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EPC
Hebrews 10:35-39, 11:1-3
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“Going Forward – A Summary of Natural Church Development”

Last September, after spending all last summer on an exploration of personal spirituality through the lives of the saints, you and I began a closer look at our *corporate* discipleship; that is, how we here at Emory Church act out our *communal* commitment to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Apart from an occasional interruption for World Communion, a Hymn Sing, and Stewardship Sunday, for two months we’ve been examining how we go about being church, what we’re good at, and what about us as a church could use some attention.

The lens through which we’ve examined our ecclesial strengths and weaknesses is called _____ who can say? - Natural Church Development. Which, as you recall, is the brainchild of one Christian Schwarz, a German man who started wondering a decade or so ago whether there might exist *universal, scientifically verifiable principles of church growth* that apply to all churches regardless of nationality, culture or theological persuasion.

To find out, Schwarz constructed a monumental international study of over 1,000 kinds of churches (big, small, urban, rural, progressive, evangelical) in 32 countries on all 5 continents to see if there were any characteristics were shared by all growing churches.¹ And what he discovered is that, regardless of size, location, denomination or theology, all growing, flourishing churches share the eight quality characteristics you and I have been exploring the last 8 weeks.

¹ Natural Church Development, A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of healthy Churches, Christian A. Schwarz, ChurchSmart Resources, 2003.

Since this is the last Sunday for a while that they'll be listed in your bulletins, let's read them together, aloud, along with their definitions:

1. **Empowering Leadership:** Leaders who equip, support, motivate and mentor others to become all that God wants them to be.
2. **Gift-oriented Ministry:** Individuals who identify their gifts and integrate them into ministries that match their gifts.
3. **Passionate Spirituality:** Faith lived out with commitment, fire and enthusiasm.
4. **Functional Structures:** Forms and structures in the church that fulfill their purpose.
5. **Inspiring Worship Services:** Worship that feeds, grounds and inspires those who attend.
6. **Holistic Small Groups:** Small groups in which individual Christians can find intimate community, practical help and intensive spiritual interaction.
7. **Need-Oriented Evangelism:** Sharing the gospel in ways that meet the questions and needs of those outside the church.
8. **Loving Relationships:** Genuine concern, practical care, and authentic enjoyment of one another.

All growing, flourishing, vibrant churches share these eight quality characteristics.

Because we wish to be a growing, flourishing, vibrant church, we asked ourselves where we stood in relation to these characteristics through a questionnaire that 30 of you filled out and sent in to the NCD national office. And what we learned is that we do the best job of here at Emory Church with Loving Relationships and Gift-Oriented Ministry. The characteristics on which we need to focus more are Passionate Spirituality, Need-Oriented Evangelism and Holistic Small Groups. And so we've been doing that. In the last several months since the May Session retreat Ed Albright led on Natural Church Development, we've dedicated newsletters, sermons, Session

meetings, dinner parties, Wednesday Night Programs and a great deal of personal reflection and prayer to the areas of Passionate Spirituality, Need-Oriented Evangelism and Holistic Small Groups. And we're not done yet. For Schwarz says the key is for a church to use what it's good at, in our case, Loving Relationships and Gift-Oriented Ministry, to enhance what needs more attention. So that's what we're doing. And it takes time, but we're not in any hurry. Because what we're really talking about here is growing into the church God created Emory to be. And for that enterprise, we have all the time in, and out, of the world.

Meanwhile, we've learned more about exploring passionate spirituality: different ways to explore it, for example; how accountable each one of us is individually for the discipline of regular spiritual practice; ways the church can support the deepening of our individual spiritual journey.

Some of us have also learned more about our personal spiritual gifts, which are broader than we might have imagined, as well as the need to pay more attention to how, and how much, we're called to use them in Christ's service in the church.

Others of us, recognizing the fundamental importance of small groups interaction to making "church" make sense and have relevance in our lives, have taken steps to participate in the small groups that already exist here at Emory Church, or to start new ones. Still others have supported wonderfully creative initiatives in the arenas of outreach and evangelism.

And because of the fruits of our efforts, we'll continue exploring and challenging and initiating ideas around the principles of Natural Church Development, even though today marks the end of this particular sermon series. For these last months have been

a fertile time of honest self-examination and fruitful experimentation. Our aim remains for Emory to be a healthy, flourishing church. And to achieve that end, Schwarz' study tells us, a congregation must be reasonably strong in *all eight* essential qualities. So *if* we continue to use our strengths to remedy our weaknesses, we *will* improve our health. If we want to.

Which of course, raises the continual question – do we really want Emory to be a healthy, flourishing church? Even given the spiritual discipline and personal attention and corporate focus required? Only time will answer that question, but I'm going to keep asking it.

Because everything I've learned about Natural Church Development (and I've only ever been one page ahead of you) convinces me that Schwarz is spot on not only about what it takes for a church to be healthy, but about the genuine possibility for any close-knit, dedicated group of believers to achieve that goal. Because the truth is, we're not really "achieving" it *ourselves* at all!

What Schwarz is *really* talking about is aligning ourselves, individually and as a church, with the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit, or at least getting out of its way long enough for the church to grow "all by itself." Because that's what healthy organisms do. Live, grow, reproduce themselves. That's how God wired life, all life. NCD's principles are based on nature, on creation, and on how God (not us) makes things grow.

It's that "all by itself" principle that seems so counterintuitive. It's just hard for us hard-working, duty-bound Presbyterians to accept the idea that what might be required is not more but *less* effort on our parts. But then, as Schwarz is fond of saying, "the

principles of Natural Church Development are pretty much the opposite of what most churches (and I would add, most pastors) ‘normally’ consider to be right.”²

To illustrate, Schwarz is fond showing a photo of a cross section of a chunk of lawn, of grass growing. This is one time it’d be handy to have a projector and screen during worship (but whoa! I promise we’re not going there any time soon).

But you can imagine it, can’t you? In a cross section of growing grass you’ve got your dirt, and your roots, and your worms wandering around in the dirt making it richer. And then there are the pale green blades of grass poking through to the sun.

And Schwarz asks, “So how does that grass grow?”

Does it have a plan, a strategic plan, say, that it’ll grow eight inches by the end of the summer? Can you measure its blades, pull them up and then stick them some place else and expect the same growth? No. By faith we know that what is seen is made from things that are not seen. (Heb. 11:3b) We provide the conditions - the seed, the soil, the water, access to the sun - that grass’ll grow “all by itself.”

In Mark 4, Jesus says “the kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the ground; and goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts up and grows – *how, he himself does not know.* The earth produces crops *by itself,*” says Jesus, “first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head.” (Mark 4:26-29)

It’s a happy, holy delegation of responsibilities, don’t you think? We provide the conditions for growth; God produces the growth itself.

What Natural Church Development helps a church do is look beneath the surface of its corporate life to examine its conditions for growth – how is the soil of its spiritual

² Ibid., p.82

discipline? The seed of its worship? The roots of its relationships? The water of its mission? The tender, pressing blade of its evangelism? And what might a church do to enhance those conditions for growth?

But the growth itself, now, that's *God's* job. Says Schwarz, "The strategic secret of growing churches is the release of *God's* growth forces."³

And just what are those growth forces?

Well, I'll run through a few only briefly just to give you a flavor of how NCD applies what you already know about growth to the organism of the church.

One of *God's* growth forces, according to Schwarz, is *interdependence* - the idea that every part of a complex organism is inextricably interconnected and interdependent. Change one and all the others are somehow impacted. Work on any one of NCD's quality characteristics for a flourishing church, and others will improve as well.

Another of *God's* growth principle is *multiplication*, which refers to a healthy organism's natural inclination to reproduce itself. Unlimited growth is not natural; every form of organic growth sooner or later reaches its natural limit. A tree doesn't keep getting bigger; it brings forth new trees. The true fruit of an apple tree is not an apple, but another apple tree. If we apply that principle to small groups, then, the true fruit of a small group is not a new Christian, or even a more committed one, but a another small group. You get the idea.

Fruitfulness is another of *God's* growth principle, according to NCD. This is the conviction that every detail in *God's* creation has a specific function, even if the function may not be apparent at first glance. And further, that all living beings in *God's* creation

³ Ibid. p. 14.

are characterized, according to their function, by their ability to bear fruit.⁴ So the principle way to evaluate the usefulness or effectiveness of any particular idea, program or initiative is simply to observe its visible fruit. As Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, “all things are lawful, but not all things are useful.” (I Cor 10:23) If an idea, an initiative, a ministry, a mission, genuinely has a place in the function for which God created a particular church, then that idea, initiative, ministry or mission will bear fruit. If not, let it go.

You get the idea – Natural Church Development is *natural*, based on nature, on creation, on how life works. Embedded in its principles is a deep, deep trust in God’s love for us, in God’s work of redemption through Christ Jesus, and in the astonishing and independent power of the Holy Spirit to spark new life where ever it blows.

The secret strength of those quality characteristics doesn’t lie in the nouns, like leadership, structures, groups, etc., but in the adjectives that precede them: empowering, effective, holistic. The nouns – ministry, spirituality, evangelism - they all exist in one form or another in every church. It’s the adjectives – gift-based, passionate, need-oriented - that make the qualitative difference in a flourishing church.⁵

You and I can’t *make* this church or any other organism grow, but we can certainly attend to and improve the conditions for growth. As Paul said about his involvement in his new church development in Corinth: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gives the increase.” (I Cor. 3:6) You and I cannot make Emory Church flourish, but each of us can certainly do our part to provide the best possible conditions for the upcoming harvest.

⁴ Ibid, p. 80.

⁵ Ibid., p.102

According to our text today, confidence brings a great reward, and endurance brings what was promised. And what Jesus promised was life, and life abundant (Jn 10:10). We can be confident that Jesus will do his part. Time will tell whether we'll do ours.

To the glory of God. Amen.