ONE OF THE MOST important tests of the value of a survey is the “sniff test.” We all learned this test from our mothers. Mothers have a highly developed sense of smell and could tell with one whiff when we hadn’t taken a bath, been around someone who had been smoking, and even know what we had been eating.

In the same way research must pass the sniff test. Both the results and how the research was conducted need to make sense and not hint at any bias when the reader gets a whiff.

From the beginning we decided to be transparent about this study’s methodology. So at several stages along the way, we sought out expert advice to test our process. Providing an open process not only made for a better study; it also should allow participants and you the reader to have confidence in the work throughout every phase. Keep in mind—if someone won’t tell you how they know, you might wonder if they really do know.

Here is the process we used to develop and test the Transformational Church research and assessment tool.
Phase 1: Identify Churches for Deeper Learning

The first step of the research was a quantitative research study of Protestant churches. Among the first seven thousand pastors who completed the quantitative survey, their churches were from 123 different denominations as indicated from our sample. Within the survey we had a shorter list to choose from which showed that 6 percent of participants were non-denominational (or had no connection with a denomination-like affinity group, such as Independent Fundamentalist networks). The goal was to establish benchmarks of key metrics but more importantly to identify the best churches. These churches would be the source of additional insights in Phase 2.

A calling list was randomly drawn from a list of all Protestant churches in the United States of America. Up to six calls were made to reach a sampled phone number. Each interview was conducted with the senior pastor, minister, or priest of the church called. The calling was done in waves of one thousand completed interviews working through a portion of the sample in each wave systematically with quotas for church size (sizes of the churches were proportional to the normal size of U.S. churches). The calling was done by a professional call center with experienced supervision.

After analyzing survey responses, we used the following criteria to determine the most effective churches among the 4,006 churches that were interviewed in the first four waves of Phase 1. To aid in recruiting churches for Phase 3, a total of seven thousand pastors ultimately completed Phase 1 questions.

- The pastor must strongly agree that “our church considers Scripture to be the authority for our church and our lives.”
- The church must have grown at least 10 percent comparing the churches current worship attendance to five years prior.
• Because of the volatility in church growth numbers among small churches (e.g., one family coming or going has a large impact on percentage growth), the church must have a minimum of fifty in current worship attendance.
• The church could not have more than one missing response among the ten questions in the survey.
• The church gave us permission to contact them for further research on church health.
• The remaining criterion was a score based on rankings on each of the following seven areas:

1. Percent growth in worship attendance (current vs. five years prior).
2. Percent of worship attendance involved in some small group, Sunday School class, or similar group.
3. New commitments per attendee (new commitments to Jesus Christ as Savior through your church in the past twelve months divided by current average worship attendance).
4. Percent of new commitments to Jesus Christ who have also become active in the life of your church (last twelve months).
5. Percent of adults who attend your church at least once a month who have regular responsibilities at your church.
6. Percent of adults who attend your church at least once a month who are involved in ministries or projects that serve people in your community not affiliated with your church.
7. Level of agreement with the statement, “We are consistently hearing reports of changed lives at our church.”

As you can tell, we were looking to change the scorecard. We were not saying that things like attendance and conversations don’t matter—they do! But they are not the only things that matter. For too long we have focused only on nickels, noses, and numbers. We wanted to look at lives changed, churches growing, and communities being changed and served. Hence, we started with a new scorecard and some expanded metrics.
Phase 2: Qualitative Research to Obtain In-depth Insights

We then contacted the 298 churches with the best responses based on the Phase 1 criteria and requested to interview the senior pastor, in person if at all possible. With much persistence by LifeWay church consultants, more than 250 interviews were completed, as they traveled to meet pastors and church leaders from Maine to California, from Washington to Florida.

The basis of the interview was a pair of topic guides that the interviewer used to encourage each pastor to describe the activities of the church, why it is working, and how they know it is effective. Because of the depth required in the interviews, the nine general subject areas were split between the two topic guides. Most interviews used only one, but a few generous pastors were interviewed using both.

Each pastor was given the opportunity to provide additional facets of ministry they considered vital to an effective ministry. The additional information provided learning beyond the general areas of inquiry that included worship, evangelism, discipleship, small groups, prayer, leadership, how new people are connected, the quality of life within a congregation, and level of engaging a lost and hurting world.

The interviewers employed by LifeWay in the process were church consultants that had extensive ministry experience. To prepare each consultant and to ensure that each interview was carried out in a consistent manner, two training sessions were provided for conducting interviews.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Each church consultant completed a summary immediately following the interview highlighting the most important things they heard. We were able to enhance the interview quality by sharing the early transcripts among church consultants for them to hear other interviewers and observe when useful information was obtained and when it was missed.

Interviewer observations and analysis of the transcripts yielded principles that have shaped this book and provided many practical examples.
Phase 3: Church Assessment

Principles that were common among the top 10 percent churches were used to develop questions for the church assessment tool. We (Thom and Ed) and our LifeWay Research Team (particularly Scott McConnell and Lizette Beard) looked at them extensively.

The questions were reviewed by a panel of experts that included:

- Alan Hirsch, founding director of Forge Mission Training Network and author of *The Forgotten Ways* and coauthor of *Untamed* with his wife Debra
- Chuck Lawless, dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, author of *Discipled Warriors*
- Elmer Towns, cofounder of Liberty University, author of more than one hundred titles listed in the Library of Congress including *The Names of the Holy Spirit* and *11 Innovations in the Local Church*
- Bob Whitesel, professor at Indiana Wesleyan University, consultant with Creative Church Consulting International and author of *Spiritual Waypoints* and *Inside the Organic Church*
- Bill Easum, senior consultant of 21st Century Strategies and author of *A Second Resurrection* and *Go Big with Small Groups* among many other books
- Gary McIntosh, professor of Christian Ministry and Leadership at Talbot School of Theology and author of thirteen books including *Here Today, There Tomorrow: Unleashing Your Church’s Potential* and *Beyond the First Visit: The Complete Guide to Connecting Guests to Your Church*
- Eric Geiger, executive pastor of Christ Fellowship (Miami, Florida) and author of *Identity* and coauthor of *Simple Church*
- Dallas Anderson, national facilitator of evangelism for the Mission America Coalition and director of proclamation ministries for the Billy Graham Center
An extensive list of questions was chosen initially—twenty questions each for the seven elements of the Transformational Loop—140 questions in all. The lengthy survey was used so that the paring down of the survey would be based on objective criteria rather than the opinions of a few.

A random set of Protestant churches was then invited to have their pastor and adult members use the Transformational Church assessment tool.

Analysis was done on 4,077 members who completed the initial version of the survey. Subsequent analysis was done on another 11,000 completed member surveys on the same and/or modified versions throughout the research process. The analysis validated the scales. In each element outliers constituted 1 percent or less of the values.

Factor analysis was run on each element of the survey. Cronbach’s Alpha for each factor proved very reliable with the lowest being .826. This internal consistency establishes the reliability of the questions in the assessment tool. Individual questions that did not have at least 10 percent of values on each half of the Likert scale were eliminated, as were questions that did not load with a factor in their section. The final set of eighty-two questions comprised the assessment tool.

As of the print date of this manuscript, 280 randomly selected Protestant churches were recruited to test the validity of the final assessment tool including completed surveys from more than twenty thousand individual church members.

**Conclusion**

In the end we are confident that the principles discovered among effective churches were assembled in a reliable survey. The principles included in Transformational Church have been and continue to be rigorously tested. Additionally, the assessment tool produced by the study is both internally and externally valid.

As we conclude the writing of this book, the Transformational Church study is ongoing. In fact, we expect it will continue for the next few years.
Every time a church participates in the assessment tool, we hope to learn a little bit more about how a church can be an instrument of transformation in the community.

(The numbers are accurate as of March 29, 2010.)