

Natural Church Development:

An interview with Christian A. Schwarz

Smaller churches do as well as larger churches in all key areas but one, according to analyst Christian A. Schwarz. That bodes well for the future of those in the shadow of mega-ministries.

Surveying 1,000 churches in 32 countries, he found eight principles of health in churches around the world, regardless of size, culture, or denomination.

The resulting "natural church development" approach has prompted debate among the experts worldwide. American pastors are starting to notice the observations of someone with an international perspective. Schwarz heads the Institute of Church Development in Germany.

Turned off by what he calls "technocratic thinking" in the church, Schwarz is bullish on smaller congregations. His research tells him that's where the action is. But Schwarz spies signs of reformation among churches of all sizes, which he discussed with LEADERSHIP's Craig Brian Larson.

We're hearing increased use of the term "church health" by those who would have until recently talked about "church growth." What will health look like in the coming decade?

I see two things. First is an emphasis on pursuing quality, not as against quantity, but as the strategic root for quantity.

Once you understand what it means to set qualitative goals, to pursue them, and to measure periodically whether you have reached these qualitative goals, this will have a tremendous effect.

Second is a shift to the relevance of small churches. One of our most surprising discoveries is that (while there are some notable exceptions) the bigger a church grows, the worse it becomes both in quality and in its capability to reach new people for Christ. In few ways is the bigger church a better church.

How do small churches outperform large churches?

One example is the percentage of people who practice their spiritual gifts to help their church grow. In churches with less than 100 in attendance, it's 31 percent. You can say that's not much. But if you compare that with churches of over 1,000 in attendance, which average only 17 percent, you see there is a decline in quality. In all areas except one, the quality decreases with the size of the church.

What's the one exception?

We measured eight quality characteristics: empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship services, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships. Larger churches do better than smaller churches only in creating more inspiring worship services.

This makes sense. In a crowd of 5,000, to sing worship songs and to have higher quality music is more inspiring than being together with eight other people and a guitarist who can play only three chords.

You urge churches to raise the quality of the area in which they are weakest, which you call the "minimum factor." That goes against the conventional wisdom of "building on your strengths."

Most churches have a weakness that they tend to ignore. They want to grow further in the area of their strengths.

To say "build on your strengths" as a universal rule is misleading. A church must build on its strengths and deal with its weaknesses. No church can do without any of those eight characteristics.

A church's minimum factor may be evangelism, for example. If they are good in prayer, they tend to go on with prayer. But they should direct more spiritual energy to evangelism.

It's like a human body. If you have problems with your heart and need surgery, the doctor cannot say, "You have a nice voice. Focus on singing." You need heart surgery first. Then you can build on your strengths. Building up your weak points is the only healthy rule.

You point to eight areas of church health. We usually hear about one or two keys to growth. How do you account for that difference?

When a fruitful church has good experiences in one area, they tend to sell this as the secret of their success.

One church says prayer is the strategic key because it's the minimum factor they addressed. In another church functional structures may be the main problem. If they improve their structure and become more fruitful, they tend to sell structure as the key.

But we cannot say the key is prayer or structure or evangelism alone. All eight qualities are secrets of success for churches of all sizes. We need a balance.

You champion smaller churches. What is their role in the near future?

The future needs more megachurches because they have opportunities others don't have, but this is an exception. Up to now most church growth writing uses examples from big churches. Even if authors don't intend to set a big church as the goal, people get that impression because all the examples are from big churches. Ninety-five percent of the literature on church growth and health should concentrate on healthy, small churches that can multiply and give birth to other small churches.

The importance of celebrating small churches and aiming to multiply small churches is strategic. And it will increase.

Christian Schwarz is author of *Natural Church Development and Paradigm Shift in the Church*, published by *ChurchSmart Resources* (800-253-4276).

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