

Dear Friends this is a copy of the little booklet published by **Christian Schwarz**

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The ABC's of Natural Church Development

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 pretheological paradigms (that are influenced by spiritualising 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 is clear, so far?

Don't worry, I do not plan to continue boring you in the next 12 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. 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 non-theologians. 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 sombre indeed.

May I quickly introduce myself? That my name is Christian Schwarz you have already ready on the title page of this booklet. And that I live with my wonderful family – my wife and three children – in the most northern part of Germany does not have much to do with the subject either. But you might be more interested to know that during the last 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 in some local church to help Christians put those insights – we have uncovered during our extensive research studies – into practice in to day-to-day operation of their church. This ministry in the local church has turned me into a sceptic towards 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 specialised books where you will find terms like "paradigms", "incarnation," and "cybernetic" all over the place. Instead I want to focus on those things that I am convinced concern every Christian.

In Germany, 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 made progress and reach more and more people with the gospel message. Could you take about twenty minutes and summarise 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?

Before 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 almost a prophetic description of the widespread condition of many parts of the church of Jesus Christ. Though the church is moving forward, everything is happening extremely slowly. Why is this so? If you were to ask the two people in the picture, one might answer you: "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."

Now 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 favourable, 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 using 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 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 this is that, figuratively speaking, we have discovered in our research a multitude 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

Thank 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 spiritual growth. They rather suspected questionable management techniques behind such a project, which should not have any in the Christian church. But the real reason behind our endeavour was something very different. 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 here 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 church without ever having heard of such a thing as marketing the church. Sometimes it is really hard to find a common denominator in all these answers.

As convincing as all 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 too, will have the same success!” we really have only two options. Either we fully buy into a model – or we just 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 characterise all growing churches. Thus, instead of just learning from a single one, 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 experienced positively. But imitating these experiences may not at all be the right answer for 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 realised 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 that is the real problem – that they offer universally applicable principles). For years I dealt with church growth literature. I 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 realised that despite 40 years of church growth studies, there had not been a single study that answers the question: What really are the proven principles that globally apply to all growing churches?

This needed to be changed. And thus emerged a plan how I would spend the next few years of my life. 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 five 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 currently experiencing great spiritual revivals (e.g. Brazil, Korea), as well as from regions which, according to international standards, appear to be mere “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 church members in each church, had to be translated in 18 different languages.

In the end, we faced the task of analysing 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 grey hair on my scalp and the debts in my bank account multiplied, but also something extraordinary had happened. This was the first time we actually had in black and white, right in front of us, 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 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, 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 something 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 towards helping each of these eight quality characteristics develop more fully in your church!

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

Quality Characteristic 1: Empowering Leadership

Please notice that our first quality characteristic is not called "empowered" but "empowering" leadership. Let me explain the difference. "Empowered leadership" could mean that there is one (sometimes several, but usually just one) ingenious multi-gifted leader with a great vision. And this leader needs volunteers to help him turn his vision into reality.

Outside the Christian realm this concept is sometimes known as "guru-leadership". But similar models can be found also in Christian churches. Some even defend this concept as an especially efficient growth principle – here is the guru-leader with the great vision, there you have the lay troops who willingly serve their powerful leaders to fulfill their life dreams.

Our study shows, however, that this could not be further 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 help Christians develop greater degrees of empowerment, which according to God's plan already belongs to them. 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 stars. 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 not going right in this church.

Quality Characteristic 2:

Gift-oriented Ministry

The basis for our second quality characteristic is the conviction that God has already determined which Christian should best assume which ministries in the church. The role of church leadership is to help its members identify their gifts and integrate them into ministries that match their gifts. This principle sounds quite simple, but its practical application will have enormous implications for all areas of church life.

When you live according to your spiritual giftedness you are no longer working in your own strength, but the Holy Spirit works in you. Thus even although you are “just an ordinary person” you can accomplish, in the true sense of the word, extraordinary things.

Most Christians, our study shows are either not involved in a ministry at all or they function in a ministry that does not match their gifts. Moreover, some 80 percent of all Christians we surveyed in German-speaking Europe could not even identify their gifts. This is incredible! Do you remember that cart with the square wheels? A person who assumes a ministry that is outside his or her giftedness resembles one of these square wheels. And a Christian who does not have a task in the church? Such a person resembles one of those many unused round wheels in the cart. You can probably imagine what a Christian is like who actually functions in a ministry that matches his or her giftedness. No wonder the practical application of this principle has such dramatic results for the growth of the church.

One of the interesting corollary results of our research was the discovery that no factor influences the sense of joy in living the Christian life more than if we are living it according to our spiritual gifts. I can only support this conclusion from my own life. Ever since I tried to shape my ministry in harmony with my giftedness I have experienced three effects: first, I am happier, second, I am more effective; and third, I am more misunderstood by other Christians than ever before. Maybe this is a necessary price to pay for wanting to follow God’s calling.

Quality Characteristic 3: Passionate Spirituality

The name of this quality characteristic may strike you as a bit abstract, but that is part of the nature of things. We had to find a term that could describe the most divergent styles of spirituality. As far as the growth of the church is concerned, one of the results of our study indicates that the important things (as long as spirituality is real) is not the way spirituality is expressed, but the fact that faith is actually lived out with commitment, fire and enthusiasm. The degree of spiritual passion is demonstrably the point that sets growing churches apart from non-growing ones.

This quality characteristic also illustrates that the methods a church uses are really a secondary concern. A church that lives its faith with passionate fervour will experience success with many a method. In contrast, in churches that lack in this area the best methods will not accomplish anything. What good is the most modern engine when the gas tank is empty, and when there is no energy?

There is a certain discipline in which we Christians have reached a sad championship: We invent strategies to avoid this spiritual passion. In my office I have organised two hanging files for this quality characteristic as I have done for all the other quality characteristics. In one file I collect all the resources I can find that support Christians in living out their spiritual passion more and more consistently. In the second file I collect concepts that result in choking spiritual passion from the very start. Every time I return home from a trip I file notes in one of those two folders about the new things I have learned.

Here is the frustrating intermediate result: the first file is not more than an inch wide, the second file has become so full that I cannot get the file drawer shut anymore! I think that this alone says more about our approach to spiritual passion than most of us are willing to admit.

Quality Characteristic 4:

Functional Structure

Interestingly enough, of all the eight marks of growing churches the quality characteristic “functional structures” has emerged as the most controversial point. Yet the principle behind it is really quite simple. The most important criterion for forms and structures in the church is if they fulfill their purpose or not. Church structures are never an end in themselves but 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 audience effectively) is changed or laid to rest. Through this process of self-renewal traditionalistic ruts can be avoided to a large extent.

So where does the resistance against this principle come from? Well, it simply is the result of the lifetime tendency of people to become more and more traditional. Traditionalism means church forms have to stay the same way I have become used to them. It is not by accident that traditionalism is a factor that shows one of the highest significant negative correlations with church growth.

Quality Characteristic 5: Inspiring Worship Service

There is probably no other area of church life where the distinction between models and principles is so frequently violated as in the area of the public worship service. Countless Christians believe that they must adopt particular worship models of other churches, because they supposedly represent a church growth principle.

But our research indicates that the question is not whether our services target Christians or non-Christians, whether they celebrate “in the language of Canaan” or in a more secular language, or whether we worship using a liturgical or a more free-flowing approach. It can be demonstrated that these are simply not the deciding factors for the growth of the church. Instead the key criterion is something else: Is the worship service an inspiring experience for those who attend it? It is this area that clearly separates growing from non-growing churches. People who attend inspiring worship services unanimously declare that the church service is – and for some Christians this is almost a heretical word – “fun.”

It is now quite evident where most of the opposition to this quality characteristic comes from: Christians who attend the worship service to fulfill a Christian duty. They do not attend church because it is such a wonderful experience that they would not miss it for anything, but to do God (or the pastor, or somebody else) a favour. Some even believe that their “faithfulness” in patiently enduring an unpleasant exercise is blessed by God.

When I share the illustration of the cart with the square wheels with groups that are conditioned by such thinking, they usually do not see anything humorous in this. For them to act like the two men in the illustration is something that is quite normal, maybe even spiritual. Can you see the connection?

Quality Characteristic 6: Holistic Small Groups

Growing churches have developed a system of small groups where individual Christians can find intimate community, practical help and intensive spiritual interaction. These are exactly the elements of the biblical concept of holism. In these groups people do not only discuss Bible texts or listen to interesting explanations by experts, but they apply biblical insights to the everyday issues of the participants.

In one of my seminars I once shared the story of the world’s largest church in Seoul (Korea), which at that time had half a million members. One of the participants immediately responded that she could not even imagine becoming part of such a church. When I asked her why she felt that way

she said: “Well I could never stand the anonymity. I need the familiar atmosphere of people I know well.”

Just a short time later I actually met a pastor from that church and asked him how they deal with the problem of anonymity. He looked rather puzzled: “Anonymity? Nobody has ever complained about that in our church.” Then he proceeded to tell me about how this church has developed a system of self-reliant cell groups of up to twelve members and how most of the members of this church are integrated into this network.

Oh well, Korea is far away, and to deal effectively with over half a million members is not our problem here. But our research shows that the principle on which this Korean church is based has universal validity. Christian small groups are not a nice, yet dispensable hobby. No, it is the very essence of the church of Jesus Christ that is worked out in small groups.

Quality Characteristic 7: Need-Oriented Evangelism

It does not take a worldwide research project to convince people that church growth is inconceivable without evangelism. How else will the church grow if not through the process of sharing the gospel to bring more and more people into the church of Jesus Christ? This process is generally called “evangelism.”

So the exciting question was not if evangelism was necessary, but could it be demonstrated that the practice of it contributes to the growth of the church. There are some people who feel evangelism works best when you push people to commit their life to Christ. They do not even shy away from manipulative methods to reach this goal. No wonder many of us feel a strange sensation in our stomach when we hear the word “evangelism.”

But it can be shown that “pushy” manipulative methods represent the exact opposite of the practice we learn from growing churches. Their secret is the way they share the gospel in a way that meets the questions and needs of non-Christians.

Quality Characteristic 8: Loving Relationships

I don’t know what you think about this term “loving relationships.” But one thing is clear. Growing churches manifest a measurably higher “love quotient” than stagnant or declining ones.

Whenever I use this expression in a seminar there are a few Christians who can’t stand it: “What a terrible term!” I could imagine that you might feel like them. So let me explain how we get this “love quotient”. Our questionnaire contains a group of questions that allow us to determine how loving the relationships between Christians are. For instance, we ask how much time members spend with one another outside of official church-sponsored events. How often do they invite one another over for meals or a cup of coffee? How generous is the church in doling out compliments? To what extent is the pastor aware of the personal problems of the lay workers in the church? How much laughter is there in the church?

What were the results? All these points – and quite a few more – have a strong correlation with the growth of the church. In fact, they turned out to be much more significant than many of the countless methods that fill so many church growth books, and which many Christians have wrongly elevated to the status of a church growth principle.

Does this amaze you? Unfeigned, practical love endows a church with a much greater magnetic power than all the marketing efforts of this world. At best, marketing the church can be compared to artificial flowers. They may look deceptively real, but they have no fragrance. Real love, however, spreads that mysterious scent that few can resist.

No Quality Characteristic Can Be Missing

Well, that was a quick overview of the most important principles that prove to be responsible for the growth of the church.

There are three things we can say about these principles today with a high degree of certainty: first, these are universally valid principles (this means they are applicable to churches around the globe); second, they can also be transferred to our own situation (and the results will look different from church to church); and third, each of these principles has a positive relationship with both the quality and the quantitative growth of the church. If we are really concerned about reaching as many people as possible, we cannot afford to sacrifice any of these quality characteristics.

That is what research reveals. Even though we Christians sometimes speak differently. At a recent Christian convention I hear one of the speakers say the following: “Church growth principles do not matter at all.” And many in the audience applauded. How would you have reacted in this situation, with approval or disapproval? Be honest!

I will tell you that I did not get up and repudiate this man, but I did not miss the chance to tell the speaker afterwards that I regard his message as a false teaching. What did he really say when he announced that church growth principles “do not matter at all?” We have seen that one of these principles is the practice of Christian love (quality characteristic 8). Thus this speaker claimed: “Christian love does not matter at all.” Another principle is dedicated prayer (quality characteristic 3). His message, however, claimed: “Prayer does not matter at all.” And so you can go through all the 8 church growth principles that we have discussed in this booklet. But hopefully you will understand why it is not exaggerated to consider such a message an irresponsibly “false teaching.”

Of course, this speaker really did not mean to say all this. But we have to ask why he made such a statement in the first place?

I tell you this story because I am often confronted with similar reactions when I use terms like “church growth principle.” For some this phrase obviously smacks of manipulative marketing methods and they rightly conclude, “they do not matter at all.” That’s why it is so important for me to know that at least you, who are listening to me so patiently, will react differently. If you will ever hear somebody say, “church growth principles do not matter” you can say to this person: “I think you have a wrong concept of what church growth principles are. Did you know that practising the Christian commandment of love is one of these principles? Are you seriously claiming that the Bible teaches us that love does not matter?”

When we examine the eight principles more closely, some will be surprised to realise that each principle summarises central aspects of the biblical message. Is it not beautiful that the most comprehensive church growth research ever undertaken in Christianity on this subject, confirms exactly what God has always said in his Word?

The principles of church growth that we have discussed are nothing else than God’s own principles. Don’t misunderstand me. The terminology that I use in this book to designate the principles may be imperfect – like all scientific methodology. The workbooks and resources we have developed afterwards can also be improved. But all this does not change the fact that the principles, which we examined with our imperfect means and researched in our deficient ways, are nothing else but God’s own principles.

The “All-by-Itself Principle”

And here is the actual highpoint of our research. We have called the principle that lies at the base of all eight quality characteristics the “all-by-itself principle.” We have proof today that the secret of growing churches does not consist in pushing or pulling the church in human strength and efforts – do you remember the picture of the cart? – But releasing and developing the potential God himself has laid into the church. Then growth occurs all by itself.

Church growth is something that we human beings cannot make. Our job is merely to stimulate the *growth automatism*s God himself uses to build his church. Excuse me for using one of these technical terms that I told you in the beginning I wanted to avoid if possible. But the reality that this term designates is absolutely central for the development of the church. So what do I mean by this term that, at first, may sound a bit peculiar and not at all biblical?

Not more and not less than a central biblical concept, and even more importantly the application of this concept, to the practical work of the church. In Mark 4:26-29 (NIV) Jesus tells us the following parable: "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, and then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

This parable shows explicitly what people can and should do, and what they cannot do. They should sow and harvest: they may sleep and rise. What they cannot do, however, is this: they cannot bring forth the fruit. In the text we find the mysterious description of the earth producing fruit "all by itself."

The Greek text used the term "automate" – literally translated it means "automatically." Thus this passage explicitly speaks of a growth automatism. I am emphasising this point because many Christians to whom I have tried to explain this principle suspect that this concept is not really a biblical one. But look again. Not only is this a biblical principle, but, when you study the original text, you find that it is a biblical term.

This parable is not merely a nice picture. No, it is the very essence of church growth. Growing churches utilise this growth automatism, some deliberately, some intuitively. It is the "secret of their success!"

So how does this happen? To answer this question it is helpful to review the eight quality characteristics. Each quality characteristic consists of two parts: a noun (e.g. leadership, ministry, spirituality, structures) and an adjective (e.g. empowering, gift-oriented, passionate, functional). The secret of each of these quality characteristics is not described by the nouns – every church has some kind of leadership, ministries, spirituality or structures. Rather the secret is hidden in the practical application of what each of the adjectives represents.

A closer look at these adjectives reveals that they have something to do with making room for those growth automatism)s God uses to build up his church. Remember our illustration of the cart: Instead of pushing and pulling the cart (the church) ourselves, we have to unload some of these wheels that are already on the cart, mount them in the right place and make the joyous experience that the wind of the Holy Spirit sets this cart in motion (seemingly) "All by itself."

Our key concern: the quality of our churches

I don't know if what I have shared with you is something new for you, or if it is merely confirming something you already suspected or knew. For most Christians with whom I share these insights, these principles differ drastically from their ideas about "church growth" or "church development."

One of the most important conclusions coming from our research project is the insight that, whenever we think about the subject of church growth, the key is the quality of the church. Quality (as measured in the form of the eight quality characteristics) is the root, quantity (increased church attendance) is the fruit.

This perspective has important implications for the practical work of the church. Instead of starting with the question: "How can we get more people to come to church?" we ask: "How can we grow in each of the eight quality areas?" Behind this approach is the theologically and empirically based conviction that quality in these areas will always effect quantitative growth (e.g. more people attending church).

The basis for this qualitative approach is the biblical principle that a good tree produces good fruit (Matthew 7:17). This means that because the tree is good (has a high quality) it also bears good fruit (more Christians who join the church). It is fascinating to see how well a statistical study confirms the correctness of this biblical statement!

A rule for which there is no exception

Let me tell you now about a finding in our study which I personally consider the most interesting of all. While there are exceptions to every church growth principles, there is *one* rule, for which we have not yet found a single exception. Every church in which each of the eight quality characteristics has reached a certain level (in our technical jargon we say it has reached a quality index of 65 or more) is a growing church.

There is a qualitative value - which can be shown in exact statistical terms – beyond which a church will always grow. Isn't this interesting?

When asked what must happen to attract more people to our church services, I can offer only one scientifically defensible reply: "We must work at reaching a quality index of 65 in all eight areas." This answer may not be very popular. Some may even say with disdain: "We don't want to grow!" But they cannot ignore the research results. That would be simply frivolous.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that this kind of growth is easy to achieve. This is not some gimmick or popular quick-fix method that promises push-button instant growth. Rather it is a difficult path to increase the quality of the church to this high level. But where in the Bible are we told that it would be very easy for the church to be fruitful to the commission of our Lord?

It may be that you find the proposition objectionable that there is a measurable qualitative value beyond which quantitative growth will always occur. Upon closer inspection, however, this phenomenon is not that surprising. Just what does it mean for a church to have reached a quality index of 65 in all eight areas?

If we release such a statement from the abstraction of statistical language, it means the following: this is 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 fulfil the Great Commission; and in which the love of Christ permeates almost all church activities. Is it even conceivable that such a church could stagnate or decline?

What Is the Weakest Area in Our Church

Some Christians who hear these principles for the first time may groan; "And am I supposed to think of all of this at once? I can't see the forest for the trees." This is the point where another outcome of our study can be very helpful; to begin with, it is sufficient to concentrate on one single area. But which area is strategically the most decisive?

It can be demonstrated that the growth of the church is blocked most by those quality characteristics which are least developed. On the other hand, this means that if we concentrate our energies primarily on these minimum factors, we can expect that this alone can lead to growth.

It has been my experience that most Christians are not easily convinced of these principles of church growth by well-reasoned, scientific analysis but rather by a simple demonstration.

For my seminars I have had a tub built with staves of varying lengths, according to the model in the illustration on this page. 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. “spiritually”) 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 symbolises 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 suggest 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.

Our Work and God’s Work

Such analogies demonstrate well the central issues in church development. The barrel composed of eight staves (quality characteristics) represents what we can, and according to God’s will, should build. Admittedly, all our industrious improvements in the quality of the tub cannot cause the water (newly won people) to flow into it. 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 he 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.

We simply cannot “manufacture” the quantitative growth of the church. We should rather concentrate our efforts on building up the quality of the church to make sure that the blessings, which God has already begun to pour out, do not pass by our church.

The apostle Paul may not use the picture of the barrel with staves, but he speaks of the same relationship between human and divine work when he uses the following words: “I (notice that Paul speaks here of himself) planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow” (1 Cor. 3:6, NIV). This clarifies what farmers already know even without these words, namely what they can “produce,” and what they cannot. They can plant, water, and harvest. But they cannot make it grow. Yet they know that their planting and watering does influence the expected harvest.

Natural Church Development

The findings of research can help us to understand the growth (or lack of growth) of churches better. But it is not enough to just understand. What good is the best diagnosis as long as the doctor does not have to offer a therapy?

To make sure that the discussion about church development does not end here we have developed a series of resources to help with the practical implementation of the principles in the life of the church.

We call this approach to church growth that we have developed on the basis of our research, “natural church development.”

The First Step

Many churches embark on natural church development by first obtaining a church profile to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their church. The church profile answers, among other things, the question: Which of the eight quality characteristics is our current minimum factor?

To do this profile, 30 members (and the pastor) each fill out a questionnaire. The computer then analyses the answers and compares them to the 4.2 million answers which we have collected so far. The software program then uses a special “global formula” to calculate scores that are standardised. The result can then serve as a basis to focus on the question: What can we do to experience growth in the area of our minimum factor?

I hope, dear reader, that by now you can understand much better than at the beginning of this booklet, that this is a question which is really spiritually significant.

The current price of a survey is R2300.

Please contact us for further information.

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