



NATURAL CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

An Introduction for Churches



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1. Welcome

Welcome to this introduction to Natural Church Development (NCD). We pray that NCD will stimulate an experience of growth and health for you personally, for your groups, and for your church in new ways. We also hope it sharpens your focus on the real issues impeding growth in your church, and increase the effectiveness of your ministry.

This introduction provides you with basic information about NCD and how it assists you to identify and address the specific issues you and your church are facing now and into the future. On the following pages you will find information about:

- the basic concepts of NCD;
- the process of implementing NCD;
- the commitment required to gain the most value from NCD;
- the benefits of engaging;
- the steps to commencing the process by conducting your first NCD Survey
- the resources available to help you apply the growth principles in your life, and in the lives of the people around you.

You are permitted to make multiple copies of this document to share with your leadership. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us at info@andyismycoach.com.

NCD continues to grow after 25 years of involvement by churches all over the world. More than 45,00 Surveys have been conducted in the USA, and 90,000 internationally. Many church leaders find it an indispensable combination of growth principles, change-process, tools and resources for ensuring their churches remain on the path to healthy growth. We look forward to partnering with you as you join them.

May God give you energy, insight and blessing as you partner with Him in the exciting journey ahead.



2. What is Natural Church Development?

2.1 A different way of thinking about growth

Natural Church Development (NCD) is a **set of principles** – a way of thinking about church growth. Growth should be about quality (health) and not just quantity (numbers). In fact NCD suggests that quality should take priority over quantity in church growth. Quantity follows quality.

At the heart of the principles is the Scriptural concept of the church as a living organism, not just an organization (albeit a spiritual one). Looking at the church "organically" gives us a different perspective on what "growth" means. The growth of organisms focuses on their health, their capacity to reproduce, and how the individual 'body' parts interact. They are grown, not built. They are nurtured, not assembled.

If a church becomes increasingly healthy over time, it is more likely and better able to reproduce disciples, ministries and eventually itself. The NCD principles, tools, processes and resources help you think about growing your church as a healthy living organism.

“Healthy churches
are grown, not
built”

NCD's objective is for each church to become the best church it can be. First Baptist should become the best First Baptist it can be, Knox Presbyterian should become the best Knox Presbyterian it can be, and St Luke's Lutheran should become the best St Luke's Lutheran!

2.2 A long term strategic process

Natural Church Development is also a long term strategic **process** for progressively improving a church's health. It is a process of continuous improvement, not a program that guarantees 'a healthy church'. Growing a church, like growing a plant, requires a long term commitment which is intentional and consistently addresses the most important issues facing the church at each stage of growth.

At the heart of the NCD process is a globally recognized diagnostic tool, the NCD Survey. The Survey was developed in Germany and is based on research into what causes churches to grow or decline. Originally carried out in one thousand churches across the globe, it is now corroborated by more than 90,000 Surveys. The NCD Survey complies with the highest international statistical standards for validity and reliability.

Surveys are done annually, offering an accurate up-to-date "snapshot" of the church's health. NCD churches find that integrating the Survey into their annual planning cycle is advantageous. Each Survey enables the leadership team to see three views of their church: i) the current state of health, ii) how the church's health has changed over the previous year, and iii) what areas need greatest attention over the coming year.

Several profiles or "snapshots" result in a longitudinal study of the story or narrative of a church. This reveals longer term trends, by identifying and addressing the most significant issues impacting long term health and growth.

3. Why church leaders find NCD helpful

Natural Church Development liberates leaders wrestling with growth issues by reminding them that God, and only God, does the growing, and that their role is to partner with Him, not try to generate the growth themselves. It offers universal growth principles that apply in all churches at all times. It provides regular accurate "snapshots" of a church's health, keeping the leadership focused on the most important issues to achieve long term sustainable growth and outlines a process of continuous improvement through the NCD Cycle. It helps leaders focus on organic growth values and brings focus to the use of limited time, energy and resources to maximize effectiveness. Feedback consistently identifies that the most important aspects of conducting NCD Surveys have been gaining an objective view of themselves, and fostering the important conversation(s) in their church.

4. What NCD is not

NCD is not a prescriptive "silver bullet" program guaranteeing church growth. It is not a short term solution. Deciding to "try NCD this year" will miss the richness and benefits that accrue from using the tools. Neither is it a replacement for exploring the paradigm, applying the principles and spiritual leadership that is motivated to achieve healthy growth.

*The most important thing
“ that has happened is the ”
depth of conversation has
increased substantially.*

Each church still has to have a strong sense of its unique vision that God has for it. Every church leader needs to discern God's leading for that vision, but it is true that NCD can help clarify, stimulate and enable that vision. NCD is not a "complete package": the NCD paradigm is dynamic, and understanding continues to grow as the international NCD community makes new discoveries in applying the principles. NCD does not make all churches the same, it's about becoming the best, unique church possible.

5. Thinking growth.... naturally

5.1 God's principles for growing living organisms

Scripture invites us to consider the principles by which God sustains and grows living things in the created universe.

Scripture teaches that the local church is also a living organism which God wants to grow – the Body of Christ. The local church shares similarities with other organisms God has created and sustains. Its potential for growth lies in its health, not its size.

NCD has proven through its international research that healthy growing churches are more successful in releasing the potential for healthy growth because they apply these natural principles and treat the church more like a living organism to be grown than an organization to be built.

A foundation of NCD is learning to see the church as a living organism whose growth can be stimulated by understanding and applying these principles in community.

5.2 Partnering with God to stimulate healthy growth

Jesus gives a picture of the partnership God expects to have with His people in growing the Kingdom. In the Parable of the Growing Seed, Jesus said:

*"This is what the Kingdom of God is like. A farmer scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know why. **All by itself** the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, 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."* (Mark 4:26-29)

Jesus clearly points to growth as the work of two partners:

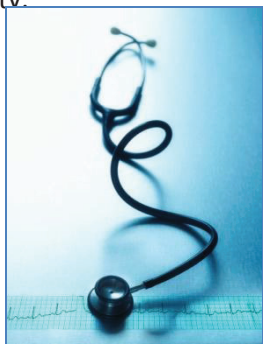
- the farmer gets the environmental factors right to maximize the potential for new life and growth by consistently removing the obstacles to healthy growth,
- but God alone brings that life and growth (which appears to the farmer as if it happens "all by itself")

The role of God's people, and their leaders in particular, is similar to that of the farmer. They cannot give life or produce growth. Only God can do that. All they can do is maximize the potential for growth. This is done by a continual process of identifying the barriers which impede growth within the life of the church and removing them. In this way the potential for 'all by itself' growth is constantly maximized.

5.3 Quality as the foundation for quantity

To think of the local church as a living organism is to acknowledge that **quality** (health) is just as important to church growth as **quantity** (attendance). In fact, quality *is* the essential foundation for quantity.

The health of any living organism directly impacts its capacity to grow and reproduce. NCD's international study of over 90,000 churches has shown a clear correlation between quality and quantity: churches that continue to maintain focus on improving their health are more likely to grow numerically and reproduce ministries. Likewise, churches failing to heed the "health warning" are much more likely to be in decline or to make decisions that will lead to future decline. It just doesn't make sense for church leaders to measure ministry success solely by quantity.



Natural Church Development helps leaders identify and address the unique health (quality) issues facing their church



5.4 Not just any growth but 'all by itself' growth

It is important to recognise that Jesus speaks of 'all by itself' growth, a term we see in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 4. This is not growth brought about by continually initiating new programming. Rather, it comes about by progressively understanding and growing into the dynamic of the church as a living, growing organism and continually working to identify and remove the barriers to its life and growth. This is the farmer's role in raising a successful crop.

For many leaders who are used to setting the course of the church, taking the congregation with them and asking God to bless the plans that have been developed, this may not be an easy transition. Many leaders see their church predominantly as a (spiritual) organization to be built rather than an organism to be grown. In effect they see their role more like a mechanic than a gardener. They may find it nearly impossible to consider leading a church where 'all by itself' growth is the norm – where God's Spirit is constantly at work among His people and not controlled by the leadership.

Yet this is the essence of the Natural Church Development paradigm. It is a process of coming to terms with how God grows healthy organisms – of which the church is one – and then collaborating with God by doing what is necessary to remove the barriers to 'all by itself' growth.



*Growth requires
gardeners, not
mechanics*



6. The origins of Natural Church Development

6.1 Comprehensive worldwide research

The Institute for Natural Church Development International, based in Germany under the leadership of Christian A. Schwarz, undertook worldwide research in the early 1990s. **One thousand churches in 32 countries** were surveyed to determine if there were principles producing healthy church growth independent of denomination or theology, country or culture, leadership style, size, or ministry model.

The key question was: *"What church growth principles are true, regardless of culture and theological persuasion?"*

As of today, more than 90,000 Surveys have been completed worldwide, confirming the reliability and validity of the original research and that there are indeed universal God-given principles that can be applied to the unique issues in every local church.

6.2 The Quality Characteristics: a framework for healthy growth

The research revealed a framework of *eight Quality Characteristics* that were critical components of the life of healthy, growing churches. All were present and none could be missing. They were:

- **Empowering** Leadership
- **Gift-based** Ministry
- **Passionate** Spirituality
- **Effective** Structures
- **Inspiring** Worship Service
- **Holistic** Small Groups
- **Need-oriented** Evangelism
- **Loving** Relationships

The most significant finding was that the vital ingredient of each characteristic of quality was the adjective. For instance, take leadership: it was not visionary leadership, or pastoral leadership, or decisive leadership which was the chief contributor to long term healthy growth but *empowering* leadership. That is, the principal contributor to healthy growth by leadership was the degree to which leaders empowered their people to keep growing toward greater spiritual maturity and contributing to Kingdom growth. The same emphasis applies for the other seven quality characteristics.

NCD is writing books about each of the 8 Quality Characteristics. See section 11 for descriptions of these books and accompanying resources.

6.3 The six growth forces: putting the “natural” into church development

NCD has shown that what differentiates healthy, growing churches from those in decline or stagnant is not just high quality in the eight areas, but their application of six *natural growth principles* to church life so that the church functions more like an organism than a spiritual organization. Six growth forces were identified in the research:

- **Interdependence** – all parts of the church know the impact on other parts of what they do and ensure that such impact is always positive for the sake of long term growth.
- **Multiplication** – every part of the church is looking to pass on God’s blessings and reproduce itself, including the church as a whole.
- **Energy Transformation** –the church’s energy and resources are continually assessed, harnessed and directed towards achieving its long term potential, eliminating wastage.
- **Sustainability** – the church invests its resources in such a way that its various parts become self-sustaining, freeing up resources to be used elsewhere.
- **Symbiosis** – diverse parts of the church are encouraged to work together in synergistic “win-win” relationships.
- **Fruitfulness** – all areas of church life are regularly assessed to ensure they are continuing to contribute to the overall healthy growth of the church as an organism.

The leaders of churches that are healthy, or becoming increasingly healthy, may or may not be aware that these principles are at work in the life of the church, they may simply be employing these principles intuitively. They may use other names for these principles, or not name them at all, but they are nonetheless employing them.

The higher the health of the church, the greater the degree to which these principles are at work. This is encouraging for two reasons: first, it shows that God is entirely consistent in the way He stewards His creation, enabling churches to grow as organisms in the same way as He brings about the growth of other organisms; secondly, to identify these principles makes it possible to understand and apply them as part of partnering with God to grow the church.

It should come as no surprise that these principles are thoroughly biblical. The teaching is direct in John 15 where Jesus speaks about "fruitfulness." We see the principles foundational to the message, such as "multiplication" in the Great Commission in Matthew 28.

For church leadership, therefore, understanding and applying these principles consistently until they become a natural part of the "way of life" of the church is essential. They are a key to releasing 'all by itself' growth.

7. The NCD Survey

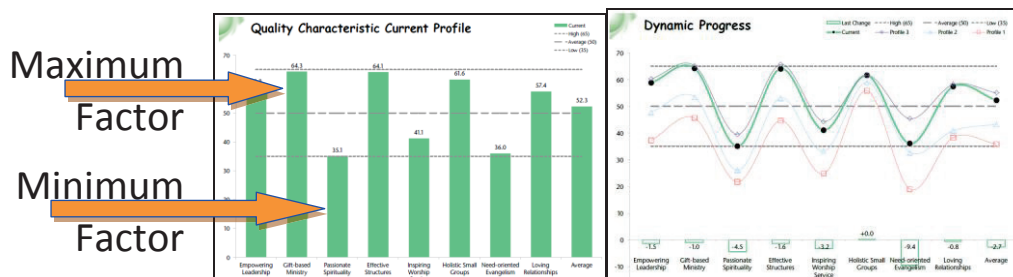
7.1 A regular accurate "snapshot" of your church's health

The international research was used as a foundation for developing the NCD Survey which gives local churches an accurate annual profile of their health. The Survey is based on:

- an internationally-validated, user-friendly questionnaire completed by thirty (30) congregational members chosen according to specific criteria;
- an algorithm arising from the original research program; and
- a statistical standardization which measures the church against other Canadian churches to provide objectivity.

The Survey profile gives a rating for each Quality Characteristic, and it holds a wealth of information about:

- relative strengths and weaknesses of the Quality Characteristics;
- the potential interrelationships between various Quality Characteristics ("Why is Holistic Small Groups high but Loving Relationships low?");
- the trends of different Quality Characteristics from Survey to Survey; and
- most importantly, the "Minimum Factor", the principal starting point for discussion, analysis, planning and action.



7.2 The Minimum Factor

The strategy to improve the health of the church is simplicity itself – work at improving the health of the Quality Characteristic that is least developed. Christian Schwarz calls this the Minimum Factor. Since all eight Quality Characteristics are essential to healthy growth, it makes sense to address the lowest characteristic, the part of the body making the least contribution to its overall health and growth. It is the most strategic use of energy and resources to maximize growth potential.

Taking action to address the Minimum Factor brings changes to the church's health. The succeeding Survey reveals the extent of such change on all eight Quality Characteristics, that is, the overall health of the church. The new Minimum Factor reflects the area most needing attention at the new level of health. And so it goes with each successive Survey. This ensures leaders stay focused on what is currently most important for long term healthy growth.

More specifically, this strategy is about identifying the barriers hindering "all by itself" growth for that Minimum Factor and then taking steps to remove them, just as the farmer does in the Parable of the Growing Seed. This approach acknowledges that each church is a unique organism with a unique growth path and a unique set of emerging barriers as it grows, each requiring a unique and timely response.

To focus continuously on successive Minimum Factors as they emerge with each new Survey does not mean an abandonment of the church's strengths. On the contrary, NCD recognizes the vital importance of leveraging the church's strengths to help address areas of weakness.

8. Of Cycles and Spirals

8.1 Linear versus cyclical thinking

So much of what we do in the Western world, and therefore the Western Church, is to think in linear ways. Everyone knows the standard approach to planning: know where you are, decide where you want to be, then put a plan in place to get there. It's always about getting from A to B. But is it?

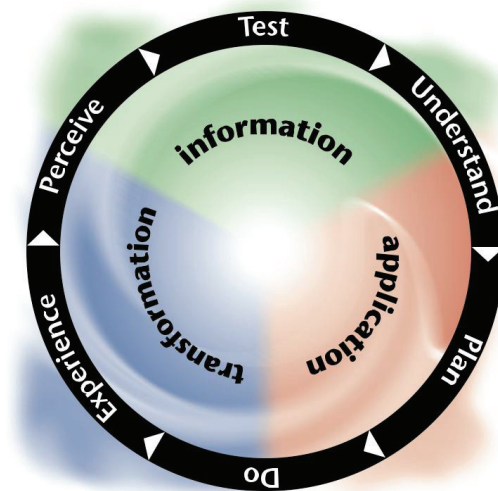
The world that God created naturally operates in cycles. It is the natural order of all growing things. We acknowledge this without even thinking twice about it. The cycle of life is something we take for granted.

Cycles are part of the everyday life of churches. The "church year" is but one example. The issue is that very few church leaders pursue the growth of their church in a systematic cyclical way. Yet adopting a cyclical approach is the most effective way to address issues of life, health and growth. Experience has shown that farmers and others whose lives are largely influenced by the forces of nature intuitively understand the power of the cyclical approach to life whereas those from more urban settings find it harder to grasp.

8.2 The NCD Cycle

The NCD Cycle is the foundational tool for undertaking the NCD process of addressing each Minimum Factor as it arises. It is more fully explained in **The NCD Cycle Manual** available online as a free download at the NCD Canada web-site. The following can be said by way of introduction:

- It grounds the process of growing a church in the essential nature of God revealed to us in Trinity (represented by the three colours).
- It encourages the pursuit of deeper partnership with God in growing His Kingdom.
- It challenges leaders to pursue “increasing fruitfulness” in their ministry.
- It binds the processes to Scripture by laying a biblical foundation for each cycle phase.
- It raises the bar for church activity by settling for nothing less than ongoing transformation.
- It offers the possibility of practical application to every part of, and person in, church life.



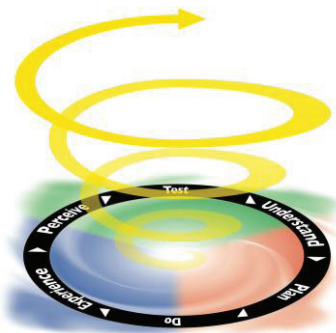
The most natural starting point for using the Cycle is to see the annual NCD Survey as the major part of the “Test” phase. This helps match the cycle to the annual church calendar, with its normal processes of review, visioning, programs, holidays, etc.

It is not hard to introduce The Cycle. Every church leader is *already* using the Cycle phases to some degree: perceiving how church life is going, testing those perceptions, developing greater understanding, planning, taking action, and seeing the resultant impact on the experiences in the church. Consistently working through the Cycle brings greater balance to the process which contributes to healthier outcomes.

8.3 Turning the cycle into a spiral

No church, whether it works consistently on addressing current health issues or not, ends up in the same place at the beginning of each year. All activity in church life is contributing in some way to the long term healthy growth of the church, or not. It may come as a surprise to church leaders but there is no such thing as a “plateau” – right now seeds are being planted in your church which will deliver future fruitfulness or fruitlessness, growth or decline, health or sickness. It is unwise to assume that decisions, actions and activity taken to address issues in the past will produce the same results in future, even if applied to what appear to be the same issues. In fact an entirely different response might be required.

This reality is represented by the NCD Spiral, which is in effect a three dimensional view of the Cycle. In one sense, the NCD Spiral represents the changing health of every church. While a church may “begin again” each year, it will always begin from a new place on the spiral, either healthier (up the spiral) or less healthy (down the spiral).



More specifically, the spiral represents the fact that every time a church undertakes the Cycle, each of the six phases will differ from their counterpart in the previous Cycle because the church's health has changed, bringing new issues and dynamics. If the church is increasing in health, perceptions of where God is at work are sharper, the testing process more focused, understanding greater, planning tighter, actions more effective – all contributing to new experiences of God at work. At its heart, the spiral is about a practical ongoing process that progressively increases the Kingdom fruitfulness of everyone in church life, especially leaders.

8.4 A challenge to become increasingly fruitful

Engagement with NCD principles and processes highlights the fact that continuously growing the local church to greater health is serious business, particularly for its leaders. Fortunately God's call is first to "partnership" not to "performance". And it is the depth of that partnership which determines a leader's fruitfulness. That is why NCD is so strongly focused on growing that partnership in the practical processes of everyday church life.

Experience has taught us over the years that many leaders face one or more of the following hurdles when approaching NCD for the first time:

- They worry about knowing the state of their church's health, or believe they already do
- They mistake being frantically busy for effectiveness
- They see their own spiritual growth as distinct from that of their church
- They are satisfied measuring "success" in terms of quantity (numbers of people, financial giving, amount of activity) not quality (spiritual health and growth)
- They tend to focus on short-term programs and quick-fixes rather than a long-term process calling for discipline and wisdom.

All of these issues have a bearing on fruitfulness. In John 15, Jesus calls on us to contemplate seriously what it means to be fruitful. He poses the following challenges:

- We are all called to lead fruitful lives (v15:16a)
- We are to bear lasting fruit, i.e., fruit bearing long term results for the Kingdom (v15:16b)
- We should aim for more fruit rather than less because it brings glory to God (v15:8)
- We need to know in very concrete terms if we are bearing fruit because fruitlessness is not an acceptable option (v15:2a, 6)
- We must understand that in partnering with God, He desires to help us, expecting us to become *increasingly* fruitful as time passes (v15:2b). This is not achieved without effort on our part.

There is a strong growth dynamic evident in this passage, using the organic metaphor of the Gardener, the Vine and the branches. Ongoing healthy growth resulting in increasing fruitfulness is expected. It challenges all who are called to partner with God in leading their church to grow.

NCD offers the principles and processes which encourage increasing fruitfulness in practical ways.

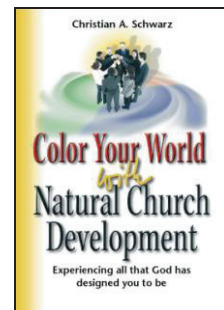
9. Commencing the NCD process

9.1 Read the foundational resources

You have already commenced the NCD process by beginning to deal with the issues raised in this introduction. The next step is to read the foundational NCD resources. There are many, but we would recommend that as a church leader, you begin with just two, both written by Christian A. Schwarz, the founder and leader of NCD International.

Color Your World with Natural Church Development – published in 2005, this book explains the Quality Characteristics, growth forces, Trinitarian Compass, some of the NCD tools including the NCD Survey, and the impact of NCD on churches internationally over the past ten years.

The ABCs of Natural Church Development – this small booklet of 28 pages is ideal for introducing some of the main concepts to your congregation. It asks why church growth can seem so hard, then looks at the eight Quality Characteristics, the Minimum Factor approach, and “all by itself” growth. It’s a fun read.



You can read more about these resources and other books and tests created around most of the eight Quality Characteristics ncdamerica.org.

9.2 When to conduct the first NCD Survey

Christian Schwarz says that there are no pre-conditions to conducting a Survey. Every church can get a "health check" and begin to work on the most important issues affecting its health whenever it chooses.

Having said that, experience suggests it is helpful to consider the following issues. They do not disqualify a church from conducting a Survey. It is solely about timing and whether the leadership is able to devote sufficient attention to working consistently through the cycle process and address the issues in the Survey. You may wish to discuss them with your leadership before deciding finally when to conduct your first Survey.

- Is the church currently launching significant new programs or building new facilities, activities which are consuming all available energy in the church?
- Is the leadership at the point of seeking new vision or direction, or questioning the fruitfulness of current approaches?
- Is there a time of the year when doing a Survey naturally fits in? If, for example, you do your visioning and planning over the summer vacation, you may want to do the Survey in the March to May period, giving time to obtain the results and get congregational feedback before everyone heads away. Alternatively, you may do the Survey in the Fall when people are fresh and enthusiastic and wanting to engage with the issues.



- Are you going through leadership change, whether it be the senior leader or others in the church? You may wish to delay the Survey two or three months until the new leader is in place. (Many churches find that once they have started the Cycle process, it helps to keep doing the Survey through times when there is no senior leader because it provides continuity and keeps them focused on the key issues.)
- Are there any significant crises currently occupying the church's leadership? It may be wise to address these first as they often take a lot of time and energy.
- Does the leadership of the church understand that conducting the NCD Survey is not a "one off" program but the start of a long term process of continuous improvement and addressing key health issues?
- More importantly, is there energy and enthusiasm for doing what it takes to grow the church, because NCD will not "do the growing" for those who have no real interest or commitment?

10. How to succeed with NCD

10.1 Working with a certified NCD coach

- As NCD has been employed in over 45,000 churches in the USA we have learned that there is tremendous value in working with a fully trained and certified NCD coach.
- 85% of churches who work with a coach for two NCD cycles experience a measurable increase in church health and attendance.
- One of the best practices, that Andy uses with churches, is to follow the simple 5 step process over a 9 month period of time.
 - Step 1: Preparation
 - Step 2: Diagnosis
 - Step 3: Plan
 - Step 4: Implementation
 - Step 5: Evaluation
- Working with a coach through the five-step process ensures that everything considered for the future is Spirit led, well thought out, and covered in much prayer.
- To learn more about working with a certified NCD coach contact Andy at info@andyismycoach.com.