

The Eight Quality Characteristics of Natural Church Development

Effective Structures

The Church is the living Body of Christ. Like all healthy organisms, it requires numerous systems which work together to fulfill its intended purpose. Often churches have to keep in mind a multitude of complex forms and regulations which may have been useful at the time they were instituted, but which lost their functionality over time. Each must be evaluated regularly to determine if it is still the best way to accomplish the intended purpose.

In order to develop effective structures, several things have to be looked at: "Who are you? Where are you going? How will you get there? Are you there yet? What are you doing to get where we want to go? Who is going to do it, and what are they supposed to do?"

Empowering Leadership

Effective leadership begins with an intimate relationship with God, resulting in Christ-like character and a clear sense of God's calling for leaders' lives. As this base of spiritual maturity increases, effective pastors and leaders multiply, guide, empower and equip disciples to realize their full potential in Christ and work together to accomplish God's vision.

Leaders of growing churches concentrate on empowering other Christians for ministry. They do not use lay workers as "helpers" in attaining their own goals and fulfilling their own visions. Rather, they invert the pyramid of authority so that the leader assists Christians to attain the spiritual potential God has for them. These pastors equip, support, motivate, and mentor individuals, enabling them to become all that God wants them to be.

Gift-based Ministry

The Holy Spirit sovereignly gives to every Christian spiritual gift(s) for the building of God's kingdom. Church leaders have the responsibility to help believers discover, develop and exercise their gifts in appropriate ministries so that the body of Christ "grows and builds itself up in love."

The gift-based 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. When Christians serve in their area of giftedness, they generally function less in their own strength and more in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus ordinary people can accomplish the extraordinary!

Holistic Small Groups

Holistic small groups are disciple-making communities which endeavor to reach the unchurched, meet individual needs, develop each person according to their God-given gifts and raise leaders to sustain the growth of the church. Like healthy body cells, holistic small groups are designed to grow and multiply.

Research has shown that continuous multiplication of small groups is a universal church growth principle. It has also shown what life in these small groups should be like if they are to have a positive effect on both quality and numerical growth within a church. They must be holistic groups, which go beyond just discussing Bible passages to applying its message to daily life. In these groups, members are able to bring up those issues and questions that are immediate personal concerns.

Inspiring Worship

Inspiring worship is a personal and corporate encounter with the living God. Both personal and corporate worship must be infused with the presence of God resulting in times of joyous exultation and times of quiet reverence. Inspiring worship is not driven by a particular style or ministry focus group, but rather, the shared experience of God's awesome presence.

The word "inspiring" means an inspiredness which comes from the Spirit of God. Whenever the Holy Spirit is truly at work (and His presence is not merely presumed), He will have a concrete effect upon the way a worship service is conducted including the atmosphere of the gathering. People attending truly "inspired" services typically indicate that "going to church is fun."

Loving Relationships

Loving relationships are the heart of a healthy, growing church. Jesus said people will know we are His disciples by our love. Practical demonstration of love builds authentic Christian community and brings others into God's kingdom.

NCD research indicates that there is a highly significant relationship between the ability of a church to demonstrate love and its long-term growth potential. Growing churches possess on the average a measurably higher "love quotient" than stagnant or declining churches.

It can be shown that there is a significant connection between "laughter in the church" and that church's qualitative and numerical growth.

Need-oriented Evangelism

Need-oriented evangelism intentionally cultivates relationships with pre-Christian people so they can become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ who are actively participating within the life of the church and community. Using appropriate ministries and authentic relationships, believers can guide others into the family of God.

It is the task of every Christian to use his or her gifts to serve non-Christians with whom one has a personal relationship, to see to it that they hear the gospel, and to encourage contact with the local church. The key to church growth is for the local congregation to focus its evangelistic efforts on the questions and needs of non-Christians. This "need-oriented" approach is different from "manipulative programs" where pressure on non-Christians must compensate for the lack of need-orientation.

Passionate Spirituality

Effective ministry flows out of a passionate spirituality. Spiritual intimacy leads to a strong conviction that God will act in powerful ways. A godly vision can only be accomplished through an optimistic faith which views obstacles as opportunities and turns defeats into victories.

The nature of this quality characteristic becomes evident by examining the prayer life of Christians who take the NCD survey. While the amount of time (quantity) a Christian spends in prayer plays only a minor role with regard to the quality and growth of a church, whether prayer is viewed as an "inspiring experience" or not has a significant relationship to the quality and quantity of the church. Similar results were found with respect to personal use of the Bible and other factors affecting personal spirituality.

The quality characteristic "passionate spirituality" demonstrates the theological core of the matter in church growth: the life of faith is a genuine relationship with Jesus Christ.