



NCD Sample Pages: *Natural Church Development*

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The sample pages contain the table of contents plus pages 6-19 from the introduction and first chapter. These pages may give you an idea of the character and layout of the book, so that you can decide whether it is useful for your purposes. The remaining pages of the book put the program that is described in the introductory text into practice.

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Natural Church Development

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Away with technocratic thinking

“Saying good-bye to human success programs—and hello to God’s growth automatism.”

Why is it that many Christians are so skeptical towards the church growth movement? Is it because they do not desire growth in their own congregations? Do they resent questioning the effectiveness of their church’s ministry? Or is something other than the Great Commission their number one priority?

I don’t doubt that there are people who fit these descriptions, but the criticism of currently accepted church growth principles does not come only from their circles. I have found many Christians with both a heart for the lost and a discerning method of ministry who for some reason have never embraced the church growth movement.

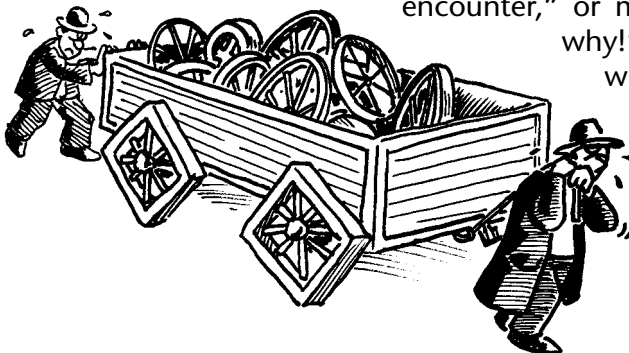
To them it seems to present simplistic rules and principles “that don’t work in the real world, anyway.” From their point of view, mere people are trying in their own strength to do what only God can do. Whether or not this impression is right, it is the image the church growth movement has in the eyes of many believers—a technocratic endeavor through and through, even in those cases where the spiritual aspect is emphasized.

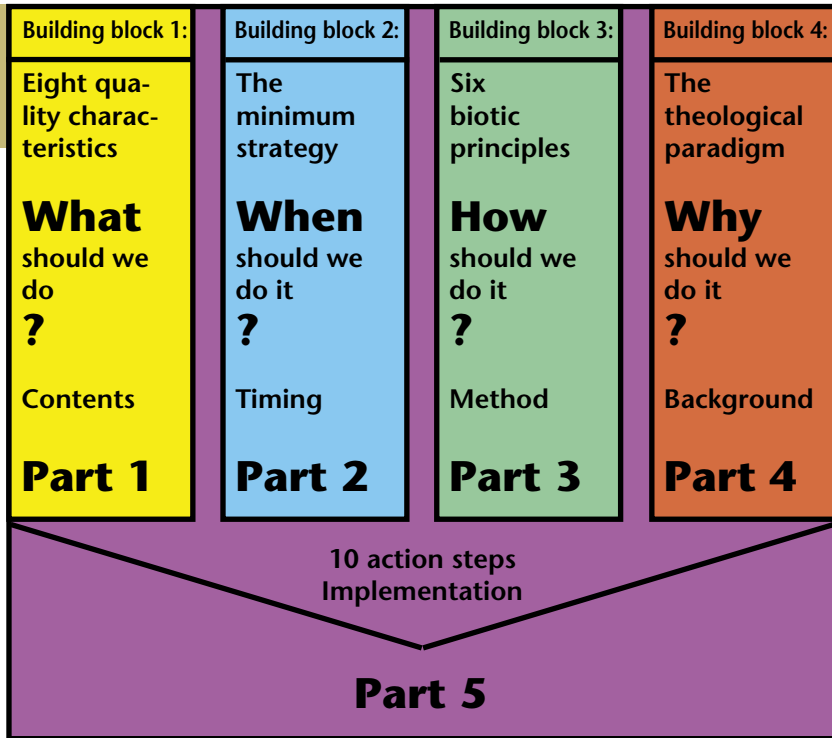
Church growth in one’s own strength

What does it mean to attempt church growth in one’s own strength? Take a look at the cartoon below: a wagon with four square wheels, loaded with perfectly round wheels, pushed and pulled by two men. They are devoted, hard workers, but their job is slow, tedious, and frustrating.

For me this is more than a cartoon. It is a prophetic description of a large part of the body of Christ. The church is moving, but at a tediously slow pace. Why? If you asked the two workers, they would probably say, “It’s because of the stiff resistance we encounter,” or maybe, “We’re going uphill, that’s why!” And these answers are not all wrong!

As Christians we do encounter resistance at times, and a church’s walk can be steeply uphill. The cartoon, however, helps us to understand that while such problems exist, the true cause





Introduction

The five sections of this book in a nutshell: The first four parts answer the four basic questions of church growth; part 5 addresses the how of practically implementing the four building blocks of natural church development.

for chronic frustration often has to do with something else—square wheels.

The illustration teaches us that God has provided everything we'll ever need for church growth, yet we do not always make proper use of it. That is the real problem. Instead of using God's means, we try to do things in our own strength—with much pulling and pushing.

That is what I mean by "technocratic church growth." It is not that the workers in this picture are unspiritual. It is not that their goal—to get the church moving—is in any way wrong. The problem is that their *methods* are insufficient because they are inconsistent with God's plan.

This book is based on a different approach to church growth. In my institute we have chosen to call it "natural," or "biotic" church development. "Biotic" implies nothing less than a rediscovery of the laws of life (in Greek, *bios*). The goal is to let God's growth automatism flourish, instead of wasting energy on human-made programs.

The "biotic" alternative

What is natural church development?

“Some church growth concepts are so focused on the fruit that they fail to consider the root that produces that fruit.”

Why call our approach “natural church development?” Natural means learning from nature. Learning from nature means learning from God’s creation. And learning from God’s creation means learning from God the Creator.

To illustrate, I like to use the picture on the opposite page. It depicts several principles of organic growth. Most church growth authors would confirm the value of learning from these principles. The problem with many popular concepts, however, is that they fail to go deep enough. They are literally superficial. Thus they overlook the underground realities which influence life—like the composition of the soil, the workings of the root system, or the (very important!) role that worms play.

Why does the grass in this picture grow? Is it because of a numerical growth goal, such as “I will grow eight inches by the end of June 1997?” It could be that that is its secret (we will explore quantitative growth goals later). For now, I simply want to emphasize the need for recognizing the “underground” realities, without which we cannot answer the question of “why” there is growth. What happens below the surface is the strategic focus of natural church development.

Isn’t this “natural theology?”

Applying observable laws and paradigms of nature to theology is highly controversial. I concede the difficulty here. This type of theological reasoning, called *theologia naturalis* can create enormous problems when applied to theology proper, i.e., the knowledge of God. It fosters the illusion that we can perceive and understand God on our own—without Christ, without the cross, without revelation. Here, however, we are dealing with *principles of church growth*, not with questions about the character of God. It seems to me that in this context, learning from creation is not only legitimate, it is a must!

Jesus Himself frequently used parables from nature and agriculture to illustrate the nature of the kingdom of God—the lilies of the field, the seed that grows by itself, the growth of the mustard seed, the four soils, the tree and its fruit, the laws of sowing and reaping. Some interpreters claim that Jesus used these examples simply because His audience lived in an agrarian

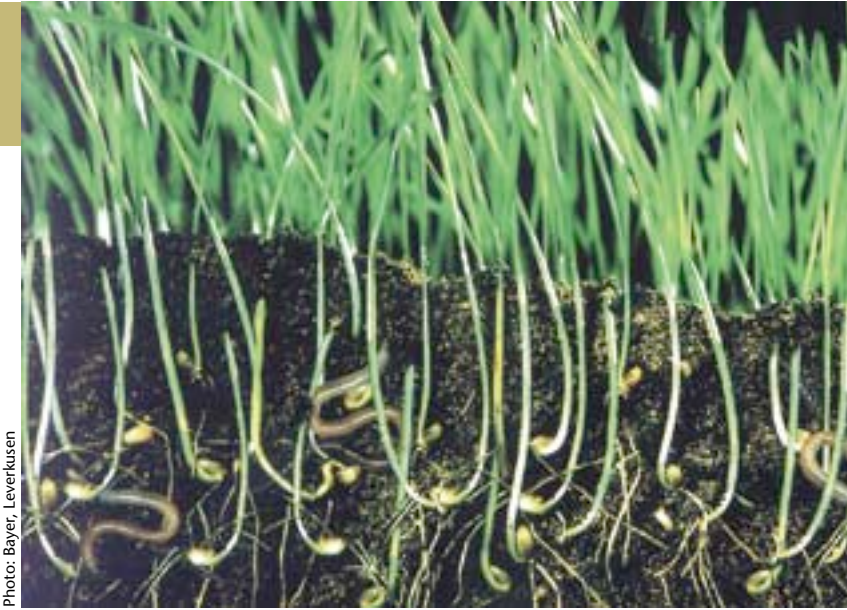


Photo: Bayer, Leverkusen

The laws of organic growth: Some church growth concepts literally stay on the surface by merely studying the fruit, while overlooking the roots which produce the fruit

society and therefore related best to such illustrations. I don't think that goes far enough. If Jesus were walking among us today, He would hardly replace these parables from nature with parables from the world of computers, such as "The kingdom of God is like a computer program—your output depends on your input." Technocratic illustrations like this would miss the secret of life. The sphere of the biotic has totally different laws from that of the abiotic.

A typical example of the biotic approach can be found in Matthew 6:28: "See the lilies of the field, how they grow." The word "see," however, does not fully cover the implications of the Greek word *katamathete*. This is the intensive form of *manthano*, meaning "learn," "observe," "study", or "research." Whenever in Greek *kata* is used in front of a verb, it usually intensifies the word. In our context it would mean to *diligently* learn, observe, study, or research.

What is it then that we are to diligently study? It's not the lilies' beauty, but rather their *growth mechanisms* ("how they grow"). We are to study them, examine them, meditate on them and take our direction from them—all these aspects are included in the imperative verb form *katamathete*. And we are told that we need to do these things in order to understand the principles of the kingdom of God.

Learning from the lilies of the field

Discovering the "biotic potential"

"The biotic potential is a concept designed by God the Creator Himself."

Every student of God's creation—Christians and non-Christians alike—will eventually stumble upon something scientists call the "biotic potential." Ecologists define it as the "inherent capacity of an organism or species to reproduce and survive." This is a concept entirely unknown in the world of technology. No machine is inherently able to reproduce itself. A coffee machine can make coffee (thank God!), but it will never make another coffee machine. In nature, however, the order of things is entirely different: a coffee plant produces coffee beans, which in turn can produce new coffee plants. It was God's intent to build this perpetuity into His creation from the start. It is the secret of life, a divine principle of creation.

When we are dealing with natural processes, it is important for this inherent potential to have free rein. The difference between the biotic potential and the empirical growth (in the laboratory as well as in the field) is called "environmental resistance." While it is clear that growth cannot be "made" or forced, it is important to keep the environmental resistance to a minimum in order to create the best possible conditions for growth.

The biotic potential in a congregation

The same is true for church development. We should not attempt to "manufacture" church growth, but rather to release the biotic potential which God has put into every church. It is our task to minimize the obstacles to growth (the "environmental resistance")—both inside and outside the church.

Since we have very little control over outside factors, we should concentrate on the removal of obstacles to church growth and multiplication within churches. Then church growth can happen "all by itself." God will do what he promised to do. He will grant growth (1 Corinthians 3:6).

The principle of self-organization

The principle of self-organization is found throughout creation. Secular system research uses the term "autopoiesis" (self-creating) for this phenomenon. It should rather be called "theo-poiesis" (God-created). This principle brings a great mystery to light. If we apply it to the "organism church," we face the question of how to organize self-organization. What can be done to



Learning from God's creation: The principle of self-organization is evident everywhere in nature, from the tiniest microorganisms to the laws governing the universe.

release the biotic potential—the growth automatism, by which God Himself grows His church? The four building blocks of natural church development—quality characteristics, minimum strategy, biotic principles, new paradigm—try to supply an answer to this question.

Much of the secular literature covering the topic of self-organization does have a significant esoteric bent which makes it more difficult to deal with this matter. The difference between the esoteric and natural church development, however, is much like the difference between astrology and astronomy!

Non-Christians who discover this phenomenon almost always tend to attach some pseudo-religious meaning to it. Instead of connecting self-organization with the only true God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of heaven and earth, a number of authors introduce fictional occult concepts. Although this does not change the divine origin of this principle—human misinterpretations of divine principles will never alter them—it nevertheless calls for a thorough biblical investigation and verification.

Isn't that esoteric?

The “all-by-itself” principle

“The release of God’s growth automatisms is the strategic secret of growing churches.”

The term “growth automatisms” is at the heart of our definition of “natural church development” (see opposite page). The biblical concept behind this term is best described in the words of Mark 4:26-29: “And he was saying, ‘The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the ground; and goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts up and grows—how, he himself does not know. The earth produces crops *by itself*; first the blade, then the head, and then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.’”

This parable clearly shows what people can and should do, and what they cannot do. They should sow and harvest, they may sleep and rise. What they cannot ever do is this: they cannot bring forth the fruit. In the text, we find the mysterious description of the earth producing fruit “by itself.” Most commentators agree that this “by itself” is the key for understanding this parable. Just what does it mean?

The term used in the Greek is *automate*—literally translated it means “automatic.” Thus this passage from Mark explicitly speaks of “growth automatisms!” Of course, to the Hebrew mind this automatism would never be credited to some god-like Mother Nature. In the context of the parable, the word means simply “with no apparent cause,” and the underlying thought is “performed by God Himself.” In applying this idea to the life of a congregation, it indicates that certain developments appear to happen “all by themselves,” or “automatically.” Christians, however, know—even though it cannot be proven empirically—that the fruit that develops seemingly *all by itself* is, in reality, a work of God. The “automatism” is really a “theomatism!”

The secret of growing churches

This is precisely what I mean by the “all-by-itself” principle. It is not merely a nice picture. I understand this principle to be the very essence of church growth. Growing churches utilize this principle. It is the “secret” of their success!

Some do it deliberately, others by instinct. It doesn’t really matter. Ultimately, what counts is *applying* this principle. In fact, some even have faulty thinking about it. Their ministry may be *exemplary in practice* and a model from which to learn. But such churches’ *the-*

What does “natural church development” mean?

Releasing the growth automatisms, by which God Himself grows His church

Natural church development defined: All human endeavors are focused on releasing the divine growth automatisms.

ories are not able to accurately explain the secret of their growth, and they certainly cannot supply reproducible concepts for other churches. We will address this problem in more detail later.

I have discovered the principles of natural church development from three different sources:

1. Through our **empirical research** of growing and non-growing churches. This does not mean, however, that we blindly accept the explanations churches give for their own growth or lack of growth.
2. By **observing nature**, that is God’s creation. As we saw before, the Bible itself exhorts us to use this approach.
3. By **studying Scripture**. Throughout the Bible, we consistently encounter the biotic principles of church development—though not with these technical terms.

Neither the observation of churches nor of nature should ever become the basis for establishing absolute standards. If a concept contradicts biblical truth, Christians should reject it, even if it appears to have been used with “success.” Not everything in nature is a “biotic principle” to be used in natural church development. Our task is to carefully and biblically discern what is theologically legitimate and what is not.

The major differences between natural church development and other church growth concepts can be expressed in three main points:

The origin of natural church development

So what’s the difference?

Introduction

1. Natural church development rejects merely pragmatic and a-theological approaches (“the end justifies the means”) and replaces them with a **principle-oriented** point of departure.
2. Natural church development has no quantitative approach (“How do we get more people to attend services?”), but looks at the **quality** of church life as the key to church development.
3. Natural church development does not attempt to “make” church growth, but to release the **growth automatisms**, with which God Himself builds the church.

Natural church development means bidding farewell to superficial pragmatism, to simplistic cause-and-effect logic, to a fixation with quantity, to manipulative marketing methods, and to questionable “can-do” attitudes. It means leaving behind human-made prescriptions for success and moving on to growth principles which are given by God Himself to all of His creation.

Three key terms

In order to clarify the difference between natural church development and the predominant approaches, I will be using three terms throughout this book: the “*technocratic*,” “*spiritualistic*,” and “*biotic*” *paradigms*. These terms are actually shorthand for entire outlooks on life which will be explained in more detail in Part 4 (pages 83-102). Once we understand the presuppositions on which these different patterns of thinking are founded, it is evident why natural church development cannot expect to find general acceptance among Christians.

Technocratic paradigm

The significance of institutions, programs, methods, etc. is *overestimated*

Spiritualistic paradigm

The significance of institutions, programs, methods, etc. is *underestimated*

Biotic paradigm

The theological approach underlying natural church development

Eight quality character- istics

Are there distinctive quality characteristics which are more developed in growing churches than in those which are not growing? And could it be that developing these quality characteristics is the “key to success” in growing churches, and beyond that, a more helpful approach than the pragmatic question, “How do we get more people to come to church?” This is precisely the focus of our research. The results put into question much of what until now has been marketed as “church growth principles.”

Demythologizing church growth

“Learning from growing churches does not mean adopting the explanations church leaders often present as the key to success.”

A look at church growth literature can be confusing. An entire array of programs claim, “Do what we do, and you will get the same results.” Unfortunately many of these concepts contradict one another. One group pushes “megachurches” as the most effective way to reach a community with the gospel, while another suggests that the optimal church size is a small group, almost like most home Bible studies. Some suggest that the key to success is a worship service targeted toward non-Christians, while others emphasize that the goal of a worship service is exclusively worshipping God and equipping the saints. One group is convinced that marketing strategies must be integrated into church planning, while another enjoys healthy church growth without even having heard of such methods.

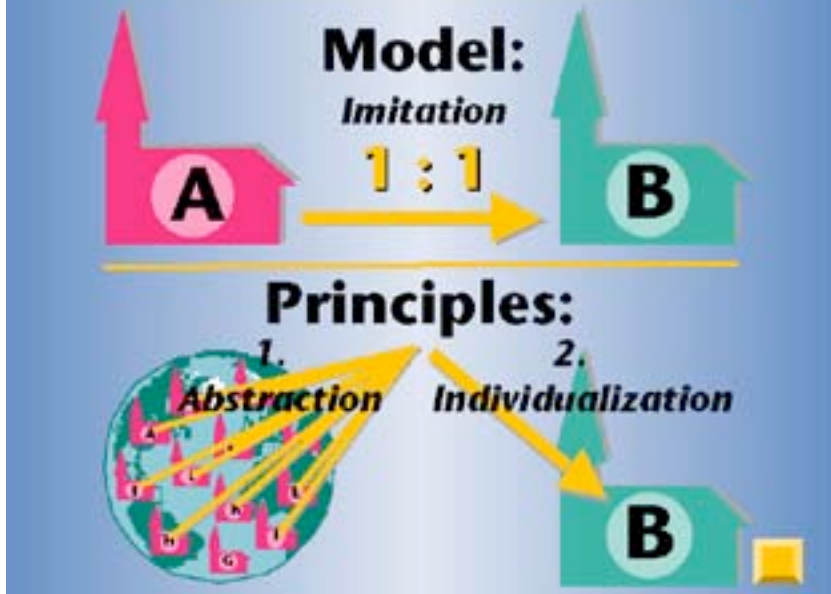
It appears to me that past discussions have made too little distinction between “models” (= concepts, with which some church in some part of the world has had a positive experience) and “principles” (= that which applies to every church everywhere). Thus some models parade as universally valid principles. At the same time, proven principles with universal application are sometimes mistaken for “one model among many.”

Principles or models?

I have attempted to illustrate the difference between these two approaches in the diagram. When I talk about following a model, I mean a church’s attempt to transfer the methods of a single successful church (most often a megachurch) to its own situation. This approach is especially fascinating because, to a certain extent, the vision one hopes to realize for one’s own church is already visible in real life in the model church.

The *principle-oriented approach* is different. It also assumes that model churches have much to teach us. Yet rather than limiting itself to *one* extraordinary model, hundreds of model churches—both large and small—are researched to discover which elements turn out to be universal principles that are relevant for all churches—and which elements are perhaps interesting factors, but not generally valid principles for effective church growth. The principles are obtained by *abstraction*, i.e., by stripping the observable models of all their specific, local, and cultural flavor. In a second step, the principles thus gained are *individualized* for the concrete situation of a specific church. This

Models and principles



While “imitation” best describes the process of simply copying the ministry of a single model church, the principle-oriented approach comprises two steps: “abstraction” and “individualization”.

sometimes cumbersome principle-oriented approach (abstraction followed by individualization) is less attractive for some than the simple one-to-one imitation of a successful model church.

Natural church development, as described in this book, is a *principle-oriented approach*. There is nothing wrong with being inspired by a model church. However, if we want to go beyond enthusiasm to the transfer of reproducible elements, we must seek to discover the universal principles that are the basis for every kind of church growth.

Learning from growing churches means analyzing their practices to discover the universals. This means more than simply adopting the explanations church leaders often present as the key to success. I have learned each of the principles presented in this book from growing churches, and interestingly enough, often from churches that would reject “our” approach to church growth. It may well be that these churches would perceive their “success” in a completely different fashion, would use an entirely different jargon, and have never even heard of the principles of natural church development. Yet it can be demonstrated that they work and minister—consciously or unconsciously—according to these principles.

What does “learning from growing churches” mean?

The international research project

“This study developed into the most comprehensive research project of the causes of church growth ever undertaken.”

How does one discover universally applicable church growth principles? Answering this question is not a matter of intuition, nor of studying a limited number of model churches. There really is only one way to find an answer to this question, namely, scientifically sound research of churches around the world.

This realization provided the framework for our research project. In order to accumulate a sufficiently large data base to make scientifically significant assertions, a minimum of 1000 different churches on all six continents was required. We needed large and small, growing and declining, persecuted and state-subsidized, charismatic and noncharismatic, prominent models and entirely unknown churches. We needed a cross-section of churches and regions where spiritual awakenings are occurring (such as Brazil or Korea), as well as areas which, in the light of worldwide standards, qualify more as “spiritually developing nations” (such as Germany).

This study developed into the most comprehensive research project of the causes of church growth ever undertaken. Churches from a total of 32 countries participated. The survey questionnaire, which was to be completed by 30 members from each participating church, was translated into 18 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. To put it another way: if we were to take a walk along the equator and answer a question every ten yards, we’d be clear around the world before the last question was answered!

Why all the effort?

What motivated this massive endeavor was the realization that without such thorough research it would be impossible to decide which of the modern “principles of success” are universally applicable and which are simply “myths.” Much of what is often matter-of-factly assumed to be a “principle of church growth” was shown by our research to be nothing more than the pet idea of a certain pastor. Such ideas, which are deduced from the personal experiences of one author, are not necessarily wrong. We can learn much from them. They are, however, not to be confused with universal church growth principles.



The research project conducted by Germany's Institute for Natural Church Development from 1994 through 1996 is the most thorough study to date of the causes for church growth. On the map, countries which participated in this study are colored red.

One of the most important criteria for our research project was a high scientific standard. Christoph Schalk, a social scientist and psychologist, agreed to coordinate the project and serve as its scientific advisor, after having identified several weaknesses in the testing procedures we had used until three years ago. He drafted a new questionnaire with rigorous standards for objectivity, reliability, and validity, and used approved methods from social science for the analysis of the data.

This project is actually the fifth stage in a series of research projects begun ten years ago in German-speaking Europe. Although the methodology may have left much to be desired in previous years, we gained an initial understanding of church growth principles upon which the subsequent studies were based.

To my knowledge, our research provides the first worldwide scientifically verifiable answer to the question, "What church growth principles are true, regardless of culture and theological persuasion?" We strove to find a valid answer to the question, "What should each church and every Christian do to obey the Great Commission in today's world?"

The scientific criteria

The value of the research