

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

August 27, 2019

My Dad worked in agriculture his whole life. He grew up on a farm in North Carolina plowing behind a mule. After WWII, he managed a network of cotton gins, was an agricultural extension agent, and retired as the Director of the Cotton Cladding Division of the USDA.



So long as he was able, Dad also “farmed” in our yard. In Atlanta, where I grew up, he cultivated dogwood trees; and in Memphis, where they spent the last 40+ years of their lives, he cultivated a large rose garden in the back yard. One of the things Dad talked about each year was getting the soil tested so he would know what nutrients needed to be added in order to sustain the best dogwoods or roses. If the proper nutrients were available, plants would grow pretty much on their own.

That’s a similar idea to what Jesus said in Mark 4:26-28 – *“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. **All by itself** the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.”* The word being translated “all by itself” is the Greek word *αυτοματη* (“automatay”), from which we get the words “automatic,” and “automatically.”

To take this in a slightly different direction, what is the primary factor that affects how much water this barrel can hold? It’s pretty obvious that the defining variable is the shortest stave, right? Once the water level reaches the lowest opening, the barrel is as full as it’s going to get; and the quickest way to increase the capacity of the barrel is to lengthen this short stave.

Following a similar train of thought, German theologian and researcher Christian Schwarz has developed a “soil test” to identify the “shortest stave” or the “minimum factor” in the life of a Christian congregation—that limiting factor that is preventing the “all by itself” growth that God’s Spirit intends as the central strategy for retaking this planet from the powers of Darkness.



Schwarz’s research has been ongoing for more than twenty years, and has now been normed on more than 70,000 congregations of every sort and size, on every continent except Antarctica. Schwarz’s research has demonstrated that eight factors work together to produce “all by itself” congregational growth. These eight factors are:

1. **Empowering Leadership**
2. **Gift-Oriented Ministry**
3. **Passionate Spirituality**
4. **Functional Structures**
5. **Inspiring Worship Service**
6. **Holistic Small Groups**
7. **Need-Oriented Evangelism**
8. **Loving Relationships**

Notice that each factor has an operative adjective.

Over the years, Schwarz’s global research has been packaged as “Natural Church Development,” or NCD, focusing on these “all by itself” factors. In order for a congregation to benefit from the research, thirty active members complete the NCD survey, which results in an extensive report that identifies the “minimum factors” that are limiting growth. The congregation uses this information to implement improvements for 18 months, after which the cycle repeats, identifying what have now become the “minimum factors.”

I used this process in the last two congregations I served, and we found that it was a very useful tool. I have recommended to our Church Council that we use NCD as our next “strategic plan,” repeating it three times in the next five years (if our experience with the first iteration is positive) as our current strategic plan (2014-2020) draws to a close.

This proposal will be presented to the congregation at our Quarterly Business Meeting on September 8. I’ve attached more information with this *Laptop*, and I also encourage you to watch six short videos in which Dr. Schwarz explains in more detail how the NCD process accomplishes “all by itself” growth. The link below will take you to the videos. It only takes 30 minutes to watch them all.

Enjoy!

Dave

<http://www.ncd-international.org/public/Mini-Seminars/English.html>



Natural Church Development: A Fascinating Tool for Congregational Mission & Vision



Natural Church Development is the result of the most comprehensive research project ever conducted in the Christian church. Christian Schwarz conducted this study from 1994-1996 in more than 1,000 churches, in 18 languages, in 32 countries, on all five continents. More than 4.2 million responses were gathered. (Research is ongoing, and the NCD materials are now available in 3.0.)

These 1,000 churches included large and small churches, growing and declining ones, churches that are persecuted by the state and churches that are financially supported by the state, prominent and well-known churches as well as totally unknown ones. There were churches from areas such as Brazil and Korea that are experiencing great spiritual revivals, as well as churches in “spiritually developing areas” such as . . . Europe.

Out of all this research came the realization that there are eight “quality characteristics” of churches that are growing, and the further understanding that no church that wants to grow can neglect even one of these quality characteristics. Let’s look at them:

Quality Characteristic 1: **Empowering Leadership**

Healthy, growing churches are not led by “ingenious multi-gifted leaders with great vision.” To the contrary, God generally does not fulfill his plans through super-gifted stars, and their presence generally indicates a lack of health in a congregation. Healthy, growing churches are led by persons who consider their most important ministries to be equipping, supporting, motivating, and mentoring Christians to be all that God calls them to be.

Quality Characteristic 2: **Gift-Oriented Ministry**

God has already determined which Christian should best assume which ministries in a given local church (1 Corinthians 12:18). The role of leadership, then, is to help Christians identify their gifts and to integrate them into ministries that match those gifts. When we live according to our spiritual giftedness, we are no longer working in our own strength, but in the power of the Holy Spirit. This research discovered that no factor influences joy and effectiveness in living the Christian life more than living according to our spiritual gifts.

Quality Characteristic 3: **Passionate Spirituality**

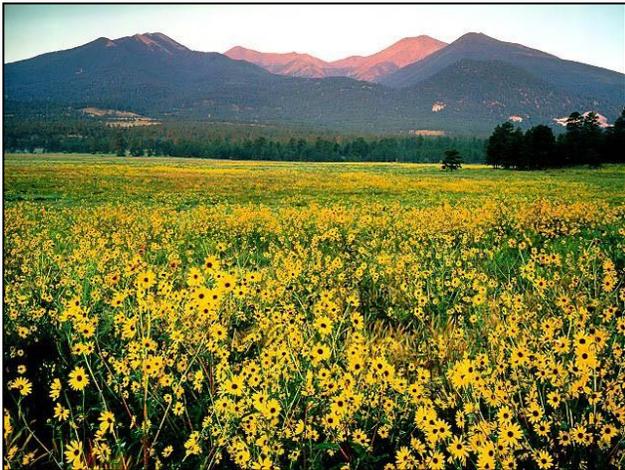
As long as spirituality is genuine, the most important thing for church growth is not how that spirituality is expressed, but that this faith is actually lived out with commitment, fire, and enthusiasm. The methods a church uses are really a secondary concern. A church that lives out its faith with passionate fervor will find many methods to be effective. The degree of spiritual passion is clearly the central point that sets growing churches apart from non-growing ones.

Quality Characteristic 4: **Functional Structures**

The most important criterion for “forms and structures” in the church is whether they fulfill their purposes or not. Church structures (i.e., “how we do things”) are never an end in themselves but are always only a means to an end. Whatever does not measure up to this requirement (e.g., demeaning leadership structures, inconvenient worship service times, or programs that do not reach their audiences effectively) is changed or laid to rest.

Being bound to traditionalism (i.e., “this is how we do things around here”; or “we never did it that way before”) is an extremely effective predictor of stagnant and declining congregations.

Quality Characteristic 5: **Inspiring Worship Service**



This research demonstrated that the most important thing about worship is not whether it is contemporary or traditional, formal or informal, liturgical or seeker-sensitive. The key criterion is whether or not the worship service is an inspiring experience for those who attend it. People who attend inspiring worship services unanimously declare that worship is—and for some Christians this is almost a heretical word—FUN!

Churches where worship is so inspiring that persons rearrange their lives so that they can be there . . . are growing churches. Churches filled with persons who come to fulfill a duty or to do God, the Pastor, or somebody else a favor . . . are declining churches.

Quality Characteristic 6: **Holistic Small Groups**

Growing churches have developed a system of small groups (including Sunday School/Bible Study) where individual Christians can find intimate community, practical help, and intensive spiritual interaction. Such groups not only study the Bible, but they work hard to understand the “so what?!” of their study. Group life is not a nice-to-have dimension of congregational life. Group life is at the heart of the church, and persons who are not in meaningful small-group relationships are missing the very essence of the Body of Christ.

Quality Characteristic 7: **Need-Oriented Evangelism**

The Great Commission constitutes the marching orders of the church. Jesus told us not only to pray that his “kingdom might come on earth as it is in heaven,” but to actually organize our lives around the achievement of this goal. How does that happen? God’s Kingdom does not come through pushy and manipulative methods, but through honest, caring friendships that earn the right to talk about the deepest heart-needs of our souls. Jesus calls us to focus our lives, not primarily around family or around career, but around the Great Commission.

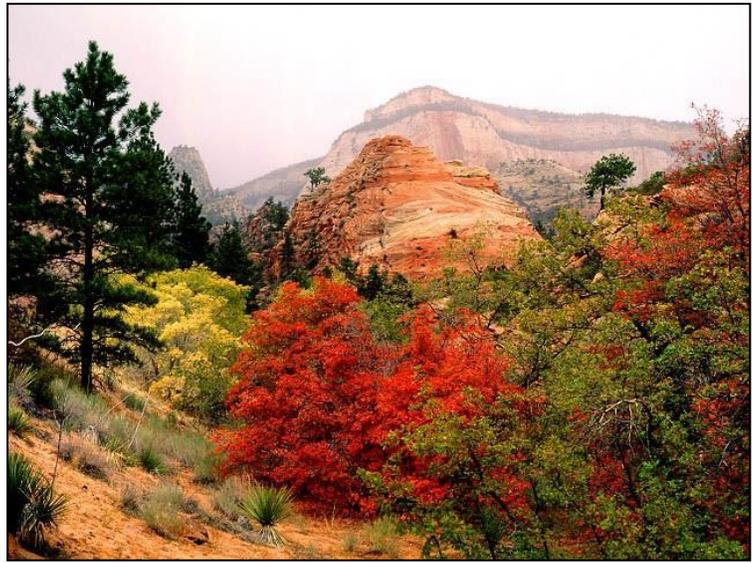
Quality Characteristic 8: **Loving Relationships**

Growing churches have a significantly higher “loving relationships” than stagnant or declining ones. How in the world would you measure such a thing? Some of the dimensions of this characteristic include how much time members spend with each other outside of “official” church events; how often members get together on their own for meals and coffee; how generous the church is in offering compliments; how aware the pastor and staff are of the real lives of the membership; and how much laughter there is in the church.

Unfeigned, practical love gives a church a much greater magnetic power than all of the marketing efforts in the world. Real love spreads a fragrance that few can resist.

Well, so what? The evidence is in, and three things can be said about it:

1. These principles are universally valid (they are applicable to churches anywhere in the world).
2. These principles can be applied to any specific situation (though they will be applied differently).
3. Each of these principles will positively affect both the quality of the life of the church and the number of people who want to be a part of it.



If we really intend to reach the world/ the United States/Maryland/Columbia with the gospel of Jesus, we cannot ignore any one of these eight quality characteristics. The “natural” in *Natural Church Development* (NCD) conveys the good news reminder that it is God who grows the church.

In order to fulfill the Great Commission, we do not focus on “How can we get more people to come to church?” but on “How can we grow in each of the eight quality areas? Jesus taught us that good trees produce good fruit (Matthew 7:17), and that the Kingdom harvest comes “all by itself” (αυτοματη; Mark 4:26-29). Quality (as measured in the form of the eight quality characteristics) is the root; quantity (increased church attendance) is the fruit.

To say it another way, in a church “in which the leaders are committed heart and soul to church growth; in which nearly every Christian is using his or her spiritual gifts to edify the church; in which most members are living out their faith with power and contagious enthusiasm; in which church structures are evaluated on whether they serve the growth of the church or not; in which worship services are a high point of the week for the majority of the congregation; in which the loving and healing power of Christian fellowship can be experienced in small groups; in which nearly all Christians, according to their gifts, help to fulfill the Great Commission; and in which the love of Christ permeates almost all church activities . . . is it even conceivable that such a church could do anything but grow?”

So where do we start? We can't do everything at once, can we? Which area is strategically the most decisive? NCD research has demonstrated that the growth of the church is most blocked by those quality characteristics that are least developed. Focusing on these “minimum factors” alone can lead to growth. Christian Schwarz describes it this way:

For my seminars I have had a tub built with staves of varying lengths. When I visit a church for which a church profile had been prepared, I first write the names of the eight quality characteristics on the staves according to how strongly or weakly each of the individual characteristics is developed. The name of the “minimum factor” (e.g., “structures”) is written on the shortest staff and the name of the “maximum factor” (e.g., “spirituality”) on the longest.

Then I pour water into the tub until it starts to overflow. While I am pouring and the carpeting or the feet of those sitting in the front row are getting wet, I ask the participants what I should do. Some, including the custodian, demand that I stop pouring the water immediately. I don't, of course, because in this illustration the water symbolizes God's blessing flowing down from heaven into the church. We can't seriously ask God to stop blessing us just because our church has trouble “holding the water”!

Others suggest that we should pray more. I agree that prayer is extremely important and absolutely essential for church growth. So I extend the longest staff, “passionate spirituality,” four inches—and everyone can see that this noble measure doesn't solve the real problem. The water keeps splashing on the floor. Eventually someone suggests that I should lengthen the minimum factor staff. And look at that! As soon as I lengthen it just an inch, the tub can hold more water.

Now if God does not send water, even the finest barrel will stay dry. On the other hand, when God does pour out the water—and there is much theological evidence for the fact that God does so most willingly—then the quality of our “barrel” (church) is decisive. This quality ultimately determines whether the barrel can hold any water at all.



Natural Church Development Questions

1. Empowering Leadership

- a. Is the leadership cadre of the church balanced between generational cohorts?
- b. Is the leadership cadre balanced between men and women?
- c. Is the Ministry Staff more about the work of “equipping” and “mentoring” rather than “doing”?
- d. Is the leadership style of the Ministry Staff congruent with the needs of the congregation?
- e. Does the Ministry Staff provide biblical vision for the church?
- f. Is the church open to change and experimentation?
- g. Does the church have a Church Council or similar group?
- h. Is there an intentional program of leadership development?

2. Gift-Oriented Ministry

- a. Are small groups used to prepare prospective members for the responsibilities of membership?
- b. Are members familiar with the biblical principles related to spiritual gifts?
- c. Is appropriate training available for persons to discern their gifts?
- d. Does the ministry placement process take spiritual gifts seriously?
- e. Are persons encouraged to experiment with the exercise of their gifts?
- f. Are members encouraged to initiate ministry efforts (within broad guidelines)?
- g. Does the church offer encouragement and support for the exercise of the less visible gifts?
- h. Do the Deacons function as servants, not as administrators?

3. Passionate Spirituality

- a. Could the core leadership be described as being “Passionate” or “Contagious” Christians?
- b. Is there a significant hunger for spiritual growth in the congregation?
- c. Do members regularly practice the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, fasting, etc.?

- d. Do members experience their faith as relevant to and as transforming their lives?
- e. Do members tithe both their time and their income?
- f. Do members live consistent lives of faith during the week?
- g. Are members involved as “salt & light” in community activities?
- h. Is there a steady stream of volunteers asking, “What can I do to help?”
- i. Could the congregation as a whole be described as “passionate” about following Jesus?

4. Functional Structures

- a. Does the church have a clear, motivating Mission Statement?
- b. Does the church have a clear, effective, current Constitution?
- c. Does the church have a clear, effective, current set of By-Laws?
- d. Are Church Officers, Committee Members, Teachers, and Program Leaders duly elected in rotating terms?
- e. Do all Ministry Staff and Support Staff have current job descriptions?
- f. In what ways does the church do “long-range planning”?
- g. Are church publications meeting their intended purposes?
- h. Does the church have an up-to-date Personnel Manual?
- i. Does the church have a Pastor-Relations Committee or its equivalent?
- j. Are stewardship processes Mission-Driven?
- k. Are all Ministry and Support Staff compensated at or above “market levels”?
- l. Are health and disability coverage provided for all employees?
- m. Do financial procedures have appropriate lines of accountability?
- n. Are structures continually evaluated in light of Mission?
- o. Has the church given careful thought to its denominational affiliations?
- p. Is the process for budgeting, spending, and accounting for church monies understood and trusted?

5. Inspiring Worship Service

- a. Is the Sunday Morning Service an experience of worship in which members and guests participate with enthusiasm?
- b. Does the congregation sing with enthusiasm?
- c. Does the congregation participate in worship or “observe” worship?
- d. Does the Sunday Evening Worship Service meet genuine needs?
- e. Does the Wednesday Evening Service have a clear purpose?
- f. Does the worship schedule make participation easier or harder for 21st Century lifestyles?
- g. Do members experience worship as “inspiring”?
- h. Do worship services offer clear Bible teaching and application, with calls to commitment?
- i. Is there a balance between “reverent” and “celebrative” music?
- j. Is first-rate preschool care available during worship?

6. Holistic Small Groups

- a. Are members expected to be active participants in small Bible study groups?
- b. Do these small groups encourage an atmosphere of trust and sharing?
- c. Are Prayer and Accountability Groups available at other times than Sunday morning?
- d. Does the church encourage and support Home Bible Study Groups?
- e. Does the church encourage/emphasize the creation of new Bible Study Units?
- f. Is first-rate preschool care available during Great Commission Christian Studies?
- g. Are there curricular choices for adults?
- h. Are first-rate groups provided for young adults, college students, youth, and children?

7. Need-Oriented Evangelism

- a. Does the church give at least a tithe of receipts to mission enterprises beyond the local community?
- b. Does the membership affirm the primacy of the Great Commission in defining direction, decisions, and allocation of assets?
- c. Do members have a heart understanding and commitment to being a Great Commission Congregation?
- d. Is the congregation more committed to comfort or to Mission?
- e. Are members able to share their faith effectively?

- f. Are public services structured so as to be intelligible and welcoming to “outsiders”?
- g. Are issues of life commitment and re-commitment frequently lifted up in worship and in study?
- h. Does the church effectively communicate the gospel to secular adults and youth, leading them to conversion, baptism, and discipleship?
- i. Do members “think outreach and evangelism”?

8. Loving Relationships

- a. Do members’ lives intersect in meaningful ways outside the church campus?
- b. How often do members spontaneously engage in activities together?
- c. Does the church have a current pictorial directory?
- d. Does the church produce a directory of some other sort?
- e. Do members make conscious and consistent efforts to make guests welcome?
- f. How often and in what ways does the church offer compliments and affirmation to members and to staff?
- g. Does the membership feel that the Ministry Staff is appropriately available to them?
- h. Do members genuinely care for each other?
- i. Do small groups spontaneously care for members in need?
- j. How much laughter is heard around the campus?

