

***Natural Church Development:  
A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches***

**Reviewed by Daniel E. Simpson**

*Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* by Christian Schwarz (U.S. edition: ChurchSmart Resources, Carol Stream, Ill., 1996, hardback, 128 pages).

This book so captured my attention that I sat down and carefully read it from cover to cover, twice! Christian Schwarz, who leads the Institute for Church Development, located in Germany, has written an important work that is creating quite a stir around the world. Written in German, the first edition was simultaneously translated and published in 11 languages.

*Extensive Research*

One of the reasons the book is important is because it is based on extensive research that studied 1,000 churches in 32 countries. The study used a cross sampling of churches that were large and small, growing and declining, persecuted and state-subsidized, charismatic and noncharismatic, prominent models and unknown churches. The 4.2 million responses attempt to give a scientifically based answer to the question, What church growth principles are true, regardless of cultural persuasion? (p. 19) In the forward of the book, Bob Logan writes, "To my knowledge, there has never been such an extensive, statistically valid, worldwide church growth research project ever con-

ducted.”

So what is *natural church development*? Schwarz says it's learning from nature, God's creation. He sees the church as a living organism. Therefore, he believes principles of church growth will be in line with the laws of biological growth (p. 8). The scientific term “growth automatism” is at the heart of natural church development. This “all-by-itself” principle says that all living organisms have been created by God with the capacity to grow and reproduce “automatically” (p. 12). Thus, natural church development does not attempt to “make” church growth, he notes, but to release the growth automatism, with which God himself builds the church (p. 14). Schwarz states that he discovered the principles of natural church development from three sources: (1) Empirical research, (2) Observing nature, and (3) Studying Scripture (p. 13).

Schwarz divides the book into five sections. The first four sections present the four building blocks of natural church development:

- 1) What do we do?--Content: *Eight quality characteristics*
- 2) When should we do it?--Timing: *The minimum strategy*
- 3) How should we do it?--Method: *Six biotic principles*
- 4) Why should we do it?--Background: *The theological paradigm*

Part five lays out ten action steps for practical implementation of the four building blocks: (1) Build spiritual momentum, (2) Determine your minimum factors, (3) Set qualitative goals, (4) Identify obstacles, (5) Apply biotic principles, (6) Exercise your strengths, (7) Utilize biotic tools, (8) Monitor effectiveness, (9) Address your new minimum factors, and (10) Multiply your church.

#### *Unfortunate Tone*

The book comes across as significant and substantial. However, I was troubled by the somewhat arrogant tone and the almost hostile approach of the book. Schwarz appears to launch a

blatant attack on the church growth movement. He seemed to project himself as one who finally has all the answers to why churches grow.

Schwarz begins his book by asking, "Why is it that many Christians are so skeptical toward the church growth movement?" He continues by creating an antithesis between natural church development and what he thinks many people perceive church growth to be: "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" (p.14).

Thus, from the very outset of the book, Schwarz goes head to head with his spin on the church growth movement as he creates a strong juxtaposition between church growth and natural church development. It is easy for the reader to get the impression that Schwarz is against classic church growth thinking.

On one hand, Schwarz attacks the church growth movement. Yet on the other hand, he redeems the term church growth for his purposes. To Schwarz, church growth is a desirable thing. But it must be *his* kind of church growth rather than that of the church growth movement. He refers to "church growth literature" often. In fact, his contrast of the church growth movement to his own empirically demonstrated approach is reminiscent of a familiar form in Scripture: "You have heard it said . . . but I tell you . . ."

In preparing this review, I had some email conversations with Erich Baumgartner, who served as a translator for one of Schwarz's recent works.<sup>1</sup> Baumgartner offers an explanation for Schwarz's arrogant tone:

As far as the tone of the book is concerned, I suspect that it is more a problem of understanding the original context of the book (Germany) than a problem of arrogance. What is necessary in a German context to be

heard by skeptical pastors ministering in empty churches--pastors who have tried and failed in applying many well-meaning American church growth principles--comes across as unduly critical in America. I have discussed this issue at length with his American publisher and with Christian Schalk<sup>2</sup> so that future works will have a different tone. At the same time it is important to let him say what he needs to say even if at times he sounds a bit critical of those from whom he learned so much.

#### *Laudable Concepts*

The more I explored Schwarz, the more I said to myself, What he is describing as natural church development is the heart of the church growth movement! I found myself largely agreeing with the principles he advances. But I was troubled that he does not acknowledge the church growth foundations which support his thesis. He attributes none of his ideas to anyone, even though much of what he says can be found in 40 years of church growth literature!

However, in response to an early draft of this review, Schwarz said that it was by design that the book is completely without footnotes, references to literature, quotations, and discussion of different positions with reference to names. He said the book was written to an international audience, and the church growth discussion is very different in different countries. (The complete text of Schwarz's response is included as at the end of this article.)

So is Christian Schwarz an advocate of church growth? He told me this: "As a matter of principle, I never answer this question. In the same way, I don't answer the question whether I am evangelical or not, Charismatic or not, etc. The mere question reflects very often a wrong approach, and just by answering it, I would be part of this wrong approach. So I say to people 'Listen to what I say--would you regard this as "church growth"?' I try to leave the labeling job to others, and I don't mind if people might label me wrongly."

*A Knowledgeable Critic*

Over the years I've read lots of criticism of church growth. In fact, we in church growth welcome criticism because it is a vital part of keeping us on track. To me there are two kinds of criticism--good and bad. Good criticism is based on a well-founded understanding of church growth and takes a reasoned and responsible approach to constructive dialog. It's fair and objective. Bad criticism is usually uninformed, irrational, and often comprised of hot-headed rhetoric. My first impression of Schwarz was that he was just another bad critic.

But the more I read Schwarz's *Nature Church Development*, the more I tend to see him as a good critic who chose a questionable approach for his criticism.

As we can see from Schwarz's background, He is well qualified to offer constructive and informed criticism of church growth. Erich Baumgartner provides some helpful insights:

I have been aware of Schwarz's work in the German church growth scene since the early 1980's when he published the substantial 306-page *Theologie des Gemeindeaufbaus* (Theology of Church Growth), one of the earliest serious indigenous theologies of church growth ever published in any language. For the last 18 years Christian has grown into one of the most-read German authors in church growth who has had made a major contribution in making the insights of the movement available to the German-speaking Christian church.

For years Schwarz's books contextualized American church growth principles to a European audience and shaped a German approach to church growth. For more than a decade he also edited the German magazine *Gemeindegewachstum*, now *Praxis*, a high-quality church growth publication with more than 6,000 subscribers. The closest equivalent in English is *Strategies for Today's Leaders*.

But Schwarz not only adapted church growth thinking. He also began his own research projects in the later 1980's to test how church growth principles worked in the German-speaking churches. By his own admission these research projects did not always meet all the strict criteria of social research methodologies. But they served to test many of the claims of church growth advocates in a German context and went beyond the case-study approach that dominates church growth research until today.

#### *Church Growth Straw Man*

It appears that throughout the book, Schwarz uses the technique of setting up "straw men," then proceeds to blow them away. That is, he makes undocumented references to supposed church growth thinking, then proceeds to show its fallacy in contrast to the virtues of his own ideas. For example, under the heading "Demythologizing church growth" he says, "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'" (p. 16). However, that comment does not reflect true church growth thinking. I don't know of one competent church growth leader who would make such a claim. Yes, there have been books written in the name of church growth which overly emphasize a programmatic approach. But that does not reflect the heart of the movement. The problem is, many of the extreme statements that he implies to be central to church growth are not reflective of true church growth thinking at all.

In response to that, Schwarz told me that the book was primarily positioned to reach those who have heard about church growth, and for whatever reasons, have a negative opinion about it. He said his depiction of church growth reflects "church growth thinking" as it is in the heads and hearts of a lot of people. He said, "So my depiction of church growth may be labeled as a mere 'straw man' in light of the most important literature on subject. But if we move from literature and footnotes to the hearts and heads of thousands of Christian leaders, you see that it is a

part of reality. Reality is never a straw man.”

Although I found myself bothered by his seemingly unfair attack on church growth, I appreciate his attempt to get anti-church-growth people to embrace his ideas without their realizing that they have indeed embraced church growth. In my opinion, if church leaders embrace natural church development, they've adopted the heart of Donald McGavran's church growth thinking.

However, I found myself distressed that he takes such a hostile stand against the church growth movement. It seems to me that he could have strongly made a point for natural church development without launching a head-to-head attack on the church growth movement.

#### *The Quest of True Church Growth Principles*

An important premise of the book is the emphasis on the need for a *principle-oriented approach*. Schwarz rightly points out that church growth principles should be obtained by abstraction, i.e., by stripping the observable models of all their specific, local, and cultural flavor, rather than using a one-to-one-imitation of a successful model church (pp. 16-17). Donald McGavran would give a hardy “amen” to that. In fact McGavran would commend Schwarz for his thorough and extensive empirical research to discover true church growth principles. Church growth thinkers need to take seriously Schwarz's observation of the tendency in church growth to blur the distinction between models and principles (p. 16).

Schwarz continues, however, to give the impression that his massive empirical research project establishes the definitive list of universal church growth principles. He asks, “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” (p. 18). As Schwarz then goes on in detail in describing the “most comprehensive research project of the cause of church growth ever undertaken,” the reader is left with the distinct impression that the only reliable

principles are the ones Schwarz discovered.

Upon analysis, the diligent student of church growth will discover that indeed, much of what Schwarz has “proved” through his research has been apart of church growth literature for decades. His research indeed makes an important contribution to understanding church growth.

Unfortunately, rather than using his book to strengthen the church growth movement and substantiate its principles that are truly valid, Schwarz sets himself against the movement. Perhaps that tone is because the book was not contextualized to the American audience, as suggested above. But why not contextualize? Is an aggressive publishing schedule more important than taking the time to cast a writing in such a way as not to insult and alienate brothers and sisters of a different culture. (Perhaps this is a lesson that all of us who write and publish can heed). I believe that Schwarz would be making a much stronger impact on the American church if his tone was positive and his approach was conciliatory rather than antagonistic.

#### *The Eight Essential Qualities*

An important contribution Schwarz makes is the articulation of “eight quality characteristics” of natural church development. The church growth movement was driven from its outset by the question that was the crux of Donald McGavran’s thinking, “Why do some churches grow, and others do not?” That question led to the delineation of various lists of principles that attempt to provide answers. In 1976 Peter Wagner’s *Your Church Can Grow* outlined “the seven vital signs of a healthy church.” That list provided a useful paradigm for understanding church growth. Other researchers also developed lists. In 1984 Dan Reeves and Ron Jenson published an impressive catalog of principle lists from 16 books.<sup>3</sup> It is doubtful that any of those list composers had intended their lists to be the definitive word on why churches grow. However, the presence of such lists gives credence to the words of Christian Schwarz: “A look at church growth literature can be confusing. Unfortunately many of these concepts contradict one another” (p. 16).

Christian Schwarz, representing a new generation of church growth thinkers, has developed what we might call the “1990s version of church vital signs.” His extensive research has yielded a list of “eight quality characteristics” of natural church development. It appears to me that this list offers a useful paradigm for church growth researchers. His work is based on a matrix that evaluates both quantitative and qualitative measurements in both growing and declining churches.

Schwarz says, “In church growth literature there are numerous lists of ‘characteristics of growing churches.’ To date, I have collected 23 such lists from different authors, and they are all fairly similar. The reason I prefer ‘our’ list to others is that the biotic ‘secret of success’ of each quality characteristic is unmistakably expressed through the adjectives” (p. 78).

Here are Schwarz’s eight quality characteristics:

1. *Empowering leadership.* Leaders of growing churches concentrate on empowering other Christians for ministry. They invert the pyramid of authority so that the leader assists Christians to attain the spiritual potential God has for them.

2. *Gift-oriented ministry.* The gift-oriented approach reflects the conviction that God sovereignly determines which Christians should best assume which ministries. The role of church leadership is to help its members to identify their gifts and to integrate them into appropriate ministries.

3. *Passionate spirituality.* The majority of members in growing churches live their faith with contagious enthusiasm and share it with others. They have a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ. They live committed lives and practice their faith with joy and excitement.

4. *Functional structures.* The core of this quality characteristic is the development of structures which promote an ongoing multiplication of ministry. Growing churches continually evaluate to what extent church structures improve the self-organization of the church.

5. *Inspiring worship service.* Regardless of the style or model of your worship, here’s the real question: Is the worship service an “inspiring experience” for the participants? When worship is

inspiring, it draws people to the services “all by itself.”

6. *Holistic small groups.* Continuous multiplication of small groups is a universal church growth principle. Furthermore, they must be *holistic* groups which foster care, servanthood, and Bible application to real-life concerns. The planned multiplication of small groups is made possible through the continual development of leaders as a by-product of the normal group life.

7. *Need-oriented evangelism.* Evangelistic efforts focus on the questions and needs of non-Christians. Every Christian is responsible to use his or her own specific gift in fulfilling the Great Commission. Furthermore, leaders of growing churches know who has the gift of evangelism, and these leaders are effective in directing them in need-oriented outreach.

8. *Loving relationships.* There is a highly significant relationship between a church’s “love quotient” and its long-term growth potential. People do not want to hear us talk about love, they want to experience how Christian love really works.

#### *Other Contributions*

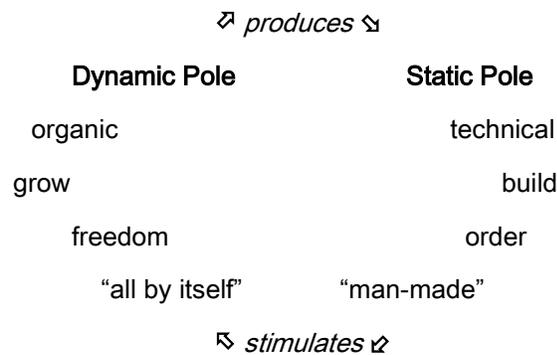
Much of what Schwarz offers is a revamp, recast, or expansion of traditional church growth concepts. However, there are several areas that he makes a contribution to church growth thinking.

The *minimum factor* seems to provide some fresh thinking in helping churches know how to prioritize their energies for moving forward. “The minimum strategy assumes that the growth of a church is blocked by the quality characteristics that are least developed” (p. 50). One way Schwarz illustrates the minimum factor concept is with his “minimum barrel” analogy. It’s based on a barrel comprised of eight staves of various lengths (representing the eight quality characteristics). The water level in the barrel cannot rise any higher than the shortest staff. Schwarz argues that a church should use its strengths to work on areas of weakness (pp. 52-53).

Another helpful area that Schwarz discusses is in goal setting (pp. 44-45, 110-111). While he agrees with the classic church growth claims of the importance of setting goals, he disa-

agrees with the *kind* of goals to be set. Schwarz believes that our goals should be only in the areas of human achievability, and not in areas that are beyond our control. Thus we should not focus on goals of quantity (“3,400 in church by 2002”), but on quality (“by the end of November, 80 percent of all regular worship attenders will know their spiritual gifts”). His premises is that quality will lead to quantity.

Schwarz’s ideas on bipolarity is also worthy of notice. In Part 4, “A New Paradigm,” Schwarz describes the concept of bipolarity as a paradigm to understand church life. “The law of polarity states that for every force there must be a counterforce” (p.84). Thus in the church, there are two poles as illustrated in the chart below:



The two poles are in reciprocal relationship. The dynamic pole always creates organization (structures, institutions, rules, or programs). The purpose of this organization is, in turn, to develop further dynamic poles (p. 85). To the left of the dynamic pole comes the danger of the dualistic or spiritualistic paradigm. To the right of the static pole is the risk of the monistic or technocratic paradigm. Schwarz believes that almost all major conflicts in church history as well as in the church today can be explained as a struggle between the two poles because of single-pole thinking. The bipolar paradigm, in Schwarz’ view, is character-

ized by what he calls the “reformation principle,” meaning that all institutions are evaluated on their performance under the following criterion: “How useful are they for the development of the dynamic pole, i.e., for the church as an organism? (p. 94). The significant implications of viewing the church through this bipolar paradigm began to sink into my thinking the more I studied the chapter.

A most fascinating, and perhaps important idea is Schwarz’s rule of 65. He states, “The real challenge of our international research project was to develop an empirical method for measuring the eight quality characteristics” (p. 38). In each of the countries they surveyed, the values obtained were normed to a median of 50, i.e. the average church for each country had a quality index of 50 for each of the eight characteristics. What they discovered is that, “Every church in which a quality index of 65 or more was reached for each of the eight quality characteristics, is a growing church. *This is perhaps the most spectacular discovery of our survey*” (p. 39). Thus, as Schwarz would contend, church growth is not simply a matter of praying more, or developing a great small-group program, or creating a dynamic worship service. Schwarz insists that the key to growth is “found in the harmonious interplay of all eight elements” (p. 39). Thus, he states, “When asked what must happen to attract more people to our worship services, I can only offer one scientifically defensible reply: ‘We must work at reaching an index of 65 in all eight quality areas’” (p. 41).

#### *The Abstract and the Inappropriate*

The section in *Natural Church Development* which is the least helpful for me is Part 3. Schwarz explores six biotic principles: (1) Interdependence, (2) Multiplication, (3) Energy transformation, (4) Multi-usage, (5) Symbiosis, and (6) Functionality. The principles appear to be constructive and serve to help us think about the church in organic terms. However, the section lacks enough illustrative material to bring the principles from the abstract to the concrete.

An area that Schwarz perhaps stepped over the line is his

strongly associating church growth with technocratic thinking. Throughout the books he draws a contrast between *technocratic* thinking and *biotic* thinking, implying that most church growth thinking is technocratic. Where this dichotomy reached an irritation point with me was in the author's comparing the technocratic mindset to a robot. He says, "Much of what has been published in the area of church growth comes closer to the 'robot' model than to the 'organism' approach" (p. 62). There may be some validity to that claim. But by this point in the book, the reader is so conditioned to view classic church growth negatively, that any of Schwarz's attempts to cautiously cast his language as to not be a direct accusation on church growth is lost. When I saw the sequence of color photos of robot parts lined up against the color photos showing a human embryo becoming a happy little child, I shouted, "Unfair!" I know that there is value in using strongly contrasting images to show differences between two kinds of thinking. But Schwarz's imagery creates a polarization of extremes. The strong impression his graphics make is that classic church growth practitioners are assembling machines, but leaders who follow his principles are growing living organisms. That contrast is not appropriate. The church, the Body of Christ, is a living organism. Even if its leaders succumb to some technocratic ideas, the fact still remains, the churches they lead are the body of Christ!--Not some robotic machines as Schwarz implies.

#### *Must-Read Book*

Those who align themselves with the church growth movement may become disheartened by the book's hostile, unfair, and seemingly unwarranted attacks. However, students of church growth need to seriously engage its ideas. Schwarz makes a fresh appeal for us to think organically about the church. He reminds us of the qualitative factors that sometimes have been overshadowed by a focus on quantity. He reinforces the importance of distinguishing between models and principles. He examples for us an approach to church growth that puts a high priority on research and study.

The book is easy to read, but its overview style leaves many

unanswered questions. Readers soon realize that if they are to pursue its concepts, they'll have to purchase more extensive materials developed by Christian Schwarz's organization and distributed in the U.S. by ChurchSmart Resources (1-800-253-4276). Schwarz admits: "This publication is an attempt to produce a simplified first introduction to natural church development based on what I have covered more extensively in several other books" (p. 127). However, for me, the somewhat simplistic approach left me more frustrated than eager to search out the rest of his writings to piece it all together. Schwarz's *Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development*, co-authored with Christoph Schalk (ChurchSmart, 1998), provides a practical workbook in applying the principles to the local church.

The full-color format of *Natural Church Development* resembles a visually appealing elementary school science textbook featuring photographs, charts, graphs, and diagrams on every page. An interesting feature is that each page turn begins a new section or point. The drawback is that discussion on any given issue is somewhat artificially confined to what will fit on two pages.

I believe Schwarz has written a must-read book for any serious student of church growth. In spite of its condescending tone, this is an important work and makes a meaningful contribution to our understanding of how the church grows and how we can do our part in aiding that growth.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>. Erich Baumgartner, Ph.D., is director of the Global Research Center at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, and also is a professor of world mission and leadership development. Erich was been involved in translating some of Schwarz's work into English.

<sup>2</sup>. Christian Schalk is a social scientist and psychologist who coordinated Schwarz's research project and serves as scientific advisor.

<sup>3</sup>. R. Daniel Reeves and Ronald Jenson, *Always Advancing: Modern Strategies for Church Growth* (Here's Life Publishers, 1984), pp. 155-160.