

Eight Quality Characteristics of Growing Churches Worldwide

Christian A. Schwarz's Natural Church Development

On the basis of worldwide research Christian Schwarz has determined that there are eight universal characteristics of growing churches

- 1. Empowering leadership**---Schwarz found out that leaders of growing churches concentrate on equipping other Christians. They teach, support and motivate others. They invest in discipleship, delegate work in stead of taking all the work on their shoulders. This principle is about multiplication of energy and creating and sustaining a larger network of people who can do the work. It is about mobilizing people.
- 2. Gift-oriented ministry**---:Ministry tasks are not given on the basis of availability, but on the basis of Spirit-given gifts, which need to be discerned and developed. Applying this in the church will result in a larger group of people who work on the basis of their giftedness.
- 3. Passionate spirituality**---Faith is not a matter of duty or rules only. The growth of a church (in quality and quantity) is related to a passionate spirituality. This characteristic is about the intensively experienced relationship with Jesus Christ. It is about loving Christ and experiencing this in worship, prayer and action.
- 4. Functional structures**---According to Schwarz many people feel that talking about structures is unspiritual. He questions the functionality of structures and asks, "To what extent are the structures enabling a better self-organization of the church and enable her to accomplish her mission?"
- 5. Inspiring worship**---Another important characteristic relates to the quality of worship in the church. Growing churches show high quality worship (not only in terms of a seeker-sensitive service). The worship should be comforting, inspiring and challenging people.
- 6. Holistic small groups**---Small groups are amongst the most important factors for growth of the church nowadays. Groups in which people study the Bible, pray, share and serve others are vital to discipleship.
- 7. Need-oriented evangelism**---We need to discern between *methods* of evangelism and *principles* of evangelism. Churches need to support those with the gift of evangelism and stimulate them to evangelize. Schwarz (and others) have pointed out that approximately 10% of the believers have this gift. They should not be burdened with loads of other church work but set free to develop their ministry and focus on meeting people's felt needs
- 8. Loving relationships**---Growing churches have a high score on the quality of their relationships. The climate of the relationships can be determined as a loving atmosphere in which people really live with each other from the love of Christ. The church radiates this love into the neighborhood.

On the basis of his worldwide research Schwarz concludes that none of these characteristics may be missing if the particular church is to be healthy and growing. Based on an analysis of a church profile the church's quality index can be measured. Schwarz claims that if a church has a score of 65 or higher it is likely that this church is growing.

The model holds a qualitative starting point---improving the quality on the 8 characteristics will have quantitative consequences. The claim of this model is therefore that whenever quantitative results 'stay away', this is an indicator of qualitative problems. The quality of each of these eight characteristics has an effect on the growth potential of the church. Where a church has a low quality it tends to be in decline and where the quality is good the church tends to be healthy and growing. Schwarz and Schalk developed a questionnaire that enabled churches to identify their minimum characteristic and thereby improve the overall health of the church.[6] You can contact the Woodlands Project if you wish to do the survey in your church.[7]

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Stability Phase---Once the church has built and paid for its building and can afford the ministry of a fulltime minister of word and sacrament they tend to call themselves a “real church”. Historically the ordained clergy have acted as chaplains to the church rather than enabling the ministries of the whole church, thus setting the expectation that a church is a minister plus stipend plus building. This is what we call a maintenance or pastoral approach to ministry or church. This model has served us well when most people tended to attend church, but is death in a post-Christian society. The church rests on its laurels, becoming obsessed with its own survival and program and begins to lose contact with its environment. Recognizing this and taking action before it is too late is what is required.

Decline Phase---Failure to recognize that the purpose and identity of the church needs to change in order to meet the needs of a changing community results in decline. Churches easily dismiss this as temporary or random and things will work out in the future. Fall-off in visitors, volunteer energy etc. continues and there is a tendency to blame everyone or everything else other than ourselves. There are factors beyond our control, but we are not entirely blameless. All the blaming response does is accelerate decline and the congregation becomes increasingly detached from the surrounding culture.

Death Phase---If the blame response is never replaced with a learning stance the church will eventually die. Lots of congregations are today somewhere between denial and bargaining. Denial and blame are enemies of a holy death and as we have seen particularly in a church structure where autonomy is vested in the local congregation this phase can drag on for a long time.