



NCD Sample Pages: *The ABC's of NCD*

This is a PDF export of sample pages from the booklet *The ABC's of Natural Church Development* by Christian A. Schwarz. You may view them online, but are also invited to download them to your hard disk or print them out for reading on paper.

The sample contains the first few pages of the booklet to give you an idea of the character and layout of this tool, so that you can decide whether it is useful for your purposes. The remaining pages explain all of the eight quality characteristics and show why it can be useful—and is, indeed, a spiritual undertaking—to do an NCD Survey in your own church.

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Greetings to you, dear reader:

Since we are not yet acquainted I am not sure that I would be hitting the right note with you if I were to explain my burden in the following words:

Because the oikodomic thrust of ecclesiology is restricted through pre-theological paradigms (that are influenced by spiritualistic and technocratic assumptions), which do not sufficiently take into account the incarnational character of revelation, the specific cybernetic implications of biotic church development—in particular those growth automatisms which can be verified empirically and which, in the context of a creation-oriented interpretation, can be explained as theomatisms—are often not well understood. Everything clear, so far?

Don't worry. I do not plan to continue boring you in the next 28 pages with this kind of language. First of all, I don't want you to think of me as a bushy-browed armchair scientist with a pair of black-rimmed glasses on his nose. Secondly, with this kind of argument I can hardly count on holding your attention for the next 20 minutes. And thirdly, the subject of this book is much too important to keep it hostage to the esoteric vocabulary of the so-called experts.

I wrote this booklet because I am convinced that church growth is a subject that is important for every Christian no matter how theoretical or practical a person's bent is, or if he or she is a theologian or a lay person in the church. More precisely, this subject is addressed to those who are interested in shaping the practical side of the church's life. It speaks above all to the non-theologians among us. They are the real experts. When it comes to church growth, if we

had to rely only on professional theologians and academic people, the future of the church would be somber indeed.

May I quickly introduce myself. That my name is Christian Schwarz you have already read on the title page of this booklet. And that I live with my wonderful family—my wife Brigitte and three children—in the most northern part of Germany, close to the Danish border, does not have much to do with the subject either. You might be more interested, however, to know that during the past few years our institute has focused on church growth research and has collected a wealth of insights that have not been uncovered before.

What is even more relevant for you is that for the last ten years, practically all of my weekends have been filled with appointments on some local church to help Christians put those insights we have uncovered during our extensive research studies, into practice in the day-to-day operation of their churches. This ministry in the local church has turned me into a skeptic toward all those theories that tell us how church growth is supposed to happen. I have become an advocate of practical reality. And most of all, working with so many wonderful people in different countries, denominations and cultures has shown me who the most important operators in church growth are: the volunteer workers in the local church.

In this booklet I don't want to talk to you about all the intricate details of our research (if you are really interested, you can read one of my specialized books where you will find terms like "paradigms," "incarnation," and "biotic" all over the place). Instead, I want to focus on those things that I am convinced concern every Christian.

You have to know that in Germany, most people are used to calling each other by their last name. Unless, of course, you come by our institute where we would switch to the much more personable first name even before we have emptied the first cup of coffee.

So I am imagining that you are visiting me in Northern Germany and are saying to me, "Christian, I

really wish that things in our church would get better, at least better than they are right now. You get around to so many churches, growing and declining. And if I understand you correctly, you are concerned that churches make progress and reach more and more people with the gospel message. Could you take about twenty minutes and summarize what you have learned in your studies during the last ten years? And could you do it in a way that I can apply what I hear to my work in the church?"

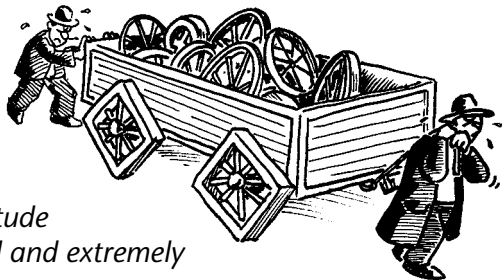
Then I would take a long sip from my cup of coffee and say, "Glad you asked."

Why do we have such a hard time with church growth?

***B**efore I start my monologue I would like to ask you this question: "Why do you think we have such a hard time with church growth?"*

Perhaps you would answer, "I think we have such a hard time because these days there are so many factors working against the Christian faith. We Christians are trying hard, but our message is just not a hot seller with the crowds today."

I would then show you the following drawing. In this picture you see a cart with four square wheels transporting a multitude of wonderfully round and extremely



functional wheels. The cart is being pushed and pulled by two people who are demonstrating great dedication, yet must feel that their enterprise is going extremely slow and is proving to be quite frustrating.

For me this picture is more than just a caricature. In fact, it is an almost prophetic description of the wide-spread condition of many parts of the church of Jesus Christ. Though the church is moving forward, everything is happening extremely slow. Why is this so? If you were to ask the two people in the picture, one might answer, "Because we have to fight such a strong headwind," while the other might add, "Because we have to push this cart up a mountain that is quite steep."

No nobody denies that in many cases this answer is not even wrong. From time to time we Christians do feel the winds blowing into our face, and sometimes the path of the church leads steeply upwards. But the picture reveals that these circumstances are not the real problem. Even if the conditions around the church were more favorable, the real problem would still exist.

This parable illustrates something essential. Everything that we need to see the church grow has already been provided by God. The problem is that we do not make use of it. Instead of utilizing the tools that God has given us, we try to push and pull the church in our own strength. And perhaps we even feel that the use of "square wheels" (some theologians will probably suspect a deep dialectic mystery behind this verbal monstrosity) is something particularly spiritual.

"If I understand you correctly," you might answer, "the important thing here is to take those round wheels that have been so abundantly provided in the church and mount them where they belong according to God's plan."

"Exactly. And the really exciting thing is that, figuratively speaking, we have discovered in our research a mul-

titude of round wheels that already exist in the church. The difference is that some churches use them, others do not."

"Now you have to tell me more about your research project, or I might have difficulties following your argument."

What we can learn from other churches—and what we cannot

*T*hank you for letting me share some of the background of our project. In the last few years I have met many Christians who had difficulties seeing anything spiritual in a research project about church growth. They rather suspected questionable management techniques behind such a project, which should not have any room in the Christian church.

However, the reason behind our endeavor was something very different than developing certain management techniques. We wanted to sharpen our perspective for those principles that God himself uses to build his church. The more we deal with these principles, the more we learn something about how God acts today among us.

But how can we find out what these principles are? Well, we could go and ask some pastors of growing churches about the secret of their success. One thing you would discover is that you would hear as many answers as there are churches that are successful. Some feel that their secret to success is their worship service that is sensitive to people who are unchurched. Others are sure that the key to their growth is to be found in the centrality of worship and the nurturing of believers. Others praise new marketing methods as an essential approach to church growth, while others successfully

grow their churches without ever having heard of such a thing as marketing the church. Sometimes it is really hard to find a common denominator in all of these answers.

As convincing as some of these answers may sound by themselves, each answer contributes to the confusion even more. Who is right? And when we notice that everybody seems to claim, "Do like we do, and you will have the same success!" we really have only two options. Either we fully buy into a specific model—or we give up in frustration.

Fortunately, there is a third option. Instead of listening only to the answers of the leaders of these churches, we could study the churches themselves to find out if there are any elements that characterize all growing churches. Thus, instead of just learning from a single model, we could investigate literally hundreds of model churches, both big and small, in order to find out which of the elements of the churches studied are generally valid principles, and which elements are perhaps interesting, but not generally applicable elements of church growth.

Can you follow me so far? It took me years to really understand this difference. Today we call this the difference between a "model-oriented" and a "principle-oriented" approach. "Models" are concepts that one or sometimes many churches in some part of the world have experienced positively. But imitating these experiences may not at all be the right answer to churches in other situations. "Principles," however, are those elements that have been proven to apply to all growing churches around the globe.

I can almost hear you sigh. What one can learn from a single church, you can imagine. But how would you go about studying over 1000 churches from around the globe?

If you feel totally overwhelmed when you think about the magnitude of such a project, let me tell you: That's exactly how I felt a few years ago when I realized that the literature of church growth, up to that time, had largely

worked with a model-oriented approach (even though most of the models claim—and this is the real problem—that they offer universally applicable principles). For years I dealt with church growth literature. I even spent some time studying in the “Mecca” of the church growth movement, Fuller Theological Seminary, and learned many good things. But in the end, I realized that despite 40 years of church growth studies, there had not been a single global study that answers the question: What really are the proven principles that apply to all growing churches?

This needed to be changed. And thus emerged a plan how I would spend the next few years. One of the greatest challenges of my life (so far) had begun!

What do growing churches really do differently?

To establish a database large enough to come up with scientifically significant conclusions, our institute had to study at least 1000 different churches on all six continents: 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. We needed churches from areas which are experiencing great spiritual revivals (e.g. Brazil, Korea), as well as from regions which, according to international standards, appear to be more “spiritually developing countries” (e.g. Germany).

The study grew to become the most comprehensive research project ever conducted on the causes of church growth. Churches in 32 countries participated. The questionnaire, which has to be filled out by 30 members in each church, had to be translated in 18 different languages. In the end, we faced the task of analyzing 4.2 million responses.

Those answers, cut out and pasted together, would create a band of paper extending from Chicago to Atlanta or from Los Angeles to Salt Lake City!

When the project was completed, not only had the gray hair on my scalp and the debts in my bank account multiplied, but something extraordinary had happened. This was the first time we actually had in black and white, right in front of us, the principles that were proven to be used universally by God to build his church—literally from Alaska to Vladivostok, from Greenland to the Falkland Islands, from the North Cape to the Cape of Good Hope.

The eight quality characteristics of growing churches

On the next few pages I would like to show you the eight most important principles we identified in the course of our study. Don't let it bother you that the names we selected to describe these principles sound relatively abstract: empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship services, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships. We call them the "eight quality characteristics of growing churches."

There is no question that at first this all sounds a bit theoretical. But as soon as we take a look at what is hidden behind each one of these principles, you will notice that they have a lot to do with the situation of your own church. What was your original question? "What could we do to see our church make better progress?" The answer is: Work toward helping each of these eight quality characteristics develop more fully in your church!

Our research taught us that no church that wants to go grow can neglect even a single one of these quality characteristics.

Quality Characteristic 1: Empowering Leadership

Please notice that our first quality characteristic is neither called “powerful” nor “empowered,” but “empowering” leadership. Let me explain the difference. “Empowered leadership” could mean that there is one (sometimes several, but usually one) ingenious multi-gifted leader with a great vision. And this leader needs volunteers to help him turn this vision into reality.

Our study shows, however, that this could not be farther from the truth. Leaders of growing churches do not try to build up their own power to become all-powerful. Exactly the opposite. They consider it as one of their most important tasks to empower other Christians. They equip, support, motivate, and mentor individuals to become all that God wants them to be. Some of these Christians may even be led to go very different ways than their leaders. But empowering leaders can rejoice about such a Christian with all their heart because they know that God has a unique calling for every individual.

What is interesting is that most of the pastors who reached the highest scores in our survey are hardly known to a wider public. And yet they provide us with more helpful basic principles of leadership than most of the world-famous spiritual “superstars.” Leaders of growing churches do not have to be superstars. In fact the superstar model can be a hindrance for church growth. God generally does not fulfill his plans through super-gifted heroes. If someone plays this role (or has to play this role because the church expects it) it is usually a sure sign that something is definitely not going right.