

Responses from Christian A. Schwarz

Reported by Daniel E. Simpson

In preparing my review of *Natural Church Development*, I have had several rounds of correspondence with Christian Schwarz. He has most graciously engaged in dialogue that has helped clarify issues and has made my review of his work more objective and constructive. With his permission, I have included the following three letters which will give you a candid look into the mind and heart of a brother who is striving to serve Christ for the sake of the Kingdom.

--Dan Simpson

Letter 1

I gave an early draft of this book review to Bob Logan for his critic. His excellent feedback was highly beneficial. Bob had also faxed that early draft to Christian Schwarz. Christian faxed back a two-page response, which I include below in its entirety.

--Dan Simpson

February 13, 1998

Dear Bob [Logan],

Thanks for the copy of the book review. I do not share your opinion that it is a "bad review." It's a bit polemic in style, that's true--but this helps to communicate Dan Simpson's view very clearly to the reader. And this view is--even if I do not agree to all

of his points--worth being discussed. In contrast to many reviews which only sing "Hallelujah" or condemn something without really dealing with the contents, his review gives me the impression of being very balanced. So my hope would not be that he puts out controversial points, but that he might even sharpen them. I firmly believe that such a discussion helps more than the "I-am-for-it" or "I-am-against-it" approach.

Since I am aware that you are in some more discussions of that kind, let me share some background which I normally would not regard as that important, but in the context of such discussions they might have their place:

1. This book is not a "scientific book" because its was not designed to be one. It reflects findings of our research project (that is scientific in the empirical sense of social sciences) and is based on other foundational writings (that are scientific in the theological sense), but in itself it is not intended to be a scientific book. It's just meant as a first introduction to the system of Natural Church Development, whereas other building blocks to the system serve different purposes.
2. The book works completely without footnotes, references to literature, quotations, and discussion of different positions with reference to names. This is not an accident, but was a deliberate decision. This decision was influenced by several facts: (1) We have this literature-based discussion in other elements of the system already. (2) The state of the church growth discussion is very different in different countries, and the book was designed neither to be German or American, but international, and last but not least, (3) It would have been a completely different book.
3. It is primarily positioned to reach those who have heard about church growth, and have, for whatever reasons, have a negative opinion about it. Let me oversimplify: If 80 percent of NCD is identical with other church growth concepts, and 20 percent different, you could lay more emphasis on the 80 percent or on the 20 percent. You could write a book or articles exclusively about the 80 percent (which I have done extensively), or write a whole dissertation about the 20 percent.

Both are legitimate. One reason why I stressed the different aspects, which are first of all located on a paradigmatical level, is that after maybe 548 books on church growth have been written, a 549th book which says exactly the same as all the others would be boring and unnecessary. And if the target is primarily to address those who have a somewhat negative opinion about church growth movement, the goal is to tell them: "Your criticism is not all wrong. But it certainly would be wrong to make an anti-church growth position out of it." Our experience in different countries is that the book seems to reach exactly those people. For a lot of them are not really "anti church growth," my heart is rejoice in it.

4. Since the book is deliberately written without quotations etc., it does not reflect this kind of positioning with reference to literature, but is trying to do something--in my understanding--more fundamental: It reflects "church growth thinking" as it is in the heads and hearts of a lot of people, very often a wild mixture of mere clichés, being uninformed, dogmatically presuppositions, and a grain (but sometimes more than a grain) of truth. I write this in the first chapter of the book very clearly, and I do not answer the question at all, whether this popular criticism is fair or not. It could be argued whether or not the position I try to position NCD against are really typical of church growth literature--in my understand it is very often not the case--but all these clichés are part of reality, probably in terms of change processes, a far more important part than the literature itself. And you find these clichés on both sides: On those who criticize the church growth movement, and on the side of some of those who try to put church growth into practice as well (maybe sometimes because of misunderstanding their teachers). Yes, you do find untheological pragmatism there, you do find the "Big-is-good" mentality there, you do find manipulative marketing methods there, you do find preoccupation with "can-do" mentality there, etc. So the kind of "church growth procedure" may be labeled as a mere "straw man" in the light of the most important literature on church growth; but if we move from literature and

footnotes to the hearts and heads of thousands of Christians, you see that it is a part of reality. Reality is never a straw man.

5. Am I a church growth advocate or not? As a matter of principle, I never answer this question if people ask me. In the same way, I do not answer the question whether I am evangelical or not, Charismatic or not, etc. My feeling is that 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,' 'evangelical,' 'charismatic,' or not?" So I try to leave the labeling job to others, and I don't mind if people might label me wrongly.

--Christian Schwarz

Letter 2

This letter was written in response to the expanded manuscript for this article.

May 19, 1998

Dear Dan,

Thank you for the manuscript of your expanded book review, and thank you for giving me a chance to react on it.

It is true that your review is the most critical NCD review I have read so far, but I do not regard this as harmful for our ministry, because I believe that your criticism is not unfair. It is constructive. Of course, there are a lot of things that I see very differently from you. I would love to discuss these topics in more detail with you some time face to face. I believe that this kind of controversial dialog of people who work for the same purposes can be very beneficial. For my part, I can say that I learn a lot from this kind of criticism.

If I try to read my book from the perspective of a church growth advocate and with the question, What does Christian Schwarz say about the church growth movement?, I must admit

that I can understand much of your critical remarks and I even see a certain justification in them. But please take into account that this is not the theme or the leading question of the book. You will not find any real discussion of the church growth movement in this book, because this is not the target of the book. My impression is that you criticize the book from a perspective that it was not designed to cover, and you are looking for answers that this book was not intended to give. It is not wrong to take such an approach, but I feel that this is the major root for the difficulties you have with NCD (or with my presentation of it). *[Editor's note: The terms "church growth," "church growth movement," "church growth literature," and "church growth principles" are used at least 15 times in the preface and introduction, 47 times in part 1, 6 times in part 2, 7 times in part 3, 27 times in part 4, and 8 times in part 5. This would seem to constitute a discussion of church growth. The phrase "church growth movement" is used in the very first line of the preface and in the very first line of the introduction (among numerous other places), associating the term church growth with a specific technical usage.]*

What I tried to do is simply present the main principles of NCD, illustrate them by some of our research findings, and contrast them with different views (as I have heard them over and over again in numerous discussions, rightly or wrongly labeled as "church growth"). I neither intended to give a research report or the theological background of NCD, nor the practical tools or a thorough discussion of the church growth movement. If you write that my view is hostile toward the church growth movement, I cannot identify with this statement. Of course, I am not very happy if I read in a church growth periodical that I am labeled as being "hostile toward church growth," because this is far away from how I view my position. The fact that I stress the points that are different from what is known as "classical church growth thinking" should, in my understanding, really not be labeled as "hostility." But it is the right of any critic to understand it this way and to publish it accordingly.

Together in His service,

Christian Schwarz

Letter 3

May 22, 1998

Dear Dan,

Thanks for the dialogue. I do not have any difficulties with expanded version of the book review being published as it is, because it seems reflect your perception of the book accurately; and this is certainly one way to see it.

Please keep in mind that this book was not written for church growth leaders, but first of all it is addressed to those who are, for what reasons ever, skeptical toward the church growth movement. That is the reason why both Bob Logan (in his preface to the American edition) and myself (in my introduction) start with mentioning this criticism. We tried to begin where many people actually are. There is indeed a substantial anti-church-growth climate on the grass root level, although often not well grounded. Does this really reflect "true church growth thinking" or is it only directed toward misconceptions of it? Well, this is an academic question (for me a very important one!), but it is not at all the theme of the book.

Yes, it is definitely true that most of the content of the book is in accordance with other writings of church-growth authors. Toward somebody such as you, I would say: Of course it is! I have difficulties if this fact is understood as criticism. At the same time, I stressed those areas where there are differences (for this is the more interesting area). What I deliberately did not do is to label the book as a "church growth book" or "anti church growth book," because I like to leave this labeling to the reader. Is the content (at least the essence) of the book the heart of the church growth movement, or is it an attack on it? Please, dear reader, decide yourself. Some decided that it is the heart of church growth, perhaps with some new insights, and if they have a positive view of the church growth movement, they work with it. Wonderful. Oth-

ers decided that it is a different approach than “church growth” (as they perceived it), and because they have difficulties with the church growth movement, they are happy about this “new approach,” and they work with it. I believe that this is wonderful as well.

I often ask myself whether my almost fanatic refusal against being labeled is not just, as some critics say, a game. Perhaps there is some truth in this criticism. In a way, I simply like it to be invited to one meeting as a “typical church growth representative,” and to another meeting as “one of the strongest critics,” and on both events sharing exactly the same message. But for me this is more than a game. I firmly believe that this position is my calling from God, and it has some limitations, to be sure, but at the same time it has great possibilities. I can reach some people who others don’t reach, whereas they reach people who I do not reach.

Let me share with you the primary influences or roots that have been foundational in my formation of Natural Church Development:

1. *Systematic theology*. The most important names here are theologians such as Emil Brunner and Helmut Gollwitzer. They helped me to understand the significance of what we call the “reformation principle,” which is an important part of Natural Church Development. It has helped us to work out what we call today the “bipolar approach.”
2. *The church growth movement* (in the narrow sense as advanced by McGavran and Wagner). For me personally, a key influence has been Win Arn. Topics like the “principle oriented approach” (versus models), the scientificness of church growth, the need to discover fundamental, worldwide principles, etc., have aided my learning. What I have tried to do is to sharpen these insights in my own ministry.
3. *System theory*, especially in the area of biology and ecology. The most important name for me in this field is Frederic Vester. Secular researches brought to light so

many dynamics of God's creation which are highly relevant for the Body of Christ. Our contribution has been to work out adequate analogies. Here, for instance, I learned the relevance of the minimum factor, which was not discovered by our research, but later verified by research.

4. *Original research.* The goal of our own research projects was not and is not to justify our favorite ideas, but to find out what can be validated empirically. Here I have learned many things that we simply could not have known before. Some of those things were even in contrast to what I had written previously. Because of this root of research, the theory of NCD is open to further development and change. Nothing is further from our approach than the notion of having "all the final answers." Indeed, this is the very notion that I try to attack wherever I find it. I try to be very careful, even in the none-scientific books, never to label anything as "proven" when it is just a hypothesis, never to label anything as a universal principle when it is just a wonderful insight.
5. *Grass root reception.* The fifth root, I must admit, is how these four theoretical aspects have been received on the grass root level. What do people regard as helpful (with no respect to the theoretical or empirical background), and what not? Here I have to quote all the John Does and Mary Smiths that I meet in seminars. These folks, in fact, have had at least a similar influence on the theory of Natural Church Development as some of the more prominent figures.

Dan, I appreciate your reflection on Natural Church Development very much, and of course, this will have effect on our future work.

Together in His service,

Christian Schwarz