

Natural Church Development: One Congregation's Story by Tom Acton

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Many of our readers have heard of NCD: Natural Church Development. The NCD process aims to increase church effectiveness through improved church health, strengthening congregations as they live out their God-pleasing vision, mission, and growth. But can NCD help a congregation break through seemingly insurmountable barriers? Does it ever really work?

In a medium-size town in the upper Midwest, there is a fine Lutheran congregation. A dedicated, well-respected pastor serves the 80 or so people that regularly attend worship. The building, a somewhat unique design from the 1970's, at one time served the membership well. In fact, shortly after construction, two mobile classrooms were added to the site for a growing Sunday School. In recent years, though, the buildings are beginning to show their age. Two faithful trustees of 20+ years are becoming discouraged with the lack of help with the needed painting, repairs and other chores.

The "new" pastor (he has only served them for six years) is finding it more and more difficult to attend meetings, because nothing seems to be accomplished, and to prepare sermons, as he is beginning to question his own effectiveness. He has considered asking his District President to place him on a call list.

Out of desperation, Pastor seeks a program to generate constructive energy. He notices Natural Church Development (NCD) in the district newsletter, makes a phone call and connects with an NCD coach. A few weeks later, the coach introduces the congregation to NCD and outlines the process: a survey that does a health check-up, some analysis and a plan to raise their "minimum factor." After some encouragement, the congregation signs up for NCD with the rallying cry, "We have to do something!"

Soon the Pastor hands out surveys to 30 people. The surveys are completed and returned to the coach. Within a few days, the coach returns with the survey results. Rather than simply present results that some may not understand and whose validity may be questioned by others, the coach walks the group of leaders (the "Health Team") through visual presentations on the NCD principles. Later, he presents the results and shares the minimum factor: "Gift-Orientated Ministry."

Directing the team to three areas that lead to their particular minimum factor, the coach asks questions. To help the team focus on the first area, matching gifts to task, he asks, "How intentional are you in placing people in ministry assignments according to their spiritual gifts, and to what extent are people working outside their area of giftedness? Do you give workers job descriptions?" To focus on the second area--coaching: trained, supported, and challenged--he asks questions like, "What structures are in place to

support, train and encourage people in ministry?” Thirdly, talking about significance of service, he asked the team, “How do you affirm and celebrate the efforts of people in ministry?”

Finally, they discuss the six “biotic principles” that govern the health, vitality and longevity of living beings: multiplication, interdependence, symbiosis, multi-usage, energy transformation, and functionality. The presence or absence of these six principles reveal places of health or sickness.

During the next few months, the coach at times struggled to keep the team focused on their minimum factor. The team was strongly tempted to feel sorry for themselves, as though God would not help and there could be no improvement. Sometimes, the coach dreaded going back to that congregation; their malaise seemed to be contagious.

Eventually the coach began to see some slight indications of change as the team realized that their minimum factor described them quite accurately. Striving to set measurable, attainable goals proved to be a positive step. In fact, the term “baby steps” was used to describe this initial action. One goal was to conduct a 4-week Bible study on spiritual gifts that at least 10 people would attend. This proved successful and eventually the same study was offered twice more to even more participants. The action plan also included a recognition event for two Sunday School teachers with more than 25 years of service, and a Leadership Training Workshop for new officers.

Today, this fine, Lutheran congregation in its medium-size upper Midwest town is still served by its dedicated, well-respected pastor. But the sanctuary recently received new paint and carpet, enhanced video and audio capabilities and even a refurbished organ. Worship attendance is up 20% from the 80 or so people who attended two years ago, and new adult membership classes are scheduled twice annually. When volunteers are needed, a volunteer coordinator checks a Spiritual Gift Inventory data base on the office computer. And two Sunday School workers are proud of the plaque, pictures and letter from Pastor that they received on the day their church said thanks.

This story doesn’t end here. A second survey is scheduled to be taken soon. The team is eager to not only see what they believe will be improvements in some of the eight quality characteristics, but they can hardly wait to identify the new minimum factor and put together the next Action Plan. ■

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The eight quality characteristics addressed by NCD are:

- Inspiring Worship
- Empowering Leadership
- Gift-oriented ministry
- Passionate Spirituality

Functional Structures
Holistic Small Groups
Need-oriented Evangelism
Loving Relationships.

To find out more about NCD, contact the Center for U.S. Missions at office@centerforusmission.org or 949-854-8002 x1780.