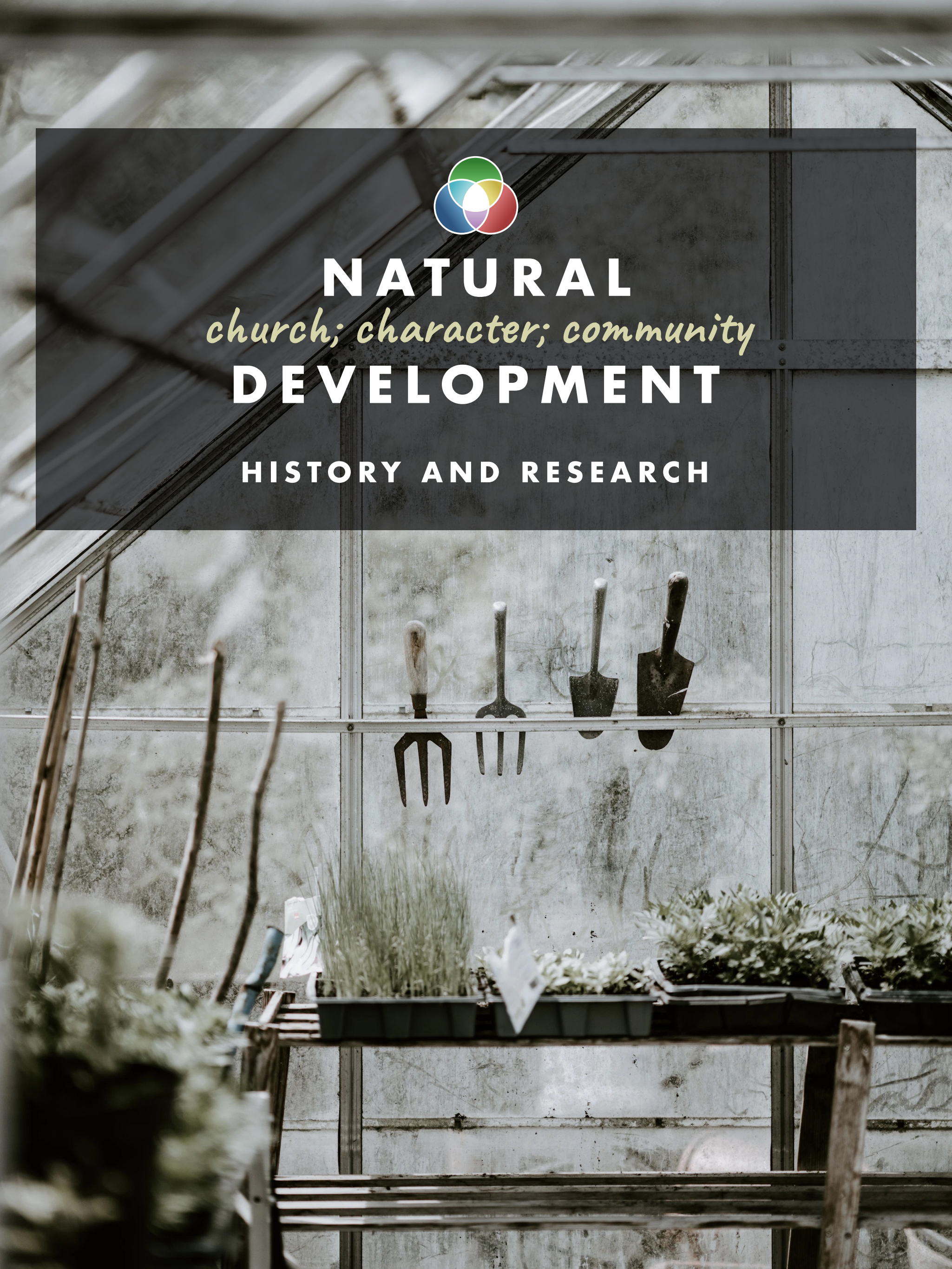




NATURAL
church; character; community
DEVELOPMENT
HISTORY AND RESEARCH





Natural Church/Character/Community Development (NCD) is a principle-oriented way of approaching the Christian life that strives to integrate biblical standards and empirical learnings. The growth principles identified through international research and communicated in the NCD books can be applied both by individuals (church members, active believers, nominal Christians, non-Christians) and at a corporate level (households, local churches, small groups, denominations, para-church organizations, etc.).

NCD has developed an extensive toolbox targeted at helping people relate the principles to their specific contexts and needs. All tools of Natural Church/Character/Community Development are focused on increasing the quality of the Christian life. NCD research indicates that this investment in quality, i.e. increasing health in individuals, is key to activating quantitative growth, i.e. increase of churches and Christianity as a whole (Schwarz 2006).

The research of NCD encompasses data from over 90,000 Christian congregations worldwide including 2.5 million people in 86 countries. Increasingly, it also includes data from non-Christians exploring what it means to develop their character and community in line with the principles of the God's Kingdom.

1. ORIGINS

- 1.1. 1978-1986: Initial model-oriented attempts explored church growth patterns.
- 1.2. 1987-1995: Research focused on assessing church health through surveys and testing tools.
- 1.3. 1996: Official launch of Natural Church Development.
- 1.4. 1997-2014: Phases NCD 1.0 and 2.0 introduced foundational tools and refined methodologies.
- 1.5. 2015 and Beyond (NCD 3.0): Modern updates incorporated digital tools and new learning models to expand accessibility and relevance.

2. LEADERSHIP

Who we are and what we are looking toward.

3. RESEARCH

- 3.1. The Hallmarks of NCD Research
 1. What can be expected from NCD research—and what not
 2. Goals of the research
 3. Scope of the research
 4. The Church Survey as part of an overall theory
 5. In search of universal principles
 6. Synthesizing empirical and theological perspectives
 7. Both diagnosis and therapy
 8. Making the invisible visible
 9. Individual and corporate applications
 10. The hypothetical causality of quality and quantity
 11. Language-based and national normations
 12. Accessibility of data
- 3.2. NCD Church Survey
 1. Practical procedures
 2. The necessity of an external criterion
 3. The quality index
 4. Minimum factor theory
- 3.3. Different Stages in the Development of the Surveys
 1. Explorative studies in pre-test phase
 2. First international study and repeat tests
 3. Secondary studies
 4. Detailed research through personal eTests

4. RESULTS

- 4.1. Qualitative increase
- 4.2. Quantitative increase

- 4.3. Growing mission-mindedness
- 4.4. Denominational reform processes

5. PHILOSOPHY

NCD emphasises principles over rigid models, ensuring its applicability across cultures, denominations, and contexts. It is built on principles that transcend specific models.

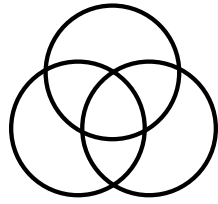
6. STRATEGY

- 6.1. Eight quality characteristics
- 6.2. Bi-polar paradigm
- 6.3. Six growth forces
- 6.4. Minimum factor
- 6.5. Trinitarian Compass
- 6.6. God's energy
- 6.7. NCD Cycle

7. THEOLOGY

By focusing on shared Christian values, NCD unites believers around a common goal: fostering healthy, vibrant communities of faith.

8. REFERENCES



ORIGINS

While the publication of the book, *Natural Church Development* in 1996, is generally considered the launch of Natural Church Development as a worldwide movement, the research presented in that book and the theory developed through observing church life and evaluating the insights in terms of biblical criteria, has a longer history.

FIRST MODEL-ORIENTED ATTEMPTS (1978-1986)

In the late 1970s, Fritz Schwarz, a Lutheran superintendent of the church district of Herne (Germany), developed a missional program targeted at (a) helping nominal church members experience a spiritual transformation through a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, (b) forming communities of committed believers within the context of the Lutheran church, and (c) empowering them to share what they have received by outreach to their neighborhood (Schwarz/Schwarz/Sudbrack 1979-1981). This program, which had been strongly inspired by the writings of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, emphasized integrating the dimensions of evangelism and social service, indicated by many activities focused on ministry to the marginalized and the Third World.

Two books in this early phase that have been authored by Fritz and Christian A. Schwarz, dealt exclusively with the societal and political impact of discipleship and church life. The first one, *Program of a New Life Style* (Schwarz/Schwarz 1981), targeted topics such as ecology, global social justice, ministry to the poor, and a simple personal life style, while the second one, *The Lie of Peace* (Schwarz/Schwarz 1982), addressed topics like armament, non-violent resistance, and peace.

Even if the authors rejected the label "model" for their approach, their program functioned as a model for many congregations throughout Germany, primarily in the context of the Lutheran church. In 1984, Fritz and Christian A. Schwarz co-authored their *Theology of Church Development* (Schwarz/Schwarz 1984) which presented the theological paradigm behind the practical work. At the time of publishing that book, there had not yet been any interaction with the American church growth movement (as pioneered by Donald A. McGavran and C. Peter Wagner). In the years to follow, Schwarz developed a relationship with McGavran in which they explored the elements that were potentially missing in the predominant church growth paradigm of the day.

INITIAL RESEARCH AND ASSESSMENT TOOLS (1987 - 1995)

In 1986, Christian A. Schwarz spent a sabbatical in the U.S.A., and studied church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary. From a critical evaluation of the church growth literature that was available at that time, together with the paradigm that had been developed in Germany, he came up with a first provisional list of about 300 items that may characterize growing churches. He developed a survey for churches in German-speaking Europe to find out, which of these items had a correlation with numerical growth, and which not. This resulted in the development of a new survey that was tested in 120 churches in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The results were published in the book, *Practice of Church Development* (Schwarz 1987). At that time, the hypothesis was that there are seven essential qualities of healthy churches.

After further evaluation of churches that worked with the original assessment tool, a new generation of that tool was made available to the public in 1991. The book *The Church Test* (Schwarz 1991) which described the overall approach, featured for the first time what was later called the six growth forces, which originated from empirical discoveries and evaluating them both in the light of Scripture and ecological research, especially by the German biochemist Frederic Vester (Vester 1980).

In 1989, Christian A. Schwarz founded the Institute for Church Development, which was later renamed Institute for Natural Church Development. In 1994, the organizational psychologist Christoph Schalk joined the Institute's team. Under his supervision, 1000 churches in 32 countries were researched according to a revised methodology, applying strict standards in terms of objectivity, validity, and reliability (Schwarz/Schalk 1998, pages 229-234).

LAUNCH OF NATURAL CHURCH DEVELOPMENT (1996)

In October of 1996, the first edition of the book *Natural Church Development* (Schwarz 2006) was published simultaneously in ten different language editions (British English, Croatian, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, U.S. English). This was the first time that the term "Natural Church Development" was used. Meanwhile, the book has been published in many more languages, including Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, Czech, Estonian, Finnish, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Norwegian, Polish, Romanian, Swedish, Tamil, Thai, and Ukrainian.

At that time, the Institute for Natural Church Development started to look for NCD National Partners, who help support churches in their respective language areas by training, coaching, and practical tools.

NCD 1.0 (1997-2001)

The first generation of tools (NCD 1.0), targeted the church as a whole. The major resources in this phase were the books, *Natural Church Development*, *Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development*, and the *NCD Church Survey*. In this phase, NCD was a popular topic especially among pastors and denominational leaders.

NCD 2.0 (2002-2014)

In the second generation of NCD (NCD 2.0), the target group was expanded by emphasizing that church development is intrinsically tied to people development, and that healthy churches are made up of healthy Christians. This theme is central to the book *Color Your World with Natural Church Development* and the “3 Color Series” published by NCD Discipleship Resources. This approach gained traction at the grassroots level with the introduction of the Trinitarian Compass, a theological paradigm that formed the foundation of all subsequent NCD tools. The Compass demonstrated how developing spiritual health connects to people’s heads, hands, and hearts, first introduced in *The Threefold Art of Experiencing God* (Schwarz 1999b). In 2004, Adam Johnstone became the co-director of NCD. During this period, he played a pivotal role in integrating the principles of Natural Church Development into what later will be referred to as Natural Character Development. Initially starting in an assistant role, his involvement grew into a collaborative effort, and by the end of 2014, he assumed primary responsibility for the initiative.

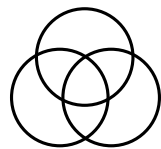
NCD 3.0 (STARTING 2015)

Driven by Adam Johnstone, the latest phase in the development of NCD resources is marked by the introduction of a comprehensive range of web-based tools designed to support personal and corporate growth. The vision behind this stage of development has been to ensure that NCD meets the needs of individuals and communities alike. This new approach enables individuals, who may or may not have any formal role within a community, to immediately apply what is most relevant to them and to continuously monitor their progress and setbacks through online evaluation tools. A key component of this strategy is a new generation of eTests addressing the topics of Empowerment, Gift-activation, Passion, Effectiveness, Inspiration, Community, Wholeness, and Love, each designed to unlock and activate God-given resources

within individuals. This emphasis on immediate application is further strengthened by the discovery of the New Testament concept of God's energy (Schwarz 2020a).

In summary, this third phase has been an expansion into "NCD in the Everyday." To mark its 20th anniversary in July 2016, NCD International redefined the "C" in NCD to encompass a threefold meaning: "character," "community," and "church," recognising the interconnection of these elements in fostering holistic development.

In 2024, Adam became Executive Director of NCD, a role that recognises his pivotal contributions to the development and expansion of the NCD movement. In this new capacity, he continues to drive the vision and strategic direction of NCD, overseeing its global impact and ensuring that the principles of NCD, in all their fullness, are effectively integrated and applied across diverse contexts. As Adam takes on this leadership role, Christian remains a mentor to the team, sharing his deep passion and wisdom while also pursuing vital research and development to support the ongoing growth of the NCD ministry. The next phase in development of NCD is underway, laying the groundwork for a future where Natural Community Development reaches its full potential helping to transform whole communities for generations to come.



LEADERSHIP

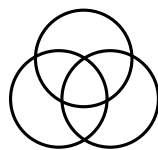
The leadership of NCD Life operates as a collaborative, global network guided by key individuals who embody its principles and vision for holistic growth. It functions as a network that is connected to individual leaders and organizations that are committed to support people in their area of responsibility.

Key Leadership Highlights:

1. **Christian A. Schwarz:** The founder of NCD and the visionary behind its principles and tools. His extensive research, writings, and teachings laid the foundation for the NCD movement and its global influence. Christian continues to serve as a mentor and thought leader, shaping the theological and methodological framework of NCD.
2. **Adam Johnstone:** In 2024, Adam was appointed Executive Director of NCD, recognising his instrumental role in expanding the movement, particularly through the integration of Natural Character Development and now into Natural

Community Development. His leadership focuses on driving the future of NCD, connecting the global NCD community, and fostering innovation in its tools and strategies.

3. **NCD.Life:** The NCD.Life team is a global group of leaders dedicated to advancing the principles of Natural Church Development, Natural Character Development, and Natural Community Development. They provide the backbone of the organisation, ensuring the vision of NCD is effectively implemented through research, resources, training, and global collaboration, while equipping others to carry the mission forward.
4. **Global Collaboration:** NCD is supported by a network of leaders across various countries, including national partners, trainers, and practitioners, who adapt NCD principles to their cultural contexts while maintaining its core vision. This decentralised leadership model ensures that the movement remains adaptable, culturally relevant, and effective in diverse settings.



RESEARCH

A chief characteristic of the NCD paradigm is that all resources are developed on the background of extensive international research that is conducted according to strict standards in terms of objectivity, validity, and reliability (Schwarz/Schalk 1998, pages 229-234). This applies both to the NCD Church Survey and to the various eTests that are integrated in the books of the NCD Discipleship Resources series. By 2016, NCD International had collected data from more than 70,000 churches in 84 countries, which enable previously inaccessible insights into the relationship between quality and quantitative growth. In his research report, Christoph Schalk illustrates with reference to a small number of churches which research methods have been applied in the development of the NCD Church Survey (Schalk 1999). By 2025, the research of NCD encompasses data from over 90,000 Christian congregations worldwide including 2.5 million people in 86 countries. Increasingly, it also includes data from non-Christians exploring what it means to develop their character and community in line with the principles of God's Kingdom.

3.1 THE HALLMARKS OF NCD RESEARCH

WHAT CAN BE EXPECTED FROM NCD RESEARCH — AND WHAT NOT.

In order to understand the unique character of the NCD data, it is important to recognize that the majority of it has been derived from two different kinds of studies:

First, an extensive primary study that, in its initial phase, aimed at identifying universally valid characteristics of growing churches (in NCD language, “principles”), and, in its second phase, on developing a support structure to help churches of the most diverse backgrounds apply these principles in order to experience qualitative and quantitative growth.

Second, a wide scope of secondary studies that are based on the data provided by the primary study, benefiting from the fact that the primary study enabled, in its second phase, an ongoing collection of new data and the unique possibility of screening long-term developments. The possibility of relating different kinds of observations to different quality levels of church, character and community enables empirical insights into the state of Christianity and its impact that are not supplied by other research agencies.

What NCD research is not targeted at.

Since the NCD Church and Character Surveys have been designed as psychometric tests, the data collected by NCD is not the most ideal source when a person is interested in the following categories of information:

- **Demographic data**, e.g., How many churches are there in a given country? How many new churches have been planted within the past twelve months? What is the average growth rate of Christianity worldwide?
- **Contextual data**, i.e., What is the educational level of the church members? What is the influence of migration patterns on a given church? What trends in society are favorable/unfavorable for Christianity?

What NCD research reveals

However, the data collected by NCD is ideal when a person is interested in some of the following categories of information:

- **Principles that apply universally**, i.e., What are the characteristics of all healthy churches and disciples, regardless of culture, spiritual tradition, or church size? How can we be sure that the methods suggested by some groups will actually work in our own situation? What are strengths/weaknesses of specific cultures in terms of applying principles of church and character development?

- **Data related to church quality and discipleship quality**, i.e., What growth patterns can be expected of a church representing a given quality level? How can a tendency to church decline be turned around? Which denominations or movements display higher quality than others? What is uniquely holding each individual disciple back from experiencing a greater life of freedom, maturity and responsibility?
- **Analysis of one's own situation**: What are the strengths and weaknesses of our local church? What are my own personal strengths and weaknesses? What are the strengths and weaknesses of our whole denomination/movement?
- **Identification of the critical factors blocking growth**, i.e., What areas do we tend to be blind to? Which single measure could have the greatest strategic impact in our situation? What should be the next step in our development?
- **Ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of one's efforts**, i.e., How can we verify if our work in a specific area has been effective? What should be improved in this realm in the future? What have emerged as new problem areas, while the overall quality has been increasing?
- **Results that can realistically be expected from a change process**, i.e., How many additional people can our church expect to attract if we increase our quality by 10 points? How will our financial situation look if we successfully develop the quality of the church? What new ministries can we expect to launch when we strategically invest in the heads, hands, and hearts of our people?
- **Breaking down organizational change to character development**, i.e., What would be my most effective contribution to God's kingdom? How can I personally best invest my energy to help my church overcome its present minimum factor? What kind of church program could supply the ideal environment to my personal growth needs?
- **Information that helps you formulate and pursue your own goals**, i.e., How can we identify the human resources needed in order to reach the goals defined by our leadership team? How can we become a church that is more relevant to the society around us? What are the topics that our whole denominational region should focus on?

2. GOALS OF THE RESEARCH

Studies conducted by NCD are never research for the sake of mere data collection. Rather, they are all targeted at answering practical questions. This applies both in cases of basic research geared to increased knowledge in general, and in cases of applied research geared to answering specific questions.

Focus on change processes

All NCD research is focused on supplying building blocks for change processes that make Christianity more relevant and effective in its manifold cultural contexts, understanding “church” as “salt and light of the world” (expressed in theological language) or an “agent for societal change” (expressed in sociological language). The most important goals of the different research projects of NCD are the following:

1. Identifying universal principles of church and discipleship health in contrast to mere models. In order to secure a sufficient degree of neutrality, we have chosen the criterion of numerical growth in worship attendance as an external criterion. Only those items that proved to display a worldwide positive correlation to numerical growth were used as indicators for health.
2. Developing an increasing number of assessment tools that help both individuals and churches (I) analyze their respective starting points, (II) monitor their progress, and (III) decide what needs to be done once a higher level of health has been reached.
3. Providing constant growth stimuli that motivate people to stay on track and to invest into the ongoing processes of change.
4. Tools for coaches that are committed to helping both individuals and organizations/groups.

Guiding hypotheses

Throughout all of the research phases, there have been four basic hypotheses, some of which have been directly confirmed by our research, while others had to be relativized and modified:

Hypothesis #1:

Both at individual and corporate levels, there is something like “quality” that can be measured empirically and evaluated theologically, a process in which the empirical research functions as a heuristic criterion, and the theological research, as a normative criterion.

Hypothesis #2:

It is assumed that both at the individual and corporate levels quality correlates with quantity in the sense of impacting an increasing number of people.

Hypothesis #3:

While hypothesis #2 merely assumes a correlation between quality and quantity, hypothesis #3 assumes a causal direction: The increase in quality is seen as the strategic root of quantitative increase.

Hypothesis #4:

The state of Christianity can, both qualitatively and quantitatively, substantially increase to the degree that individual disciples and whole churches focus their attention on their qualitative development.

Different interpretations possible

In research projects of this kind, the collection of raw data and the interpretation of that data must be distinguished, while being aware of the fact that such a distinction is never achievable in any puristic way. The initial hypotheses we start the process with are already the result of a certain view (“interpretation”) of reality, and this interpretation determines the very questions that we ask or don’t ask. On the basis of the same raw data it is possible to come up with different interpretations and thus, different forms of implementation.

The goal of NCD is not only to provide raw data, but also interpretations that fulfil two criteria:

First, they make most sense, empirically and theologically, when being compared with other interpretative constructs.

Second, they can serve as helpful points of orientation within the needed processes of change

3. SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

While the original research, as documented in the book *Natural Church Development*, was conducted in about 1000 churches from 32 countries, the present files include data from 90,000 churches, encompassing 265 million individual responses provided by 2.5 million people in 86 countries from more than 100 denominations.

Apart from this data that derived from the NCD Church Survey, the data deriving from the various eTests targeted at the growth of individuals in different areas of life promise to enable highly relevant insights into personal dynamics of change in the future.

Advantage of high numbers

In other words, compared to the original NCD research, our present database is more than 90 times as large. However, for many considerations—e.g., the accuracy of the results originally gained—this huge enhancement is less relevant than a layperson may assume. In research of this kind, you can come up with precise results based on significantly smaller samples than those that are currently accessible to us.

In most cases, the benefit of the present database is not higher accuracy in terms of the results originally gained, but enabling two research possibilities that were not available to us 30 years ago:

First, because of the increased database we now can create new subcategories to be studied. Rather than solely comparing growing with non-growing churches worldwide, as was the most important distinction in the original research, we can now zoom in to considerably smaller entities and make highly relevant observations on them, i.e., Baptist churches in the United States inside and outside of the Bible-belt, non-charismatic churches in different regions of Asia, or observations on different age groups of people who answered the questionnaire. This fine-tuning can go so far as to make precise statements about a given diocese or interdenominational movements in a specific region. In other words, the number of questions that can be answered by using data from NCD research has dramatically increased.

Second, while the original study represented cross-sectional research on the situation of churches we studied between 1994 and 1996 (usually one profile per church), the fact that many churches have done several repeat profiles throughout the past 30 years enables us to conduct longitudinal studies, through which we can precisely monitor the developments

over time and evaluate the effects of specific interventions, such as working on one's minimum factor or applying specific tools for church development.

Disadvantages of the new database

In spite of the new possibilities that the enlarged database provides, for some topics, the data deriving from the original study is still more relevant. In particular, this applies if a user is interested in observations that are representative of worldwide Christianity. This difference is due to the different kind of data selection in the two phases of research:

- As far as the initial 1000 churches are concerned, we applied the principle of “stratified random sampling,” i.e., we selected the churches according to criteria targeted at guaranteeing a representation of a wide scope of different kinds of churches, and within these different categories, we strove for random sampling. For none of these churches the decision to launch an NCD process played any role, since NCD as a technical term for a specific approach to ministry did not exist at that time.
- For churches researched beyond the initial 1000, the external selection was substituted by self-selection, i.e., the leadership of a given church decides if they want to take an NCD Profile (while the 30 people who fill in the actual survey are selected by stratified random sampling). In practical terms this means that today only churches with a certain degree of interest in NCD take the test. For that reason, there is a common denominator characterizing all of these churches: They made the decision to launch or intensify an NCD process, even if with strongly varying degrees of commitment or perseverance (indicated by different progress levels).

The consequences of these different forms of selection are far-reaching. Strictly speaking, we are safe to say that the new data is representative for all churches within an NCD process. For example, it can be assumed that Lutheran churches among the initial sample of 1000 churches represent the “typical Lutheran church” in a given country more precisely than the far higher number of Lutheran churches in the sample presently available to us.

The decision of churches to get involved with NCD goes hand in hand with the following features:

- They have a certain problem awareness concerning their own status quo.
- They are willing to be confronted with their less favourable features (“minimum factors”) and address them.
- They don't see strategic work on church development as something that is unnecessary or even unspiritual.

- They are willing to proactively invest into a better future, and are ready to pay something of the price for that.
- They are eager to actually see changes (as indicated by repeat profiles).

While none of these five features necessarily characterizes every single church involved with NCD, it can be assumed that, on average, these features are more strongly represented in a sample of churches researched by self-selection than can be expected for other churches, including the initial 1000 churches that we researched by external selection.

Does this mean that the data within our expanded sample is more “distorted” than the initial sample? Not necessarily. It all depends on the kind of question we strive to answer when studying the data. If our interest is to make statements about the “typical” church in general, the initial file will provide more accurate data. However, if our interest is to study the dynamics of actual change processes targeted at increasing church quality, the enlarged database provides better information.

4. THE CHURCH SURVEY AS PART OF AN OVERALL THEORY

The NCD Church Survey is a building block of an approach to ministry that now encompasses “Natural Church Development”, “Natural Character Development”, and “Natural Community Development.” This approach is based on a theory that has existed in its rudimentary form from the very beginning and was revised, modified, and enhanced with every stage of research.

In need of theory

A “theory” within any endeavor of that kind (including Natural Church Development) serves the following two purposes:

First, without some sort of theoretical concept, data analysis is not possible. “Raw data” in and of itself doesn’t tell us anything, as long as the analysis is not guided by a fitting theory. Any interpretation of research results depends on hypotheses and therefore on an (at least) rudimentary “theory” from the very beginning. This initial theory is then constantly modified in light of new data and new ways of understanding them.

Second, for any research targeted at initiating processes of change, a theory is needed to develop a framework for practical implementation (“strategy”). Because of that, the theory doesn’t only have to help in the process of analyzing the data, but also in providing practical support in terms of actual change.

Whenever we are confronted with the statement, “What counts is not theory, but practice,” it must be questioned. It can be demonstrated that wrong theories result in wrong (i.e., counterproductive, ineffective, or even dangerous) practices. On the other hand it is true that a “good theory,” in and of itself, does not result in “good practices.” Both the theoretical and the practical sides have to be given equal attention. Scientifically, there is no general agreement on how theories come into existence. However, there is agreement on how they should be tested. From theories, we derive hypotheses that are quantified in such a way that they can be empirically verified or falsified. The results of that “hypothesis check” are used to draw conclusions about the accuracy of the theory, modify it, or if there should be strong negative evidence, discard it.

Ongoing development

As in all research, NCD research started with an initial theory that was, throughout the different stages of the research, constantly modified. Some of the most important modifications of the theory—when comparing the initial hypotheses with the present strategy—are the following:

- The number of “quality characteristics” of growing churches has changed throughout the process (from initially seven to eight).
- The names of the individual quality characteristics were constantly adapted to the latest research insights (for instance, the first quality characteristic was first called “goal-oriented pastor,” then “goal-oriented leadership,” and finally “empowering leadership”).
- Some items of the questionnaire were, as a result of factor analysis, assigned to a different “scale” (quality characteristic) than originally assigned.
- Many items on the initial lists were erased as their correlation with long-term numerical growth was not strong enough.
- The majority of items were repeatedly reformulated throughout the process, sometimes in the light of validity considerations (correlation to numerical growth), sometimes in the light of interdenominational considerations (being understandable by different traditions), sometimes in light of cultural considerations.
- The normation for the various languages in which the survey is available were constantly adapted to the increased knowledge derived from the growing data-base.

- With every update of the survey new items were included for research purposes, i.e., in order to find out if there may be additional factors contributing to growth that can be seen as subcategories of the existing set of quality characteristics or could form a “new” quality characteristic. (With no signs of new categories emerging, this policy was ceased in the 2005 update of the survey, as it had resulted in far-too-long lists of questions which undermined the user-friendliness of the procedure.)

These changes reflect the normal development in any scientific process. Every update of a given theory is supposed to explain all phenomena that have been explained beforehand and, in addition to it, some new discoveries that were not known or explainable before.

5. IN SEARCH OF UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES

In NCD language, those factors that can be proven to apply universally (e.g., across cultural or denominational lines), are called “principles.” It is important to understand that these principles should not be confused with laws, such as “Water freezes when it is xyz degrees or colder.” Rather, in NCD we are referring to higher or lower probabilities. A typical example of a statement derived from a principle-oriented approach is the following: “If a church reaches the quality X, the likelihood is Y that it will grow by Z percent or more.”

Items, scales, and quality index

In the NCD Church Survey, the quality level of a given church is referenced in three different ways:

1. In the form of a “quality index” that indicates the overall quality of a church, expressed in the form of a number based on a mean of 50, with a standard deviation of +/-15 (i.e., approximately 68% of all churches have a quality index between 35 and 65 points).
2. In the form of eight scales (“quality characteristics”), each of them constructed from ten to eleven different items, depending on the respective scale. These eight numbers enable a distinguishing between areas of strengths and weaknesses within a given church. In particular, they enable the identification of the so-called “minimum factor,” which is of high strategic importance in terms of church development.
3. In the form of presently 85 individual items, i.e., statements that the person filling in the survey is supposed to respond to with a five point answer scheme, indicating the level of affirmation (Likert method). Some of these items are

negatively poled to interrupt the pattern of checking everything toward the right (or left). All of these items are related to one of the eight scales mentioned above.

It is important to understand that the individual items on the survey are not intended to name the root causes of growth or decline; rather, they serve as indicators of realities that are not directly visible (the reality behind the eight scales). At the same time, the answers to the individual items, as they are displayed in the Detailed Profiles, provide valuable pieces of information in the implementation process.

Spiritual, institutional, and contextual factors

There are three categories of factors that impact on the growth or decline of churches: spiritual, institutional, and contextual factors. The 85 items on the present NCD Survey provide information on both the spiritual and institutional realms of the church. While it is true that contextual factors have an impact as well, the NCD Survey deliberately focuses on principles that apply regardless of context. The focus on both spiritual and institutional factors should not be understood in such a way that contextual factors would be deemed unimportant. They are important. But by definition, we cannot influence them (at least not directly). We have to accept them. By contrast, both spiritual and institutional factors can be influenced by people committed to pursuing such a change process.

6. SYNTHESIZING EMPIRICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

One hallmark of NCD is the synthesis of both empirical and theological perspectives. This approach has been strongly inspired by the theological work of the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (see, for instance, his doctoral dissertation *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*). NCD understands its own place as a “theory between practice and practice,” i.e., it is triggered by practical questions that need to be addressed and it is supposed to result in a changed reality. The “theory in between” strives to encompass both the theological and the empirical dimensions.

The empirical perspective

As far as the empirical dimension is concerned, the criterion of “theological neutrality” applies. The fact that most of the researchers involved with NCD are Christians may have an influence both on their motivation and on the questions they ask, but it doesn’t have any influence on the research methodology itself. In general, the basics of measurement in

empirical social research is chiefly taken from psychology. It is a hallmark of the empirical perspectives to focus on objects that can be observed and measured. For these procedures, the religious orientation or theological conviction of the respective researcher is not important.

The theological perspective

As far as the overall theory is concerned, the theological perspective is deliberately included. While the empirical insights serve as “heuristic standards,” the theological (i.e., bible-based) insights serve as “normative standards.” Everything that is identified by empirical means is carefully evaluated in biblical categories before being incorporated in the NCD tool box.

It is a general consensus among empirically oriented scientists that metaphysical constructs are not accepted as scientific explanations. This does not imply, however, that metaphysical explanations don’t influence the behavior of human beings.

As far as people’s motivational system is concerned, they are even more important than most intellectual knowledge deriving from empirical data. In a strategy targeted at change, these factors should be addressed. However, the theory must clearly distinguish between the empirical data and the metaphysical explanations, even if at a practical level the majority of people tend to mix both dimensions. The integration of the empirical (physical) and the transempirical (metaphysical) layer is a major topic in the first two volumes of the NCD Energy Trilogy.

7. BOTH DIAGNOSIS AND THERAPY

The NCD Survey and NCD eTests are not just diagnostic tools, but play an important part in the “therapy” as well. Taking the the tests—and hence, learning about one’s strengths and weaknesses—is already part of a set of interventions. Taking them, in and of themselves, changes the reality that they are supposed to measure. Even if some researchers may complain about the “distorting” effect connected to these dynamics, in NCD that sort of distortion is explicitly desired. The NCD Church Survey and eTests are research tools, diagnostic tools, prognostic tools, and intervention tools—all at the same time.

NCD as a change agent

In the past, NCD International has sometimes been criticized for not limiting itself to “pure research,” but offering practical implementation tools as well. The fear is that by offering a specific ministry approach we are in danger of compromising our “scientific neutrality.” In our view, however, NCD’s positioning as both a research and an

implementation agency has highly beneficial effects on both the empirical research (in terms of growing a sensitivity for asking the right questions) and implementation (in terms of practical suggestions that are empirically verified).

Some people are not sufficiently aware of the fact that in NCD we don't strive to defend a pre-determined approach to Christian ministry (by means of illustrating that approach with the help of research data). Rather, we are constantly striving to adapt and modify the tools and procedures of NCD to what we learn from ongoing research.

Knowledge and motivation for action

Throughout the last twenty years of ministry, we learned that the very information that helps people explain a certain phenomenon (e.g., the growth of the church), is not identical with the driving forces that motivate them to launch and sustain the change process needed. Even if the dimension of “knowledge” is an important ingredient in any change process, the cognitive dimension is just one of many factors, and often not even the decisive one.

For that reason, we have proactively invested in gaining insights into people's motivational system, and to address these factors by our tools as well. A key discovery in that process was “God's energy” as part of the New Testament texts and teaching, which has—for linguistic, cultural, and political reasons—never found its way onto the agenda of Western Christianity. The NCD Energy Trilogy outlines some of the practical consequences that an awareness for the dynamics of God's energy entails.

8. MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

One of the major effects of the various diagnostic procedures offered by NCD—both at a personal and a corporate level—is making dynamics visible that otherwise would not be detected, and in some cases not even be detectable.

Benefits of visibility

Three of the most important benefits of that possibility are the following:

1. It enables us to perceive certain dynamics and to assign names to them. In the perception of many people, this is identical with bringing them into existence.
2. It makes these dynamics manageable. Since we become enabled to measure them, we can monitor our progress while working on them.

3. We are enabled to visualize even tiny steps of progress (say, a 1.5 increase on a scale between 0 and 100). Without an exact empirical measurement, those kind of changes would remain unnoticeable, especially at a corporate level. By being able to measure them, we become thankful for small steps of incremental growth, which, if maintained year after year, are often the key cumulative factors behind alleged “breakthroughs.”

Accuracy of qualitative assessment

Because of its central place within a change process, the accuracy of the quality assessment is of utmost importance. We cannot achieve such an assessment by asking people, “How would you rate the quality of your church in the area of ‘loving relationships?’” Whenever we compare the results of that kind of “self-assessment” with the actual survey results, we can see that the guessed results have not much to do with the real situation. In many cases, the actual maximum factor of a church is guessed to be the minimum factor, and vice versa.

Can we measure the church?

In some streams of Christianity there is a general reluctancy, if not hostility, toward “measuring” the quality of the church. We need to be aware that what we measure is never “the church,” but some aspects of the church that are well-measurable and can give us information on what we should do in order to improve our practices. We cannot measure “love,” but we can measure the quality of our relationships. We cannot measure “spirituality,” but we can measure progress in our prayer lives. We cannot measure God’s presence in a given worship service, but we can measure the perceived atmosphere, etc.

What we measure is not the reality that we are talking about. Rather, it is an indicator of that reality. This is not a specifically spiritual insight, but applies to all tests that measure what researchers call a “theoretical construct.” The value of the unobservable theoretical construct is considered to be the “true score” T , which is only inaccurately recorded by a given measuring instrument X (a single indicator or more likely the score of an array of items). We always have to expect measuring errors E (“error variable”). It is assumed that the observed measured value is composed of the “true value” plus the measurement error.

9. INDIVIDUAL AND CORPORATE APPLICATIONS

In some countries there is the misunderstanding that NCD was “originally” an organizational tool (i.e., the NCD Church Survey) that was later applied to individuals (e.g., the various eTests on character development). However, the historical

development was exactly the opposite: The first tools were targeted on personal development, and only years later the NCD Church Survey was developed. The reason that some people may have the opposite perception is simply due to the sequence in which the tools have been translated into some languages, such as English.

The church is people

However, regardless of the sequence in which the tools have been published, the positioning of “church development” (organizational development) versus “character development” (personal development) reveals a misunderstanding. In NCD categories, the church is people. What both the NCD Church Survey and the various eTests measure is the reality in the heads, hands, and hearts of people. For both a personalized result (individual level) and a group result (organizational level) the questions asked and the method of measurement are exactly the same. All organizational change is based on personal change.

For that reason, all of the eTests of NCD can be applied both at an individual level and at various corporate levels (such as small groups, local churches, and whole denominations).

The dual character of repeat profiles

However, there is one area where a distinction between an organizational measurement and the summation of various personal measurements does play a role. When a church takes repeat profiles, it is not necessary (and in many cases, not even desirable) that the same individuals fill in the survey year after year. In actual fact, in every repeat survey there may be very different groups of people who fill in the questionnaire. The Survey has been designed in such a way that it does not make any difference (in terms of the results) whether it is the same group of people who fill in a repeat survey or a completely different group of people—as long as it is, in both cases, the same category of people (i.e., regular attendees that have a task in the church and are members of a small group).

There are churches that have taken the NCD Survey for more than twenty years. Even if in every assessment the actual people who fill in the questionnaire change, each survey presents a precise picture of the congregation researched. Even if the church is people—and its quality is the quality in the heads, hands, and hearts of these people—there is a transpersonal dimension that characterizes the congregation as a whole, regardless of its present members. The whole is more than the sum of its individual parts. This insight is more easy to understand for members of cultures in the Eastern and Southern parts of the world, than it is in the West.

10. THE HYPOTHETICAL CAUSALITY OF QUALITY AND QUANTITY

At the level of practical implementation, the quality of a church (eight quality characteristics) has always been treated as root cause for quantitative increase (worship attendance), even at a time when a cause-and-effect relationship could not be proven. However, throughout the different phases of the research, a growing number of indicators were collected to increase the likelihood that we are indeed talking about a cause-and-effect relationship.

- In the beginning of the research (explorative phase) this was a mere hypothesis that (a) made logical and theological sense and (b) seemed to work well at a practical level when people treated it as a “rule of thumb.” In other words, the hypothesis seemed to motivate people do the right things.
- In the course of the primary study (1991–1996) a correlation between quality and quantity could clearly be demonstrated, without claiming a cause-and-effect relationship.
- With the longitudinal studies (evaluating repeat profiles of churches between 1998 and today) the situation changed: We could identify a number of indicators of the fact the relationship between quality and quantity is actually governed by cause-and-effect dynamics.

Initial international study

After the assumption of a cause-and-effect relationship between quality and quantity had guided the explorative phase of the study (1987–1994), in the subsequent study that involved researching the first sample of 1000 churches internationally, a correlation between quality and quantity could clearly be proven.

It is important to understand that the term “correlation” does not necessarily imply a cause-and-effect relationship.

A cause-and-effect relationship is only possible between variables that correlate, but correlation in and of itself does not imply cause and effect. When it comes to two variables—X and Y—that correlate to each other, there are five possibilities for cause-and-effect dynamics:

1. Variable X influences variable Y causally.
2. Variable Y influences variable X causally.

3. Both variable X and Y are influenced by a third variable Z (which has not been identified by the research) causally.
4. There is a mutual influence of variables X and Y on each other.
5. There is no causal relationship between variables X and Y at all.

What we could say at the end of the initial international study in a strict scientific sense was the following: When you address variable X (the quality of the church) in the right way, something happens, and in the end of this “something” the likelihood of numerical growth increases. This “something” could give room to empirically verifiable dynamics that have not been detected or understood so far, while being generally empirically accessible, and it also could give room to metaphysical constructs that should not be part of an empirical theory, but have a strong impact on the motivational context of church development. These dynamics are explained in detail in the three volumes of the NCD Energy Trilogy.

Extended data (2020): indicators for cause-and-effect relationship

The longitudinal studies following the initial international study provide a different research scenario than the cross-sectional studies that were conducted beforehand. In churches that took (one or more) repeat profiles we could actually study the effects of what they consciously and proactively did after they received the recommendations that are part of the various profiles.

In the majority of cases, these processes were supported by using NCD resources targeted at qualitative increase. That scenario comes close to what in empirical social research is labeled an “experiment.”

Growth projections

Based on these insights, we have developed growth projections that relate the increase in quality to the respective quantitative growth that can realistically be expected. When working with these growth projections, we have to be reminded one more time that they present probabilistic explanations, i.e., not being deterministic in nature (not: “Every church that increases its quality from A to B will increase its numerical growth rate by X,” but: “If a church increases its quality from A to B, the likelihood that its numerical growth rate increases by X is Z%”).

11. LANGUAGE-BASED AND NATIONAL NORMATIONS

One important feature that distinguishes NCD tests from home-made tests (or from people who use the existing NCD Survey questionnaires but strive to develop their own calculation procedures) is the fact that all assessment tools developed by NCD include normations.

That is a precondition for coming up with precise and comparable results.

National and/or language-based

An important “side-effect” of these normations that differ from language to language (and in many cases from country to country) is the fact that they are an important ingredient of the various contextualizations that need to take place.

Since there are different normations for different countries (or language areas), it is guaranteed that the survey provides precise results in different cultural contexts.

The difference between using a normation developed for one’s own country and using the normation of another country can be very large. In the beginning of the NCD ministry, some people used, in spite of our instructions, the U.S. English norm for other English speaking countries.

When the results of these churches were re-calculated on the basis of the correct normation, some scores were completely turned upside down (in extreme cases, displaying what was indicated as the “minimum factor” in the version using the wrong norm, was in fact the church’s “maximum factor,” and vice versa).

When working on normations for different countries, the two major areas that have to be considered are the following:

1. The first area is the translation into various languages. It goes without saying that, since every translation results in a different survey, new normations have to be applied.
2. The second area are different cultures, which applies even when two countries may speak the same language. For instance, there are cultures that give strong incentives for seeing everything more positively (which leads to higher affirmation to the individual items of the questionnaire), whereas other cultures tend to the opposite. Apart from that, the role of social expectations (and thus, of what people expect to be the “right answer” that they are supposed to give) differs strongly. Different normations give credit to these dynamics, even if the formulation of the individual items might not be changed.

Different forms of contextualization

As far as the usage of the NCD Church Survey in different languages and cultures is concerned, there are four major realms in which contextualizations take place:

1. The translation of the items. There are always different ways of expressing the chief idea of an item in a given language. Translators take great care to contextualize the contents to the situation of their target group, without losing the compatibility to the international research (and thus to the possibility to link the Survey to universal principles).
2. For every language (and in many cases also, for every country speaking a given language) there are different normations. This normation process guarantees that even if some of the items may not have been ideally contextualized (point 1), the results are still precise, since the normation process will automatically assign a corrected weight to the respective items.
3. The printed and electronically available tools used in the implementation process (both books and the Profiles resulting from the NCD Survey) provide room for cultural contextualizations.
4. The decisive element in any contextualization is provided through a coaching process. Since it is the job of any coach to help relate universal principles to highly individual situations, this ability helps bridge cultural differences.

12. ACCESSIBILITY OF DATA

In contrast to many other consulting agencies, in NCD there is the philosophy of not withholding any information from others. The major background for rejecting such a policy is that it would inevitably result in disempowerment: You depend on the protected knowledge of some experts in order to develop your path into the future. NCD has an extremely gracious policy of sharing gathered knowledge. NCD Coaches are explicitly instructed not to withhold any knowledge from those they coach.

Why no public access to raw data?

As far as the public accessibility of data is concerned, there are only two exceptions to that rule:

1. It must be guaranteed that no information passed on to a third party (such as other researchers, public media, etc.) violates the principle of data anonymity. In other words, every individual and every church taking a survey must be

confident that nobody will be able to assign the data to an identifiable person (or group), with the only exception of those they themselves decide to share their results with.

2. It must be guaranteed that nobody outside of a team of NCD researchers gets access to those formulae on the basis of which everyone would be able to sell the NCD Survey (or an adapted variation of it) without participating to the original research investments and the cost of sustaining and expanding the existing support structures. This rule is motivated by three concerns:

- (a) Securing the sustainability of NCD International.
- (b) Securing the sustainability of the national NCD Partners, who have sometimes taken enormous risks and pre-investments to build up their ministry.
- (c) Securing the NCD Partners to be in a relationship of accountability with NCD International, so that a potential misuse of the approach (for instance, adapted versions for religious cults or commercial interests) is minimized.

It is important to know that the research done by NCD has not been subsidized by any external group, but has been 100 percent financed by personal loans. The money coming back from selling the profiles is the only way of (a) refunding the research loans, (b) keeping up the existing support-structure, and (c) proactively investing in new technologies and developments. In other words, it is essential for the sustainability of NCD as a whole.

This financial structure is fundamentally different from groups that get their research work subsidized by tax payers' money or the donations of other agencies. In Germany, for instance, the largest part of social research is financed by "Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft" (in 2015, 2.84 billion Euro). If the research has been paid by tax payers, the tax payers have a right to get the results for free, since they have paid for them. In our case, that procedure would not work.

Therefore the system is set up in such a way that those benefiting from the research (either churches/individuals taking a profile or researchers that use non-published results for their own projects) contribute to the financial feedback needed.

Paths to background knowledge

While all of the published results are accessible to everyone (and can be utilized by everyone), there have always been different paths to background knowledge that is not published in the NCD tools themselves.

Other research agencies, para-church organizations or individuals can approach NCD International with their research needs, and NCD will work out a suggestion of how this research need can best be addressed, and what the conditions (service fee, copyrights, etc.) are.

The most important paths to get access to that sort of background knowledge are the following:

1. Shortly after publishing the first NCD book, we published a research report that exemplified the scientific methods applied with reference to a small sample of churches. By that way of publication, it was guaranteed that both the anonymity of participants was guaranteed and the formulae on the basis of which an alternate product to the NCD Survey could be produced without taking part in the development cost, were protected.

While this report (published in 1999) does not present the information on all churches researched so far, it explains the exact methods applied, discusses the reasons for opting for each of them, and supplies an abundance of results that would have been too specific or theoretical to be published in one of the NCD books. This report can be downloaded for free.

2. For all research requests we have supplied a form through which anyone can describe their research interest. On the basis of this basic information, we will come back to them with suggestions of how, and upon which conditions, this request can be addressed. The more specific the questions asked, the more specific answers we can provide.

While some questions may be directly answerable without applying any fee, other information may be obtained by paying a service fee.

3. Selected sets of raw data can be supplied to other researchers for use in their work. As far as the procedure is concerned, the same applies as for point (2).
4. There is the possibility for people in search of deeper insights into the research, to visit one of our offices, where it can be arranged that a member of our team works directly with the person interested in our files. In the past, the same

procedure has been repeatedly applied by way of Skype/Zoom conferences as well, in which Screen sharing has been used.

5. Since most of the research questions we received in the past were about denominational analyses (e.g., What is the most frequent spiritual style among Anglicans? What is the most frequent problem area in leadership among Lutherans? What spiritual areas are most neglected among Pentecostals?), we generally recommend to do a group profile with the respective tool (for instance, Spiritual Style Test, Empowerment Test, etc.), to get the actual results that apply to the respective region.

These results may radically differ to worldwide (or national) averages, and we are very reluctant to publish anything that could result in dealing with mere stereotypes rather than with actual data of one's respective group. In most cases, the procedure for these group profiles is already set up; in other cases, we can work out a customized solution.

3.2 NCD CHURCH SURVEY

1. PRACTICAL PROCEDURES

For the NCD Church Survey, 30 people per church are expected to fill in a questionnaire, either online or in paper form.

These people have to fulfil the following criteria:

1. Each individual participant must regularly attend the worship service.
2. They must have some form of regular task in the church (not necessarily a leadership responsibility).
3. They must be part of some form of small group in the church (any subgroup of the worshipping community).

Why 30 people?

The Survey has been designed in such a way that, when strictly sticking to these criteria, it produces the most exact results.

However, the number "30 persons" is not a static number. There can be exceptions in two directions:

- For churches smaller than 30 people (keeping in mind that in churches with a high nominal membership and a small worshipping congregation the worship attendance should be the point of reference), all members/attendees who fulfill

the criteria fill in a questionnaire. If in a church with, say, 15 people, 12 of them fill in the questionnaire (in most cases there are a few that don't fill in the questionnaire even if being asked), the survey will produce a very exact analysis of the church's situation.

- There are cases—particularly in larger churches—where the leadership wishes to include more than 30 people. Even if it has to be noted that such a procedure doesn't produce more exact results, it is possible to enlarge the group beyond 30 people. The important thing is that everyone among that extended group must fulfil the three criteria mentioned. Passing on the survey to members that don't fulfil the criteria inevitably leads to distorted results.

If in a given church there are more than 30 people who fulfil the criteria, a random sample (for instance, being drawn by lot or by selecting every second or third person on a list of qualified candidates) should be selected. It is important that, within the group of people who fulfil the criteria, the actual participants in the survey are selected in a randomized way, and definitely not by self-selection (“We need 30 people to fill in the questionnaire. Who is willing to do that?”).

The survey is available both online and as paper version, in order to avoid that one's access possibility or preference influences the kind of participants chosen.

Objective realities or mere perceptions?

There are two widespread misunderstandings about the items of the questionnaire. Therefore it must explicitly be stated what the items are not targeted at:

1. They don't strive to collect “objective facts” about the church.
2. They don't strive to “evaluate the church” (in the sense of, “How would you rate the quality of our relationships (leadership, small groups, etc.) on a scale between 1 and 100?”).

Rather the items deal with the following two areas:

1. Personal and thus, highly subjective perceptions about the church.
2. Statements about one's own (rather than “the church's”) attitudes and actions.

The NCD Survey does not measure any “objective” realities (in analogy to the size of a church building, the age of the pastor, the budget of the church, etc.); if questions of that kind should be asked, they are not part of the formula that calculates the quality index of the church. Rather, the items that are used to determine church quality (or “health/maturity” of an individual) deliberately focus on subjective perceptions of those who fill in the survey.

For example, when accessing the quality characteristic “inspiring worship service,” there are no objective features that would qualify a specific aspect as “inspiring” for all people attending. The very same thing that one person may experience as highly inspiring, may be rather irrelevant for someone else. A “correct” answer is represented by the subjective feelings of the individual who fills in the questionnaire (“Is that inspiring for me?”). This is the reason why the survey doesn’t give any definitions of some of the technical terms used (“What do you mean by “inspiring?”). The answer is, “Inspiring is that what is inspiring for you.”

From that perspective we can say that NCD doesn’t measure any “objective realities,” but it objectivizes different subjective perceptions of many different people and hence provides comparable results.

2. THE NECESSITY OF AN EXTERNAL CRITERION

It is important to understand that the individual items of the NCD Church Survey have not been chosen according to the criterion of what fits best into a predetermined scheme. Rather, only those items are included in the questionnaire that haven been proven to display a positive correlation with numerical growth that can be verified worldwide.

Because of that, it is guaranteed that the eight “scales” (quality characteristics) measured, derived from a grouping of the items in eight categories, and the “quality index” (a score expressing the overall quality of the church) correlate with numerical growth in the sense of increasing worship attendance.

The “external criterion” of numerical growth is a hallmark of the NCD Survey, distinguishing it from other assessment tools that strive to capture “quality” or “health” of the church as well. Why is such an external criterion essential?

Avoiding circular reasoning

Without an external criterion there is the danger of circular reasoning, a phenomenon that many people developing (or working with) such tools don’t even recognize:

- They determine beforehand (maybe on the basis of their own biblical understanding) what quality is or should be and by which features it should be characterized.
- Then they develop a methodology that tests exactly the features that have been worked out beforehand, which is relatively easy to do.
- When using that tool for the assessment of churches, those that are most in line with the predetermined criteria receive high scores (“good churches”), while those that are not in line with these standards receive low scores.
- Finally, the scores of these churches are regarded as a confirmation (maybe even “proof”) that the predetermined criteria developed without any external criterion were the right ones, since all of the “good churches” among the churches researched live in line with them.

Such a procedure presents, of course, purely circular reasoning. In the end, you get out of the research exactly what you have put into it, without any chance for the “research” to break this logical circle. In order to avoid that trap, we opted for the external criterion of numerical growth.

Why numerical growth in worship attendance?

In this context, we didn’t opt for numerical growth because we would deem it the “ultimate goal” of church development.

The major reasons for choosing “numerical growth” are the following:

1. First, we had to look for a criterion outside of the qualities that we measured. Of course, we could have easily taken one of the quality characteristics (e.g., “loving relationships”) or one of the items on the questionnaire (e.g., “I experience the transforming influences faith has in the different areas of my life”) and could have looked for a positive correlation of all of the other items to those selected.

However, by those correlations we would not avoid the trap of circular reasoning (“If the quality of the church is high, it has a high quality”). We had to opt for an external criterion, i.e., something that does not describe the quality/health of the church.

2. Second, we had to opt for a criterion that is relatively easy and objective to measure. Theoretically, it could have been interesting to take, for instance, “impact on society” as an external criterion, based on the hypothesis that the internal

quality of a church displays itself in the impact that it has on people outside of the church. However, that would have been almost impossible to measure given the fact of extremely different cultures, political settings, and justifiable ministry priorities. As far as worship attendance figures (not just the present ones, but the ones from the past five years in order to measure growth versus non-growth) are concerned, the numbers could be, with all inevitable inaccuracies, relatively easily obtained.

3. Third, the external criterion must be comparable among churches in extremely different structures and traditions, and in each case relate to the same reality. That is the reason why “membership figures” did not qualify. There are churches with a huge nominal membership (say, 5,000 in a European state church setting) and 22 people in worship attendance.

On the other hand, there may be churches with relatively low membership (say, 120 people) who attract a huge number of people in average worship attendance (say, 2,500 people), as can be studied in some non-Western churches. It is immediately apparent that the membership size in both cases relate to extremely different realities: In the first case it includes many people for whom church life doesn't mean anything; in the second case membership indicates those that are at the very core of the church that manifests itself in large worship gatherings.

4. Fourth, it should be a dynamic criterion (such as growth) rather than a mere static description of the present situation (such as size). Even if a church may have, say, 10,000 people in attendance, it would qualify as a “stagnating” rather than “growing church” if this level had been the same throughout the past three years. However, a church growing from, say, 30 people to 55 within three years, would qualify as a “quickly growing church.”
5. Finally, it must be possible to select a comparison group (i.e., churches that don't fulfill the defined external criterion, or fulfill it to a measurably lower degree). In our case, using the categories of growing churches versus non-growing churches (as comparison group) was a realistic pattern to achieve.

In NCD, numerical growth is not the ultimate goal of church development. We do not recommend churches to work with numerical growth goals (“By the end of 2020, our church will have 250 people in worship attendance”). Rather, we recommend setting precise and measurable goals related to the quality of the church (knowing that this procedure has the strongest imaginable impact on numerical growth). These goals can be either expressed in a description of a given quality level to be achieved (in so far as this description can be measured, i.e., precisely evaluated as to the extent that that goal has been reached at an agreed-upon point in time, such as, “12 more spiritual-gift counselors by the end of this year”), or

in scores of the quality index that the NCD Survey reveals (e.g., “From presently 41 to 50 in our gift-based ministry score by the end of this year”).

3. THE QUALITY INDEX

In NCD, the quality index, i.e., a numerical score summarizing the overall quality of the church, plays a key role. Different segments of church life (for instance, on the level of individual items of the questionnaire, on the level of each of the eight quality characteristics, or on the level of the church’s minimum factor) are all connected to the quality index.

With the introduction of the quality index, the discussion on church quality in Christianity worldwide moved to an altogether different level.

The place of “quality” in NCD

Prior to the introduction of the quality index, the term “quality” (as opposed to quantity) was usually one of the most foggy words imaginable. Meanwhile, we have achieved a fundamentally different situation. Today we can state that the “quality index” is easier to accurately measure than attendance figures. Our research indicates that the worship attendance figures communicated to us are considerably less reliable than the quality index obtained by the NCD Church Profile. In other words, throughout the past 30 years many aspects of the “quality/quantity” discussion have been turned on their head.

It may be helpful to add that the term “quality” in this context must not be confused with that which empirical social science calls “qualitative research.”

Qualitative research refers to a different kind of research methodology than quantitative research.

In NCD, we apply both quantitative and qualitative methods of research, both targeted at measuring qualitative and quantitative aspects of church life.

Goodness criteria: objectivity, reliability, validity

In all kinds of empirical research, the goodness criteria of objectivity, reliability, and validity play a key role. Without applying these criteria, no scientific assessment tool can be developed.

Any research methodology that does not work according to these standards is predestined to produce erroneous and thus misleading results (even if, and especially if, these results may be positively received by those taking such a test).

- **Objectivity** refers to the independence of the results from the persons involved in the process of processing them—both in the phase of conducting a test and in the phase of evaluating its results. As far as the NCD Church Survey and the various eTests provided by NCD are concerned, a high level of objectivity is already granted by the standardization of the respective tests, particularly in their online versions.

However, a situation in which the objectivity could be impaired is a group setting in which church members fill in the questionnaires while being together, and while the leaders tell them “how to do it,” without restricting themselves to purely technical instructions. The same applies when using the Survey with individuals who are illiterate or visually impaired. The process of reading the questions to them while expecting their answers can be done in different ways that have a strong influence on the results.

- **Reliability** refers to the accuracy of measurements, measuring instruments, and measured results. It is important to note that this criterion exclusively refers to the accuracy of the measurement, regardless of whether the reality that it measures is actually what was supposed to be measured. Reliability can be secured by different methods.

One of them is the “test-retest method.” When it cannot be applied, the most frequent procedure is Cronbach’s alpha. This is a measurement of the reproducibility of a given test result. In the case of the NCD Profile, a test-retest method could not be applied, since conducting the test, both in the preparation for it and in evaluating the results, is already part of an intervention that changes measurable reality. For that reason, we opted for Cronbach’s alpha.

- **Validity:** There can be research data that fulfils both of the criteria mentioned, i.e., it is both objective and reliable, but it doesn’t fulfil the criterion of validity. Validity is concerned with the question: Do we actually measure what is supposed to be measured? In the NCD Church Survey, the external criterion of increasing worship attendance is the primary way of guaranteeing the validity of the results.

(Christoph Schalk’s paper Organizational Diagnosis of Churches gives background information about the goodness criteria applied, by illustrating these dynamics with reference to a small number of churches.)

Practical consequences

The most important practical consequences of the possibility to assess a church’s quality index are the following:

1. Since any church’s quality can accurately be assessed, it has become possible to talk about quality and health in very precise terms.
2. Beyond the assessment of the quality index (e.g., 35 or 64), the Church Survey gives insight into the quality scores of many different subcategories, for instance at the level of each of the eight quality characteristics, and on the level of each of the items of the questionnaire.
3. It has enabled us to talk about the future of Christianity in a much more nuanced way than is possible when the respective prognoses are based on data that don’t include a quality index. Churches with different levels of quality can expect a very different future, a scale that ranges from “vibrant and thriving” to “dying.”
4. Most importantly, the quality of the church can be influenced positively, so that churches can move from low quality (prognosis: dying) to high quality (prognosis: vibrant and thriving). This possibility is usually not included in prognoses on the future of Christianity.

4. MINIMUM FACTOR THEORY

The minimum factor strategy—illustrated by a graphic of a barrel filled with water (worship attendance) that is constructed out of eight staves displaying different length (eight quality characteristics)—is a chief feature of NCD. It helps reduce the focus from endless individual elements that are all interrelated and important, to prioritizing one specific area—the quality characteristic displaying the lowest quality at a given time.

This possibility has resulted in an enormous complexity reduction, while at the same time helping to focus on measures that are strategically decisive.

Misunderstandings of the minimum factor

It must be stressed that the minimum factor strategy must not be treated as a general pattern of addressing all kinds of topics, but has a clearly limited application area—the work on the eight quality characteristics of growing churches.

While each of the eight quality characteristics is equally important, at a given time it makes most sense to focus one's attention particularly on one of these characteristics—the minimum factor.

In Natural Church Development, there are areas in which we recommend a minimum factor approach (e.g., in the tools developed for loving relationships that focus on eight different aspects of the fruit of the spirit); others in which we recommend a maximum factor approach (e.g., in the tools developed for gift-based ministry); and others, in which we apply a combination of maximum and minimum factor (e.g., the NCD Church Survey, in which we help churches to use their strengths—among others, their maximum factor—to make progress in the area of their present minimum factor.

A minimum factor strategy as a general pattern of action, regardless of the area of application, would be a sure recipe for mediocracy and has never been suggested by NCD.

As a rule of thumb, a minimum factor strategy should be applied whenever we are dealing with absolutely essential aspects of health, i.e., every single one must be displayed in order to survive and be healthy. In contrast, a maximum factor approach applies in those areas where the individual aspects evaluated, while being beneficial, are not absolutely essential for every individual or every group.

Empirical verification of minimum factor approach

The minimum factor strategy is not just a mental construct based on the image of the minimum barrel. The graphic provides no way of proving the minimum factor strategy, but is rather meant to communicate dynamics that have been proven before. The two most important empirical verifications of the minimum factor approach are the following:

First, when doing Multiple Regression Analyses in the phase of the initial NCD research, we tested the correlation that many different expressions of quality have both to numerical growth (for instance, each of the individual quality characteristics, the quality characteristics as a whole, each individual item, different groups of items, the maximum factor, the minimum factor, etc.).

From all of these options, the minimum factor of a church turned out to have by far the strongest correlation to numerical growth, and it has the strongest correlation to other expressions of quality.

Second, when screening the actual implementation of NCD in longitudinal studies, we selected two categories of churches:

- (a) Those that focused on their respective minimum factor and worked successfully on it, indicated by at least a five point increase in that area when taking a repeat test.
- (b) Those that either ignored their minimum factor or worked on it inadequately, indicated by the minimum factor score remaining the same as before or even going down.

Churches in category (a) experienced an increase in their overall quality between the two profiles of twelve points on average. By contrast, the quality of churches in category (b)—those that, while having a certain interest in church health, set other priorities than working on their minimum factor—dropped by ten points on average.

An alternate way of expressing balance

The minimum factor strategy is another way of addressing the goal of balance (which in NCD categories always implies, balance on a high level). Applying a pure maximum factor strategy to the eight quality characteristics would inevitably lead to increased imbalance. One of the most eye-opening ways of evaluating data is measuring the gap between maximum and minimum factor. The higher that gap (i.e., the higher the imbalance), the less likely is the respective church to grow.

3.3 DIFFERENT STAGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SURVEYS

1. EXPLORATIVE STUDIES IN PRE-TEST PHASE

Before the first international study, there were a number of explorative studies starting with:

1. Gathering existing information from previous research
2. Developing multiple versions of provisional, non-scientific tests

3. Conducting a scientific evaluation of the existing assessment tool, including suggestions for its further development.

I. Initial summary of existing church growth research (1986)

This phase was not focused on testing hypotheses, but on developing them by using a wide scope of empirical material. In a sabbatical that I took at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, in 1986, I studied all of the church growth books that were available by that time, and many academic papers that had not been published. Most of the material was based on case studies conducted in various parts of the world. I found many claims that the “principles” described were universal in nature (i.e., applying worldwide), but I could not find any proofs that would substantiate that claim.

On the basis of developing a “synopsis” of the different lists of features of growing churches (the terminology for referring to that reality differed immensely), I distinguished those features that the majority of authors had in common from those that were only shared by a few. This synopsis, combined with my own interviews with pastors of growing churches in the U.S. and beyond (some of them studying at Fuller), served as a first collection of ideas and potential hypotheses that could be utilized to develop an initial theoretical framework, on the basis of which empirical studies could be constructed.

II. Gathering further insights by non-scientific tests (1987–1993)

Based on these learnings that were accompanied by interviews with pastors of growing churches in Germany and Switzerland, I developed a first provisional test that I used with 120 churches in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. While the procedures applied were not meant to be scientific at that stage, the first test urged me to develop an initial theory that could have the power of explaining church development. (The results of those findings were published in the book, *Praxis des Gemeindeaufbaus* (1987).

In 1991, the procedure was further revised and extended to provide interested churches with a survey targeted at identifying their respective minimum factors (published in the book, *Der Gemeindetest* (1991)). The test results we received through that offer, and the debriefing that I personally provided, enhanced my and my emerging team’s knowledge, leading to a revision of a number of the initially held hypotheses. In 1992 and 1993, I worked on a theological assessment of the empirical insights collected by that time, published in the book, *Paradigmenwechsel in der Kirche* (1993), which was later published in a revised form in English (*Paradigm Shift in the Church*, 1999).

Throughout this explorative phase, both the questionnaire and the overall theory were constantly adapted to new discoveries. One criterion applied from the outset was the distinction of growing and non-growing churches, a pre-scientific stage of developing the external criterion of correlating church quality with numerical growth.

III. Scientific evaluation of the existing assessment tool (1991–1993)

Overlapping with the previous phase, the first attempts directed at redeveloping the assessment procedure according to strict scientific standards began. This was primarily done by the organizational scientist Christoph Schalk, first in the course of presenting his evaluation of the procedures applied by that time in his dissertation, on which a large part of his paper *Organizational Diagnosis of Churches* is based. On the basis of the insights derived from that dissertation, Christoph developed suggestions of how the procedure could be revised in terms of classical test theory so that it satisfied recognized criteria like objectivity, reliability and validity. His suggestions resulted in a strongly revised form of questionnaire.

2. FIRST INTERNATIONAL STUDY AND REPEAT TESTS

After it had been field tested with churches in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, the newly developed survey was used for studying the first sample of 1118 churches with 34,414 respondents in 32 countries. This is the research phase that is represented in the book, *Natural Church Development*.

Longitudinal studies

This research resulted in the development of the NCD Church Profile available to churches since 1998, first in English and German, soon in a large number of other languages and countries. The evaluation of the data gathered this way and the debriefing that we provided led one more time to new discoveries and some revisions in the methodology.

In particular, the increasing number of churches taking retests provided insights that were not available to us before. The retests enabled us to monitor the development of churches, some of them over a period of more than twenty years, including the various ups and downs throughout that process.

Major revision of questionnaire

In 2005, we decided to implement a major revision of the questionnaire, primarily based on the learnings from people filling in the surveys in different countries and denominations. However, that revision had the disadvantage of making the

comparison with previous profiles more difficult. Even if our learning continues constantly, apart from continually revising norms based on increasing data, we have to be extremely reluctant with major updates of that kind, since for the majority of churches the comparison with earlier results (and thus, the compatibility of the data) has become by far the most important piece of information provided by the survey.

Insights into change processes

The possibility of longitudinal studies on the development of churches over twenty years or more offers unique insights into actual change processes in individual churches and emerging trends in Christianity as a whole. Some of the insights gained from the change processes within these churches can be generalized to the majority of churches that are in comparable processes of change. Since NCD doesn't feature a specific church model, but is strictly based on universal principles of church health and growth, even those churches experiencing health and growth that have never heard about "Natural Church Development" apply the same qualitative principles that NCD describes.

The most important lesson that we constantly learn is that change is indeed possible, and if it is pursued in a concerted effort by many church members—or even better, in a concerted effort by many churches within a given region—significant changes can be measured. Whenever we offered a two-year process to a group of interested churches in a given region, the average qualitative and quantitative scores at the end of those two years had been remarkably higher than they used to be at the beginning of the process. So far, there has not been any exception to this rule, and on the basis of our data it seems to be likely that such an exception may never emerge.

3. SECONDARY STUDIES

The huge amount of data collected worldwide has made the NCD files an extremely promising base for conducting secondary studies, without the necessity of collecting new data by means of newly designed questionnaires. The secondary studies use the original raw data, including the possibility of measuring development over time.

Advantages and disadvantages of the NCD database

Using the data collected in the primary study of NCD together with the longitudinal studies that became possible recently, has both advantages and disadvantages.

Among the advantages is the high number of churches represented (90,000), their international nature, the high number of repeat profiles, and the possibility of linking all observations to different levels of church quality. These are features that make the NCD database unique and highly promising for future research. This database enables us to detect even small indications of possible future trends.

The disadvantage of using the NCD data for research projects are twofold.

1. As mentioned before, the data of the churches involved with an NCD process is not necessarily typical for “average” churches in a given country, denomination, or movement. However, since we can explore different quality levels and combine these observations, we may come close what the “average church” may be.
2. If we come up with new research topics (such as studying fundamentalism, the dynamics among “millennials,” or the correlation of liberal theology with both church health and growth), we must be reminded that the research methodology was originally not set up in order to answer these questions. We can only work with the questions that we have on our questionnaires, not with others that may be—in addition to them—worth asking.

However, in many cases the advantages mentioned outweigh the disadvantages. (In the book, *God Is Indestructible. Twelve Responses to the Relevance Crisis of Christianity* we present a number of the results of the secondary studies mentioned.)

One of the most important benefits of the NCD database should at least be mentioned in this context. Whenever I write on theological or observational topics, I check—primarily as a heuristic principle—the NCD database to find out if I can detect certain patterns connected to the questions at hand.

This has influenced my writing even in the area of non-academic books, in which I don’t present all of the backgrounds of what led me to the statements I made. In my personal writing and teaching, everything goes through this filter, independent of the fact whether this heuristic process is documented (in academic books) or not (in the majority of the non-academic books). This has become a personal habit that is supposed to protect me from promoting my personal preferences and favorite ideas.

The difficulty of comparisons with non-NCD-shaped churches

Apart from the initial samples of churches in the explorative phase of the study, and the sample of 1,000 churches collected in the first international study, all of the data of churches in our files comes from churches that, with different degrees of commitment, are involved in an NCD process.

Because of that, almost all of the churches in our files are “NCD-shaped churches.” This fact makes it difficult for us to compare these churches with those that have not been influenced by NCD. Some may view this as a purely “academic question,” as all our efforts are targeted at change processes that we have labeled Natural Church Development, but it is an important one.

The question that arises is: To what degree do the results that we come across apply to churches that have not been shaped by NCD?

1. First, it has to be understood that the overwhelming majority of churches that initially take an NCD Survey have not been “shaped by NCD” before. In other words, the research results that we present reveal what can happen in churches regardless of which church model they may prioritize.
2. Second, many denominations that use NCD consistently (for instance, at the level of a diocese or church district), like to compare some external results that are of particular importance to them—such as, giving habits, ministry to the poor, help for people who are HIV positive, participation in small groups, children’s ministry, reaching millennials, etc.—with reference to churches that are involved with an NCD process and those that are not. In every single case that I am aware of, the numbers of those involved with NCD are measurably higher, sometimes considerably. Nobody has to comment on these numbers, as they speak for themselves.

4. DETAILED RESEARCH THROUGH PERSONAL ETESTS

One of the possibilities for doing research that emerged more recently is our increasing number of eTests targeted at personal development. Of course, we have to do a lot of research as part of developing every single test. However, just as is the case with the NCD Church Survey, the automatically growing number of responses that we collect online enables us to

get increasing insights into personal development processes that, in some cases, can even be more relevant than what we learn from the NCD Church Survey. eTests are available that address all eight quality characteristics of NCD including:

1. Leadership (Empowerment Test),
2. Deployment of Spiritual Gifts (Gift Test),
3. Spirituality (Spiritual Style Test),
4. Life-Supporting Structures (Stewardship Test),
5. Inspired and Inspiring Worship Gatherings (Inspiration Test),
6. Energy Dynamics within Small Groups (Communal Test),
7. A new Paradigm for Evangelism (Wholeness Test),
8. Growing the kind of love you are capable of giving (Love Test).

Comparing the insights deriving from this data across different denominations, movements, and cultures has become one of the most promising paths of research for the future. The personal application of NCD principles is of utmost importance, as the decisive dynamics of church quality happen in the heads, hand, and hearts of the church members.

Since all of the tests are based on one of the quality characteristics of growing churches identified in the primary study of NCD, it is guaranteed that working with the eTests (particularly when not only used for diagnosis, but also for therapy) will contribute to the health and thus growth of a given church. The eTests supply an opportunity for every individual to contribute to the advance of Christianity, regardless of whether their own church leaders do or do not support these processes.

Scientific standards

It may be important to stress that, in providing the personal eTests, we are committed to the same scientific standards that are characteristic for the NCD Church Survey. In contrast to the Church Survey, the stress of the various eTests is on (a) reliability and (b) the normation supplied for various languages. As far as validity is concerned, in the realm of personal

eTests, we apply the criterion of construct validity. Two of the most important procedures for the eTest development is factor analysis and internal consistency.

For all languages in which the various eTests are supplied, there is a normation based on the respective language. In contrast to the NCD Church Survey, however, we always start with an (albeit provisional) “international norm,” which enables us to supply immediate—even if less than accurate—feedback, and then proceed to language or country based norms depending on the size of data we collect. Whenever we reach a representative level of numbers of people researched, we apply the respective normations accordingly.

Qualitative research

In particular, in the area of the development of eTests, qualitative research (in addition to the quantitative research resulting, for instance, in different normations for different languages/countries) is applied. This qualitative research is not meant as a substitute for quantitative research, but aims at complementing it. In our case, qualitative research is primarily applied in the heuristic phase of test development, quantitative research, in the phase that is geared at offering the most exact results.

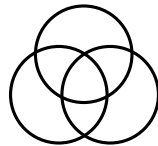
Much of the qualitative research that we conduct takes place through personal debriefing and coaching. It should be noted that all of these processes—and the respective learnings—take place at an international and thus, multicultural level. Since the overwhelming majority of this qualitative research takes place through video conferencing, i.e., Skype or Zoom meetings, it is possible to not only listen to the verbally articulated answers, but to monitor gestures, detect insecurities, and include non-verbal signals provided by the face (indicating interest or engagement) or the sound of the voice. In contrast to the standardized answer-scheme of a survey, that kind of qualitative research enables free and spontaneous answers to the questions.

By applying this procedure, we get invaluable insights into items that create difficulties in some cultural or denominational backgrounds. These insights help us revise the questions accordingly.

Evaluation of effectiveness

When we evaluated repeat test results from eTests targeted at personal growth, we could detect that in 79% of all cases, the respondent achieved higher scores in their repeat tests, compared to their initial results, i.e., they have visibly grown as a result of that process.

Change is indeed possible, and in many contexts is not that difficult to achieve.



RESULTS

On the basis of their data base of some 90,000 Christian congregations worldwide and the possibility of monitoring the development in churches throughout the last 20 years, NCD International has repeatedly evaluated and published the results of the NCD ministry in empirical terms.

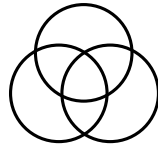
QUALITATIVE INCREASE

In order to assess the average results of long-term commitment, the research team selected all churches that have conducted three or more NCD Church Surveys, and compared the scores of them at the time of the first survey with the scores at the time of the third survey. The increase between these three profiles had been 6 points on average. At the same time, the work load of the participating members decreased significantly (Schwarz 2005, page 190).

QUANTITATIVE INCREASE

Comparing the growth patterns of the same churches at the time of their first and their third surveys revealed that the growth rate within that time window increased by 51% on average. At the same time, the percentage of transfer growth (people joining from other churches) decreased while the percentage of conversion growth increased (Schwarz 2005, page 190).

GROWING MISSION-MINDEDNESS



In his 2013 dissertation *Mission-shaped Church Development*, Henrik Andersen conducted both quantitative and qualitative research to evaluate the impact that an NCD process may or may not have on the mission-mindedness (in terms of actually changed behaviors) of churches. For that purpose, Andersen extracted from the missional literature five central indicators of mission-shaped churches and identified items in the NCD Survey that correspond to these features. He then selected churches that have conducted three NCD Church Surveys and researched how they developed between survey 1 and survey 3 in each of the five areas indicating the degree of their missionality. Since in all five categories the missionality of the churches increased considerably throughout the NCD process, Andersen summarized the net findings of his quantitative research in the statement: "When a church implements a Natural Church Development approach, then mission-shaped development happens all by itself" (Andersen 2013, page 3).

As a second step he did qualitative research in the form of personal interviews with each of the pastors of the churches participating in the study, in order to deepen the quantitative discoveries. For instance, he asked them what their reactions would be if an active church member decided to cut down their church involvement to become engaged in a non-Christian community program. The immediate answer was, "Good on them, because they would be out there, and hopefully they would be able to put some Christian influence there" (Andersen 2013, pages 56-57). Andersen concluded that this kind of response was typical for churches involved with Natural Church Development that had experienced an increase in quality.

DENOMINATIONAL REFORM PROCESSES

When NCD has been applied in a whole denomination (such as diocese, church district, network, etc.) and the denominational leaders have supported the attempts of the local churches both spiritually and strategically, the leaders frequently report—apart from numerical growth—about a change of the whole climate within the denomination. On the NCD web site, there is a video section in which denominational leaders from twelve different backgrounds talk about the changes that they have seen in their area of responsibility. One of the dioceses that have been a pioneer in the church-wide application of Natural Church Development has been the Anglican Diocese of Coventry under the leadership of Bishop Christopher Cocksworth.

PHILOSOPHY

The philosophy of Natural Church Development, as outlined in the major NCD books, is characterized by the following features:

● PRINCIPLE-ORIENTATION

NCD states a commitment to not feature any specific church model, but to communicate the principles that can be detected behind any successful model (Schwarz 2005, pages 132-143).

● INTERDENOMINATIONAL APPLICATION

In the latest generation of tools that have been published in various denominational applications, it is demonstrated how the application of NCD principles have helped various denominations or movements to revitalize their own best traditions, thus becoming more attractive within their given contexts.

● INTERCULTURAL LEARNING

Since the research has been conducted in 84 countries, the features of the NCD paradigm have been taken from different cultures. The book, *Color Your World with Natural Church Development*, highlights how the specific strengths of the West, the East, and the South have enriched NCD strategy (Schwarz 2005, pages 28-32). In particular, NCD strives to integrate insights of the Eastern Orthodox and the Western Church traditions, making the learnings of the East accessible to the West and vice versa (Schwarz 2012a, pages 23-26).

● SCIENTIFIC EVALUATION

The strong focus on research is meant to provide to any user scientifically-designed evaluation tools that help them identify their respective starting points, and the possibility to monitor their progress after a given time (Schwarz 2006, pages 18-21).

● QUALITY FOCUS

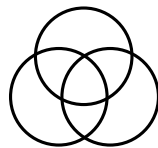
NCD rejects the practice of making numerical growth a strategic goal. Rather, it strives to increase the quality of individuals and churches in a way that can be measured and monitored. Following that path, it is claimed that the numerical growth follows "all by itself" (Schwarz 2005, pages 25-27).

• SPIRITUAL BALANCE

A feature that permeates all NCD resources is the focus on "radical balance," which is seen as a key to spiritual fruitfulness (Schwarz 2005, pages 168-181).

• PROCESS-ORIENTATION

NCD resources are intended to get people into an ongoing process of growth. By conducting a repeat test after a given time, any individual and church can identify the factor that they should now focus on in order to reach the next level of health and maturity (Schwarz 2006, pages 108-125).



STRATEGY

The most important building blocks of NCD principles, which are strongly interrelated, are the following seven: **Eight Quality Characteristics; Complementary Pole Paradigm; Six Growth Forces; Minimum Factor; The Trinitarian Compass; God's Energy and the NCD Cycle.**

EIGHT QUALITY CHARACTERISTICS

The eight quality characteristics summarize the net finding of the NCD research, by highlighting the principles that are, on average, stronger developed in growing than in non-growing churches (and their everyday life equivalents):

- Empowering leadership (Empowerment)
- Gift-oriented ministry (Gift-activation)
- Passionate spirituality (Passion)

- Effective structures (Effectiveness)
- Inspiring worship service (Inspiration)
- Holistic small groups (Community)
- Need-oriented evangelism (Wholeness)
- Loving relationships (Love)

While the way in which churches in different cultures or denominations put these principles into practice may differ considerably, NCD claims that the underlying principles are the same worldwide (Schwarz 2006, pages 18-50).

The Eight Quality Characteristics of Natural Church Development, originally identified for church health, have been adapted for individual growth in the Character aspect of NCD. This adaptation forms the foundation of the NCD Characters Books and their online eTests, which help individuals assess and develop their personal spiritual and relational maturity. While the core principles remain consistent, the terminology has been adjusted to better reflect personal application::

Empowerment; Gift-activation; Passion; Effectiveness; Inspiration; Wholeness; Community; Love

The integration of these Eight Quality characteristics leads to measurable improvements in personal and community life.

BI-POLAR PARADIGM

Natural Church Development is based on a bi-polar paradigm, striving to integrate poles that are often seen as contradictions, particularly in cultures that are shaped by thinking in terms of binary opposition. This approach has been first introduced in the book *Paradigm Shift in the Church* (Schwarz 1999a) by relating it to various aspects of ecclesiology and illustrating it with reference to the major conflicts throughout church history. The core of this paradigm has been inspired by the biblical representations of church in a unique combination of static (technical) and dynamic (organic) images, such as, "living stones," "growth of the temple," "the body of Christ may be built up," "God's field and God's building," etc. (Schwarz 2006, pages 88-89) and has later been deepened by studies of the polar structures in other fields,

particularly in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Bonhoeffer 2009), the writings of Niels Bohr (Fischer 1987) and in various schools of Asian philosophy.

SIX GROWTH FORCES

Behind each of the eight quality characteristics are six growth forces (Schalk 2006) that have been inspired by the study of creation, especially through biological and ecological research: interdependence, multiplication, energy transformation, sustainability, symbiosis, fruitfulness.

All of the growth forces describe different ways of releasing what NCD calls the "all by itself principle" (Schwarz 2006, pages 51-64). In the NCD tools, this is described as the strategic core of Natural Church Development.

MINIMUM FACTOR

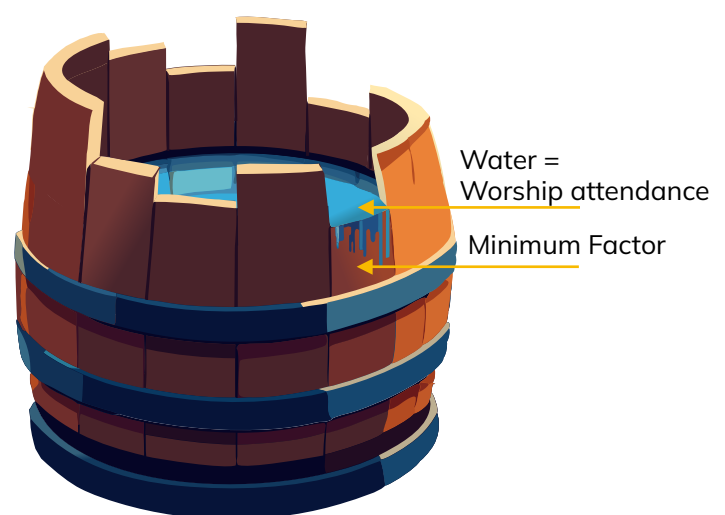
In NCD, the minimum factor strategy (i.e. the focus on the area that is, in a given situation, least developed) has a narrowly defined area of applicability: It exclusively relates to factors that are of vital importance. It refers to the single most limiting factor that is hindering a church's growth or health at any given time. The idea is based on the principle that, just as in any system, the growth or effectiveness of a church (or any organization) is limited by its weakest element.

This approach has been inspired by the German biologist and chemist, Justus von Liebig. Since this criterion applies to the eight quality characteristics of growing churches, the minimum factor strategy plays an important role in NCD.

The NCD Church Survey is chiefly targeted at helping churches relate their energy resources to their present minimum factor (Schwarz 2006, pages 51-64; see illustration of the minimum barrel).

Whenever it comes to factors that may be helpful, but that are non-essential, NCD tends to teach a maximum factor approach (Schwarz 2012b, pages 67-68)

The image of the minimum barrel inspired by Justus von Liebig: The barrel can only hold as much water, as the least developed stave permits.



TRINITARIAN COMPASS

All of the books in the NCD Discipleship Resources series are based on the Trinitarian Compass, which is a unique feature of the NCD paradigm. It uses the dynamics of the colors of light (RGB scheme) as a way of illustrating the practical relevance of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity for the daily challenges of believers: In order to produce pure white light, the colors red, green, and blue must be displayed simultaneously.



The color green is related to God's revelation in creation; the color red, to God's revelation in Jesus Christ; and the color blue, to God's revelation in the Holy Spirit. Each of these three revelations corresponds to basic dimensions of life.

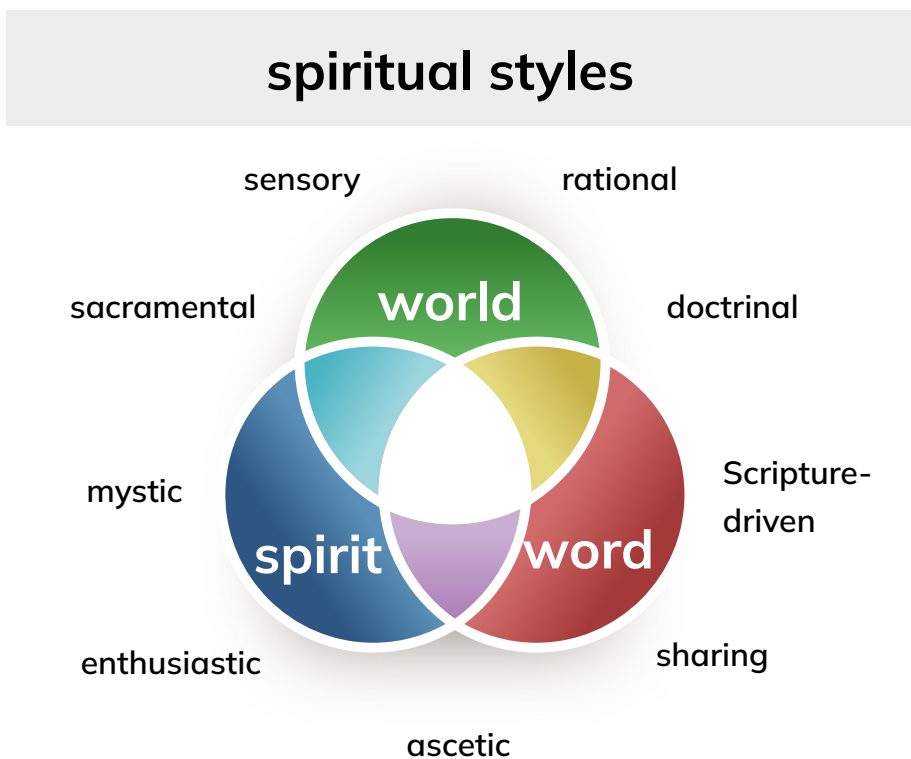
The most important dynamics of the Trinitarian Compass (Schwarz 2005, pages 45-71) are the following:

- In order to reflect God's "light" as fully as possible, it is essential that a balance of all three colors is pursued.
- The terms used in any given adaptation of the Trinitarian Compass always aim at representing a complete picture of the topic under consideration, divided into different segments of equal importance.
- The location of these segments in the Trinitarian Compass is more important than the actual terms used for describing them.
- While at an individual level it may be acceptable to be one-sided in terms of one's favorite colors, at a corporate level the goal of balance must not be abandoned.
- The pursued equilibrium must manifest itself as a "radical balance", i.e. characterized by a strong presence of all the three colors, not by trying to achieve balance through reducing the strength of a given area.
- For every person, it is beneficial to precisely know his or her respective color blend related to a specific topic. It explains both their strengths and their weaknesses. It also explains which kind of people they should connect with in order to complement for their own imbalances.

- It is always a challenge to learn from the opposite position within the compass, but this is exactly the kind of learning that helps people move to maturity.

- By striving to represent all three colors, the dynamics of "theosis" are activated: a transformative process with the goal of union with God. This very process activates what NCD refers to as "all by itself" growth.

Graphic representations of the Trinitarian Compass are available in different variations, depending on the topic at stake. This picture shows the application to spirituality, where it distinguishes nine different spiritual styles.

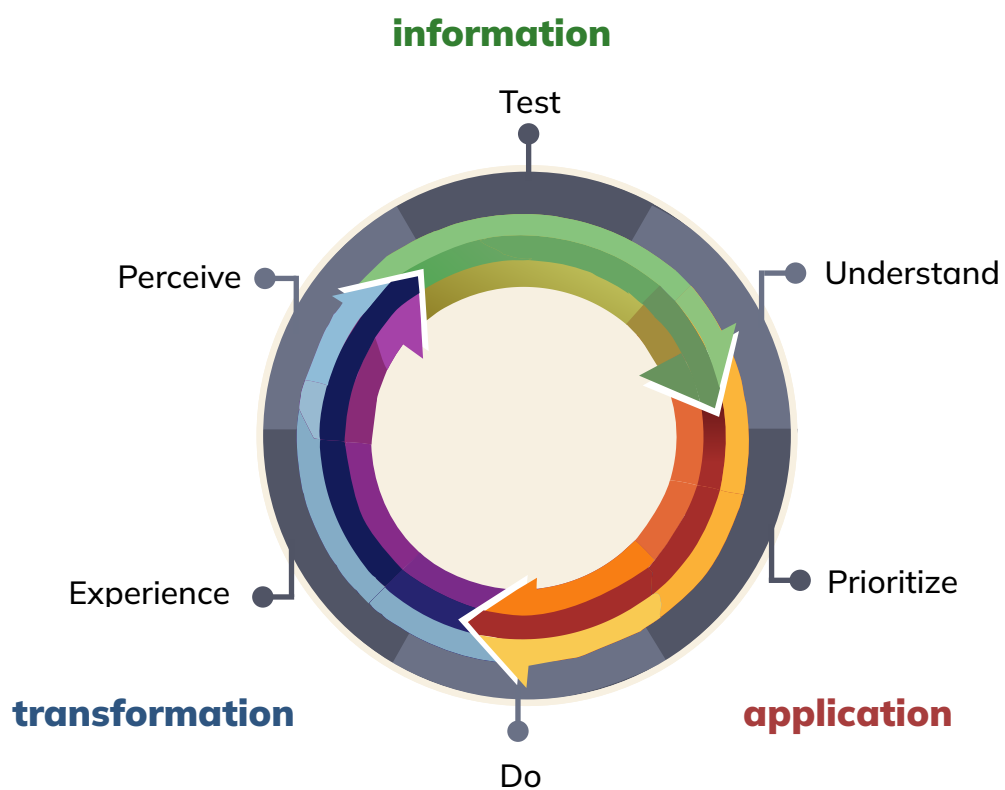


GOD'S ENERGY

One of the latest contributions that is increasingly shaping the NCD paradigm is the New Testament concept of God's energy (Greek, *enérgeia*), as reflected in Schwarz 2012a, Schwarz 2015, the first volume of the Energy Trilogy (Schwarz 2020a), and the latest publication *God is Indestructible* (Schwarz 2020b). While the concept of God's energy is taught throughout the New Testament, the Greek noun *enérgeia* has almost never been translated as energy, and the verb *energeo*, never as energize. Because of translations that strove to avoid the rendering of *enérgeia* as "energy," the NCD authors claim that in the past the concept never had a chance to influence Western Christianity, while in Eastern traditions it is generally known, but primarily limited to the liturgical and sacramental contexts. NCD has developed an eTest that helps Christians identify their respective energy mix, and make use of it by investing it in the area of the corresponding quality characteristic. The understanding that God's energy refers to the spiritual vitality or empowering presence of God that enables individuals and communities to live out their calling in alignment with His will, driving their growth, effectiveness, and transformation. The Holy Spirit, in particular, is seen as the conduit through which God's Energy flows, enabling individuals and churches to reflect the character of Christ and carry out their mission in the world. Spiritual vitality cannot come from human effort alone but must be fuelled by God's presence. Churches, people and community that operate with this understanding are more likely to experience holistic, sustainable growth that is aligned with God's will and purpose

NCD CYCLE

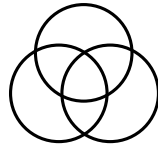
In all areas of practical implementation, NCD refers to various versions of the NCD Cycle (see picture), which is described in detail in the revised version of the book Natural Church Development (Schwarz 2006, pages 107-125).



A graphical representation of the NCD Cycle, the chief paradigm for all implementation processes

The Cycle describes a 6-phase-process that is characterized by the following features:

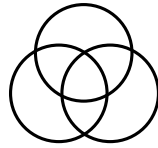
- The process can be started in any given phase of the Cycle, since there is no statically defined beginning or end.
- Every phase of the Cycle describes universally valid biblical principles rather than just programmatic ideas or tools.
- It is essential not to skip any phase of the Cycle.
- For different areas of implementation there are different versions of the Cycle.
- The Cycle is based on the Trinitarian Compass, i.e. concepts such as radical balance, opposite pole, and the assignment of the six growth phases to the colors of the Compass are essential elements of the Cycle.
- It is a spiral rather than a linear sequence, i.e. within each cycle the users moves through all of the phases, before going up a layer and repeating the process.



THEOLOGY

NCD doesn't position itself as a non-theological methodology nor as a merely pragmatic approach. The book *Natural Church Development* presents six reasons why pragmatism is unsuitable to approach church development and criticizes pragmatism as a "dead end road" (Schwarz 2006, pages 104-126). In NCD resource development, the empirical discoveries are interpreted theologically, i.e. in the light of biblical teaching. In this interpretation process, the empirical discoveries function as heuristic principle; the biblical standards, as normative criteria.

It is characteristic of the NCD paradigm that the theological reflection is worked out in inter-denominational categories, deliberately not binding itself to the specific traditions or values of a given denomination. Because of that approach, the NCD paradigm strives to exclude those topics where the different branches of Christianity are in disagreement, as long as these elements are non-essentials in terms of church development. Alternatively, it is demonstrated how the different foci, if combined, can potentially contribute to healthy balance (Schwarz 2005, pages 23-24).



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