

NATURAL CHURCH Development

How God makes growth
happen all by itself



Captain Henrik Andersen

Oh no,' my wife exclaimed, 'not another book on church growth!' Although I hate to admit it, her reaction was understandable. Through the years we (rather, I) had gathered quite a number of books on the subject and names like Wagner, Gibbs, Pointer, George and Logan took up considerable room on our bookshelves. She obviously thought we could do without another on the subject and especially one by an unknown German!

But this book turned out to be not just another book on church growth—it was different, it was refreshing, it was liberating and it was extremely useful. The book? *Natural Church Development* by Christian Schwarz.

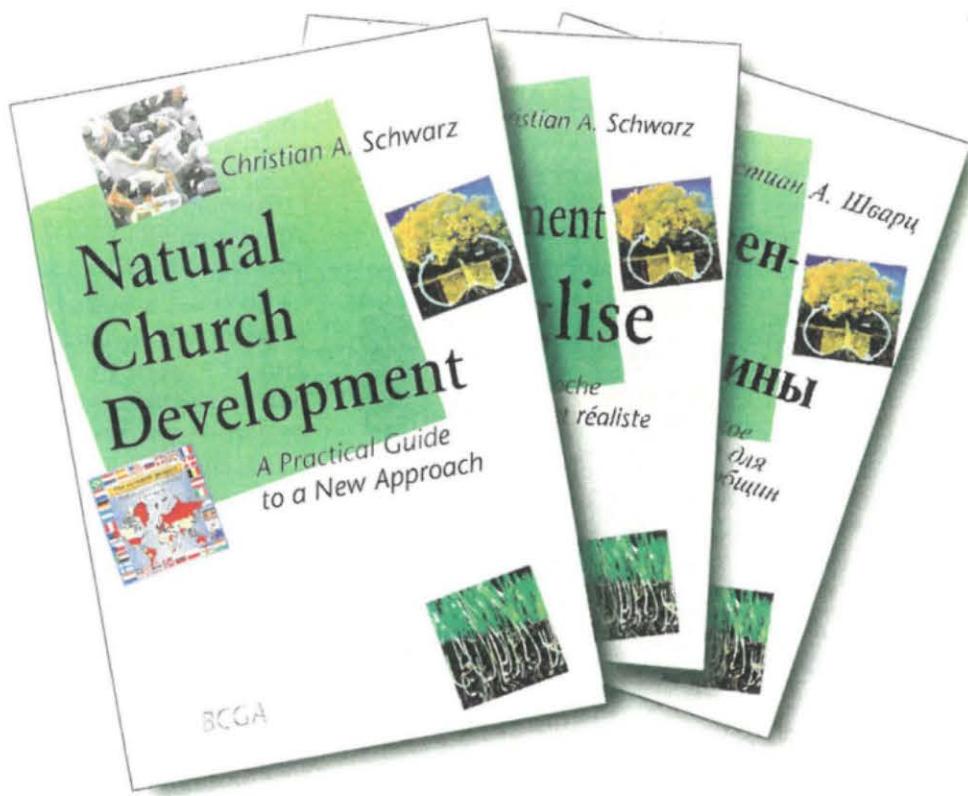
Actually *Natural Church Development* is more than the title of a book, it is an entirely new approach to the subject of church growth which

introduces a new practical tool for use in the local church.

A new approach

What is behind this term, *Natural Church Development*? Natural, says Christian Schwarz, is to learn from nature. Learning from nature means learning from God's creation. And learning from God's creation means learning from God the Creator. The church is God's creation and since he is a consistent God, it should be expected that the same principles we can observe in nature will also be true for the church. Jesus himself showed the way: 'See the lilies of the field, how they grow' (Matthew 6:28) or, more precisely, 'Learn from, study the lilies of the field, how they grow'.

When we look at nature we meet what the



scientists calls the *biotic potential*. That means *the inherent capacity of an organism or species to reproduce and survive*. In other words, growth is built in. If the organism is healthy it will grow.

This same potential is also inherent in the church

as part of God's creation. What Natural Church Development does is try to tap into that. To be more technical, it means *releasing the growth automatism which God himself uses to build his church*.

Although the terminology might seem strange, it is a purely biblical principle. In Mark 4:26-29 we read of how the crop grows—'all by itself the soil produces corn' (in Greek *all by itself = automate*).

So, Christian Schwarz tells us, we cannot and should not attempt to make the church grow. He goes even further: if we leave the growth of the church to God and get on with our job, the growth will come *all by itself*.

What about the real world?

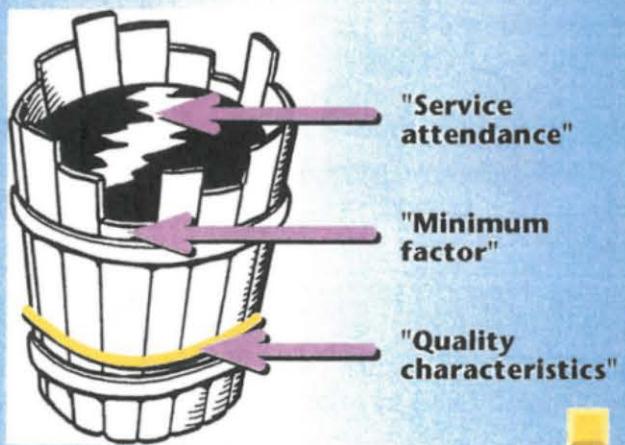
It is fine that we can observe the biotic principle in nature and also find a biblical basis for it, but does it work in the real world or is it just a clever theory? To get an empirical answer to this question the Institute for Natural Church Development conducted in 1994-1995 what Dr Robert E. Logan



called the most 'extensive, statistically valid, world wide church growth research project ever conducted'. More than 1,000 churches of all kinds, spread across 32 nations, with representatives from every continent took part.

The minimum barrel

The shortest stave determines the amount of water the barrel can hold



The research project brought to light many interesting things. For example:

- 'Big' is not necessarily equal to 'good'! On nearly all relevant quality factors, larger churches compare unfavourably with smaller ones. And the evangelistic effectiveness of minichurches (under 100 attendance) is statistically (1.6 per cent) greater than that of megachurches.
- Having numerical faith goals is not a universal growth principle! In fact 69 per cent of the churches that had grown by more than 10 members per year in the last five years did not have any such goals. (This is not to say we do not need goals, but they should be *qualitative* goals, focusing on the areas where we can make a difference.)
- It is not the form of worship that is important (seeker sensitive, liturgical, charismatic) but whether the worship service is an inspiring experience for the participants.

- It is not the spiritual persuasion that separates growing and declining churches, but whether the Christians in the church are 'on fire', are committed and practice their faith with joy and enthusiasm.

However the most important insight from the research was a confirmation of the all-by-itself principle: when we concentrate on the 'roots' (the quality) the 'fruit' (the quantity) will grow automatically.

Through the research Christian Schwarz has defined eight specific areas where there is a measurable difference between growing and declining churches. These eight quality characteristics are the key to the growth of the church.

While we cannot make a church grow, we can work on improving the quality of these characteristics and so stimulate growth. The characteristics are not taken from some successful 'model church' in a specific part of the world, but are abstracted from more than 1,000 churches all over the world. These are empirically proven, universal church growth principles, independent of culture and theological persuasion.

The eight quality characteristics are:

- Empowering leadership
- Gift-oriented ministry
- Passionate spirituality
- Functional structures
- Inspiring worship service
- Holistic small groups
- Need-oriented evangelism
- Loving relationships

The real difference

The crucial factor is not the presence of these characteristics—they are present in all churches—but their *quality*—whether the leadership is empowering, the ministry gift-oriented, the structures functional and so on. When we improve the quality of the church we release the biotic potential so that God can give the increase.

One of the most spectacular discoveries of the survey is the *65-hypothesis*, which states that quantitative growth nearly always will take place if a church has an index above 65 in all eight areas.

This, says Christian Schwarz, is one of the few

church growth principles for which we yet have to find a single exception anywhere in the world. Such a high level of quality is by no means easy to reach, and it is possible to grow with less, but it does prove that when the quality is high enough, the church will almost always (with 99.4 per cent probability) grow.

Taking the temperature of your corps

Natural Church Development introduces a tool by which local churches can identify their own quality in each of the eight areas. This is called a *church profile*. From personal experience I can tell you that it is an enlightening—and sobering—experience to see the profile of your corps, but also a great tool for working with the corps.

The profile not only shows the quality in each area, it also highlights the areas of your corps life which have the most decisive importance for further growth.

Imagine you have a barrel with eight staves (representing the eight quality characteristics) of different lengths according to how developed they are in the corps. How much water can the barrel hold? Up to the lowest stave. No matter how much we improve every other area, the water will still flow out at the lowest stave. But on the other hand, if we focus our energy primarily there, the smallest improvement alone can lead to further growth.

This concept of the *minimum factor* really hit home with me. I am probably not the only one who has had the frustrating experience where things in the corps at last seemed to be going right and it seemed we were on the brink of a breakthrough, but then it all vanished—the water ran out of the barrel. The minimum factor idea helps explain what went wrong.

While *Natural Church Development* stresses that none of the areas can be excluded, the minimum factor strategy shows us where we can use our limited resources with the greatest effect.

Other insights

There is of course much more to *Natural Church Development*. We have not mentioned things such as the *biotic paradigm*, which is the theological framework, or the *six biotic principles* that show us how we should work with the quality of the corps, or the *10 action steps* Christian Schwarz proposes for introducing *Natural Church Development* into

the life of a congregation. If we want to know about this, we just have to read the book. If we do there is a good chance we will share the testimony of Bill Hull, president of T-Net International: 'This work could liberate thousands of pastors from debilitating mythologies that have plagued their daily lives. It could give them hope, direction and finally full confidence that their work is pleasing to God' and on top of that, they could see their church grow—naturally!

Captain Henrik Andersen is married to Lisbeth. They have three children and are the corps officers at Copenhagen Temple Corps. Henrik is also the Territorial Church Growth Secretary for the Denmark Territory. Under 'interests' he lists, 'Soccer and any other sports where Danes can compete on international level (which limits the options considerably)'

An example: Profile of a typical church



By 2000 *Natural Church Development* will be published in about 30 languages. For information: www.CundP.de/international.