

Natural Church Development

An Introduction to How the ELCA is Planning to Use It

What is Natural Church Development?

Natural Church Development (NCD) is a research based system of understanding congregational life that correlates healthy congregational life with congregational growth. Originating in Germany and developed as a global model, NCD has now become well accepted by many within the United States with over 12,000 congregations from various denominations now having used the tool.

NCD studied congregations around the world in a variety of contexts. The goal was to discern common areas of congregational life that crossed all racial, ethnic and contextual lines. In addition, the hope was that how congregations functioned in these areas could be correlated to effective outreach and congregational growth patterns.

The underlying paradigm is that the church is an organic entity and functions with a foundation of life giving and sustaining principles (referred to in NCD literature as “biotic” or “life-giving” principles). These principles are:

1. Multi-usage – the best ministry can be used multiple times and multiple ways
2. Interdependence – a change in one part of the system will affect other parts
3. Multiplication – healthy ministry reproduces itself
4. Energy transfer – energy must be moved in a system to where it is most helpful
5. Symbiosis – the best solutions reinforce and support other things in the ministry
6. Functionality – everything has a function and is accountable to doing it

Using these life-giving practices allows the church body to function better and provide for increased ministry capacity.

In addition to the 6 biotic principles, the results of the research identified 8 common areas of congregational life. These 8 “quality characteristics” are:

1. *Holistic* small groups
2. *Empowering* leadership
3. *Loving* relationships
4. *Passionate* spirituality
5. *Inspiring* Worship
6. *Need-oriented* Evangelism
7. *Gifts Oriented* Ministry
8. *Functional* Structures

The key to these quality characteristics is the adjective (in italics in the list above). The noun identifies the arena of ministry but the adjective describes that aspect which makes the characteristic function in life-giving and capacity increasing ways.

Using an assessment tool that surveys the pastor and 30 key leaders and active members from the congregation, a profile is generated for each ministry being assessed. This profile is then compared with a profile curve that includes the other congregations from the same country. Congregations' worship attendance can be correlated to improving the health of the 8 quality characteristics. Improving the lowest score (the "minimum factor") increases the capacity of the system to do ministry.

How Will NCD Be Used?

In the Division for Outreach and the Division for Congregational Ministries there is currently a joint project to train 12 people who will serve as trainers for the ELCA. This group of trainers will be certified to train licensed NCD coaches throughout the ELCA. This is one key tool that will be used in the coaching of leaders for outreach ministries. *The role of coaching in ministry development is a clearly identified skill that has been targeted in both the development of new ministries and the renewal of existing ones.*

The NCD tool is likely to be used in a variety of ways. These are:

1. With mid-sized and some larger congregations in a variety of "normal" circumstances to assist them in refining their ministry in order to improve congregational health and capacity for evangelical outreach.
2. With new congregations as they develop, NCD will be used to assess the health of the new systems that they are creating in order to provide a healthy base for sustained growth. This may be an especially helpful tool as new congregations organize and as they consider building their first buildings.
3. With plateaued or declining congregations which need to "Turn Around." The NCD tool can provide the insight as to where to focus energy in order to help the congregation's capacity for ministry increase and encourage growth to resume.
4. With congregations which are in need of more significant transformation as a second phase of renewal after systemic issues have been reworked and after purpose and core values have been re-clarified. Here NCD can provide insight that assists in the development of concrete plans for ministry.

Finally, it is important to remember that NCD is a tool to assess the health of a ministry and gauge its capacity for growth. It is not a magic bullet but a tool. Many questions specific to polity and theological commitments of the ELCA are not addressed and so congregational commitments to benevolence, peace and justice need to be addressed in addition to the insights provided by the NCD assessment.

Having said this, it is clear that the NCD tool, *used within a system of coaching*, can provide for better information in the development of healthy congregations throughout the church. NCD can be helpful in increasing congregational capacity for ministry and evangelical outreach. In combination with other insights and tools that are available, NCD provides a promising base for healthy ministry development and renewal for the ELCA.