

Study: Selflessness Leads to Spiritual Maturity

Selfless service to God and others both impacts and is impacted by transformational discipleship, according to a study conducted by LifeWay Research.

The survey shows 58 percent of Protestant churchgoers in the United States agree with the statement: "I am intentionally putting my spiritual gift(s) to use serving God and others." Seventeen percent disagree with the statement.

A greater percentage of respondents indicate they look for opportunities to serve others in the community. Asked to respond to the statement: "I intentionally try to serve people outside my church who have tangible needs," 60 percent agree—although only 17 percent strongly agree. Fifteen percent disagreed with the statement.

"Serving God and Others" is one of eight attributes of discipleship that consistently show up in the lives of believers who are progressing in spiritual maturity, according to LifeWay Research.

"Service doesn't just happen in a church," said Ed Stetzer, president of LifeWay Research. "It must be modeled and encouraged. As we look at the breakdown of attributes and correlated disciplines, the data shows that praying expectantly, getting involved in the community and discipling others fosters a posture of serving. As such, disciples are serving in, through, and beyond their churches for the cause of Christ."

Churchgoers indicate much lower agreement related to sacrificial giving. Just 9 percent of churchgoers strongly agree with the statement: "I intentionally give up certain purchases so I can use that money for others." Thirty percent

somewhat agree and 32 percent disagree.

Approximately a quarter of respondents selected “neither agree nor disagree” as their answer for the three statements.

“Service and activism have become popular in our culture today, especially among younger adults,” Stetzer said. “However, most of this benevolent activity is fairly low-level involvement that does not cost the giver much. The midrange responses on the Serving God and Others attribute reveals lots of good intentions and some occasional actions but much lower intentionality, consistency or sacrifice.”

Serving clearly impacts growth, Stetzer summarized. “The study shows that individuals who have positive scores for Serving God and Others have higher scores in the other seven attributes of the Transformational Discipleship study, as well.

“For example, scores for Sharing Christ jump 24 percent when individuals have positive Serving God and Others’ scores and 51 percent for individuals with the highest Serving God and Others scores,” he said.

Likewise, Stetzer pointed out that positive responses in the other seven attributes of discipleship correlate with higher scores in Serving God and Others.

“Growth leads to service and serving leads to growth—it’s deeply connected,” he explained. For example, Stetzer said that positive scores in Bible Engagement result in a 17 percent increase in scores for Serving God and Others compared to those who do not have positive scores for Bible Engagement.

“We saw most say they were serving in some way, but far too many are sitting down on the job—particularly when the Bible says everyone should ‘... use it to serve others, as good managers of the varied grace of God’ (1 Peter 4:10; HCSB). There is a huge gap between this passage and most churches’

practice.”