George Gallup, Jr., regularly surveys the nation on politics and religion. His new book, with Timothy Jones, explores *The Next American Spirituality*.

Dallas Willard, former pastor and now philosophy professor at the University of Southern California, is the author of *Spirit of the Disciplines* and more recently *The Divine Conspiracy*.

Can you measure spiritual maturity? You'd be the one to ask first, George.

Gallup: In my experience there are four markers: beliefs, practices, attitudes, and lifestyle. Those indicators tell you whether a person has a transforming, integrated faith or just a statement of faith. The test is in the action. The deeper one goes—from belief to lifestyle—the more obvious are the markers.

Crabb: But there's still a mystery about it. I would want to preserve a little mystery in our attempts to measure.

Fong: A Chinese philosopher once said, "If I ask you to describe how much you love your wife and you actually can, then I don't believe you do." If you can quantify something so exactly, that's not

capturing the whole thing.

I'm learning over time that the real issue is the heart, and even though we need some markers, the heart is hard to measure.

Crabb: When you emphasize the markers exclusively, the danger is that people then can check themselves off as mature with a certain smugness. But if maturity is thought of as a relational concept and an ongoing process, then you never get to a point where you say, "I am now mature."

If I'm to make disciples, I not only have to preach about the subject, but I'm also responsible for moving people from point A to point B.
—Randy Frazee

Frazee: On the other hand, one danger of not assessing the maturity of our congregation is that we'll then evaluate only the ABC's: attendance, buildings, and cash. Typically we set goals only in those areas.

While we have to be very careful in what we measure, we need input as to where our congregation is struggling. We surveyed our leaders on the fruit of the Spirit a couple of years ago. The number one issue in our church was self-control.

Did that surprise you?

Frazee: Surprise me? It scared me.

It makes you not want to have a board meeting! (laughter)

Frazee: But it also excited me. This information gave me something to work toward other than increasing attendance. I'm now working toward life transformation. That is intensely powerful.

Last fall we took our first annual survey on the spiritual maturity of our church membership. Taking that information into our planning retreat in January, for the first time in the history of Pantego Bible Church, we were not just asking "Are we experiencing 10 percent numerical growth?" Now we're looking at "Where is our congregation spiritually? Where are they struggling?"

Gallup: I think you're absolutely right to do that. I've known only a few churches where there has been a serious attempt to assess the level of spiritual maturity.

It's rare?

Gallup: Yes. The giant assumption is that because people are there, they are growing; that because the church is growing, the people are growing in their journey. The better question is "What's going on on the inside of the church that's growing?" It's not enough to collect a crowd. You've got to make disciples.

Willard: The alternative way to measure church growth is bigger Christians.

Frazee: In 2 Peter 1 are listed a number of character qualities of a follower of Christ. Verse 8 says, "For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." That suggests that there is a quantifiable component to these virtues. There is evidence. The mystery of discipleship may not be defined, but in some ways it can be measured, and should be.

So we have consensus that maturity can to some extent be measured. So what do we measure? What does a mature believer look like?

Fraze: I'd begin with the words of Jesus—love God, love neighbor. We're trying to develop a corporate understanding of this so that faith isn't just an individual thing.

Then I would examine some of the core beliefs, practices and virtues that Christians disciples are called to, and ask people to identify how they are doing against those benchmarks.

Find the revolutionaries, a few people who, like you, are not happy with the status quo. God has already called out to them.
—Ken Fong

Willard: The New Testament concept of the disciple is very simple. I am someone's disciple if I am with him learning to be like him. The word I prefer most is apprentice because of the applied nature of the concept. If you look at Jesus with his disciples, you see that's exactly what he did.

Fong: Right now I'm preaching that you can't be a Christian if you're not a disciple. And that flies in the face of so much that we've been taught.

Willard: We have accepted the idea that you can be a Christian forever yet never become a disciple. We have enough trouble with "Christian"—then when we allow disciple to stand in contrast to Christian, it makes everything cloudy. The concept has become confused.

Fong: It might be easier to hold up a picture of a disciple than to define it.

We have a group, mostly InterVarsity alumni, who moved into South Central Los Angeles three years ago. I call 'em "ruined for Jesus." They're completely committed.

They had a vision to start making friends with the people. Now they're tutoring kids in the neighborhood, and they've opened the opportunity to everyone in our church. We have people in their seventies who are captivated by the whole thing. They are seeing the revolutionaries—disciples actually living out their values.

It's stimulating, for me and for our church.

Crabb: One of the points Dallas makes so strongly is that discipleship is for everybody. It's not something reserved for the super-saint while the rest can do as they choose. In a similar vein, discipling is for everybody. We're all disciple makers. Ordinary people—by virtue of being Christian—have an unusual power to make an incredible difference in somebody else's life.

I think of Hebrews 10:24: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." The verse just after that is "Make sure you don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together." Many people think that verse means show up for church Sunday morning. I don't think it means that at all.

I think it means that we get together in powerful community. On the basis of the New Covenant, we draw near to God. Then together we stimulate each other to love and good deeds. The word for "stimulate," I'm told, literally means to create a fever.

Discipling is fundamentally a community function—relating to each other in ways to pursue the question: *How can I take the little flame in you and fan it into a bonfire?*

What is the church missing here?

Crabb: Most of us settle for congeniality and never really connect. We can't just settle for pleasant relationships laced with spiritual words.

I believe in an appetite model of sanctification, not just an accountability model. When you and I get together, we can stimulate the life of Christ within, and your appetite for God becomes stronger because of our time together. The appetite must be stirred, and then we hold each other accountable as to how that appetite gets nourished.

What makes discipling especially hard for you as a pastor?

Fraze: If I'm to make disciples, I not only have to preach about the subject, but I'm also responsible for moving people from point A to point B. So discipleship is not just something I can talk about. Getting people to take steps forward is a whole other level of commitment.

How do you get people to take those steps?

Fraze: Well, I'm not just giving out an inspiring idea. I want people to perspire over the idea. I'm looking for transformation. It's a lot easier to throw out the idea and say, "Do whatever you want with this."

But discipling is mentoring them through the process. That's a lot stickier, a lot messier than a sermon.

Fong: Yes, I can give great sermons, but my congregation looks at me and says, "Okay, what do you do with your time? If you're not doing it, you're just talking about it."

Did you find a way to live it?

Fong: I was praying about this some years ago. And God opened it up to me that South Central Los Angeles is a mission field. We teach that every member is a missionary; that's how discipleship is lived out.

So I've been going down there once a month for about eight years to an untouched group—drug addicts and the liberal Asian-American activists who work with them.

Some have told me, "Rev. Fong, we expected you to go away after three years. But you keep coming back." And I bring lay people with me. That's my way of discipling. And I see tremendous transformation.

When they're sitting at a small table teaching about Mary Magdalene to a group of women and they ask, "How many of you have been prostitutes?" and all the women raise their hands, suddenly the pretense is gone. My people say, "We can minister to this crowd because they're the people that Jesus liked to hang out with."

We have a pastoral intern who is thinking about going to seminary. We were talking with one woman, a Korean-American from a wealthy suburban family. She looks like a model, but she had attempted suicide five times.

"I'm tired of trying to kill myself," she said. "Every time before I'm dead someone saves me." Everybody wept through her story.

I asked the intern afterward, "As that woman was sharing her pain, were you mentally flipping through all your nice, standard answers that you would give to hurting people?"

She said, "Yeah."

"And what did you do with those?"

"I threw them all away."

I said, "Thus endeth the lesson." If the gospel we believe and teach cannot speak to these people at their level, then it's worthless.

My church members from the L.A. suburbs hang out with these people. They become friends. It's changing them. It's changing me. I'm not just teaching discipleship, I'm learning discipleship.

What kind of preaching builds disciples?

Willard: I realized early in my preaching career that I was not preaching what Jesus preached. That led to years of trying to find out what it was he was saying.

As I studied the Gospels, I saw that it was incredibly liberating and strengthening to people to receive what Jesus taught. The preaching of the kingdom of God is, I think, at the heart of making disciples. Pastors in some circles say to me, "We preach that all the time." But if you listen, you know they aren't preaching it. The kingdom of God is not good news to them.

I think every preacher would say, "I want to preach good news." What makes the presentation of the kingdom not good news?

Willard: Well, it comes across as a standard of living you're supposed to attain. We have a lot of talk about grace, but when you look at the concrete form that it takes in institutional life, it's legalism. And it's backbreaking, and it is not good news. The gospel as I preached it as a young man was what I now call the gospel of sin management. And it leads to either self-condemnation or self-righteousness.

Sin certainly needs to be managed—I don't quarrel with that—but that's not the central project. The central project is life, eternal life. John 17:3 is very clear about what eternal life is: it's an interactive relationship with God. Discipleship, as it is often taught, easily degenerates into legalism—look at the later followers of George Fox, John Wesley, or St. Francis.

Too often grace is a detached abstract theological concept, some arrangement in heaven called "unmerited favor." Where you need unmerited favor is at street level.

Fong: I teach it this way: there are two parts of the Good News. First, everyone's a rat. There are no squirrels. I told my congregation, "Some of you think you're just a cute little squirrel sinner. Who hates a squirrel?" I said, "Have I got news for you. Everyone's a rat. God doesn't see any squirrels."

When I said this at the drug rehab place—"How many feel like a rat?"—everybody raised their hands right away. At seminary chapel, it was like, hmmm, some of the professors weren't sure. I said, "Some of you are raising your hands because you know I'm theologically correct, but you don't feel like a rat." I said, "Until you know that you're a rat, it's not good news to find out you're not the only rat in the room."

I said, "Some of us are rats because we're not convinced we're rats. We look around and think that someone else is a bigger rat, that someone else needs the cross more than I do.

"Only when you know you're a rat are you ready for the second part: God is not an exterminator."

Whew! That's good news!

Willard: The primary point in discipleship is grace—given to people who don't deserve it. The surprising thing is that, with God, there just seems to be no limit to how much he will forgive. That's the attitude, I think, that enables us to step out of the culture of shame and begin to grow as disciples.

Crabb: That is crucial because most of us think if we're going to get over our shame-based culture then we have to preach a theology of self-esteem and minimize our theology of sin. Exactly the reverse is true.

How do you present that in a church?

Fong: For me, I have to be forthcoming myself. I have to share my failures. The hardest part for me is sharing current ones. It's easy to admit "Oh, yeah, when I was in college I failed in this way." Everyone nods.

But I know deep down that they're not hearing the real one that I'm struggling with right now. So that's always a battle within myself. But even to talk about that battle, I think, helps create an atmosphere where people understand it's not easy to grow in Christ.

Fraze: I have been very open with my home group. I helped create the spiritual maturity assessment tool, then it was my turn to take the test.

Physician, heal thyself.

Fraze: I felt like I was doing my own appendectomy. (*laughter*)

I asked my wife, my 15-year-old daughter, and a close associate to give me feedback on how they thought I evidenced the fruit of the Spirit. I was encouraged in some areas, but all three said I struggled in one area.

Next I had to take their assessments to my home group. My heart was pounding. I shared the evaluations. I began to weep. And I'll never forget it. The members said, "Well, Randy, we've known this about you all along." Then they gathered around me and they prayed. And they pointed me to the discipline of silence.

And now it's out. Out in the context of a safe community where I can deal with it prayerfully. And I don't have to say it again.

Crabb: Many people go through their entire lives never feeling safe in any relationship. And that's a violation of the gospel. I would suspect that the issues that are most intense within people never come up in small groups. Therefore, the issues that are strongest in my soul are never dealt with in the presence of other Christians because there's an absence of safety.

We need to examine the passions that are ruling within us as we engage each other. Is there really the passion of one upmanship? Or looking for something witty to say? Or of playing it safe so that nobody could possibly reject me?

Gallup: If you can get at what people are most fearful of sharing, particularly in a small group, that is a great step toward healing. Everybody is in bondage to something. It may be chemical, pride, hedonism, narcissism, you name it. As it's said, nobody needs a disease but everybody needs a cure.

The pastor who reads this interview is busy, somewhat stressed, has a sermon pending, and now we're asking them stop all that to reconsider discipleship.

Willard: My first need is to be a disciple myself: to love as Jesus loved, to serve as Jesus served. Second, I am to make disciples, teach others to do the same. This is why we're here. If we find that yoke is not easy, we'd better check our busyness.

Frazer: As a pastor it's extremely easy to give 100 percent of your time to things that, at the end of the day, don't have a whole lot to do with the mission that Christ gave us. It would be a refreshing solution to our busyness to throw out those things that don't have anything to do with discipleship.

Gallup: Pastors and disciples should put everything to the test. As Paul said in Thessalonians, put all things to the test to see what is good. Does it bring you closer to Jesus Christ? Every program, every effort, every ministry in the church should be looked at in the light of that question. Throw out everything that doesn't.

Takes courage.

Gallup: I'm sure it does.

Willard: But that's the only way forward.

Fong: It sounds like we're spouting revolution here, but that shouldn't surprise us. I would recommend finding the revolutionaries in the church. Not all of them are board members. Find a few people who, like you, are not happy with the status quo. God has already called out to them. And they're just waiting for you to encourage them.

Gallup Surveys

A Day in the Spiritual Life of America

100 people were asked: "In the last 24 hours—that is, between this time yesterday and this time today—did you happen to do any of the following?"

55% Prayed at a meal

51% Talked to someone about God or some aspect of your faith or spirituality

44% Shared faith

36% Read the Bible

32% Read books or articles with spiritual themes

25% Counseled someone from a spiritual perspective

24% Watched/listened to religious radio/TV

22% Spoke out on a national issue out of your religious conviction

15% Attended a prayer service or Bible study or worship group

5% Listened to cassette tapes with spiritual themes

5% Called a psychic hotline or read your horoscope

3% Used the Internet to research or explore matters of religious faith

2% Visited Web sites related to churches or that contain spiritual themes

—from a survey taken for the book, *The Next American Spirituality*, by George Gallup, Jr., and Timothy Jones (Chariot Victor, 2000)

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