



TOOL

Build up that bucket!

Let's pretend. Pretend your congregation's vitality is something you can pour into an old oaken bucket. Eight pieces of oak encircle that vitality.

But, what if the oak pieces aren't the same size? The shortest piece limits your congregation's vitality.

To increase vitality, lengthen that short piece.

Natural Church Development

Natural Church Development is helping Northeastern Iowa Synod congregations identify that short piece of oak, grow stronger, and thrive.

It's a concept used beyond Northeastern Iowa. It was developed by



a German man, Christian Schwarz. Now, it is endorsed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and six other church bodies and has touched 40,000 congregations.

How it works

The process helps a congregation measure itself against characteristics that

Schwarz found in growing congregations. It's a tool that assesses the health of ministry and gauges its capacity for growth. The congregation learns its strengths and celebrates them. The congregation also learns its least strong characteristic—its shortest piece of oak—and works to build that up.

Eight characteristics

Natural Church Development grew from a study Schwarz conducted. He took several years to study what makes congregations thrive. He chose a thousand congregations in 32 countries on five continents. When he analyzed which qualities impact growth in local congregations, his answers clustered into eight categories (see box above).

"This is what I've always thought," said Rev. Joel Dahlen, Our Saviour's, Mason City. "There isn't just one thing that affects church growth but a whole series of things. The idea is that we work from strengths on areas that need to be built up. The result is that we fill in our weakness, our strengths

Growing congregations' quality characteristics

- Empowering leadership*
- Gift-oriented ministry*
- Passionate spirituality*
- Functional structures*
- Inspiring worship*
- Holistic small groups*
- Need-oriented evangelism*
- Loving relations*

The adjective in italics is the key to each characteristic above.



DAHLEN

grow, and BINGO! the whole congregation's vitality is boosted. This is what I've been looking for."

Process

The process begins with a congregation asking the Northeastern Iowa Synod about Natural Church Development. A synod staff member meets with the congregation's leadership. If the congregation commits to using the process, it selects a leadership team.

Celebrate first

Jennifer Collins, Mason City, is a member of Our Saviour's leadership team.

"First, the team chose people to complete the survey," Collins said, "30 persons reflecting the congregation's membership—high schoolers, people in their 80s, male and female, married and single.

"We arranged for them to fill out the survey during the Sunday school hour. The ELCA tabulated the results, and Rev. Anderson returned to explain them."

Rev. Mark Anderson is a Northeastern Iowa Synod assistant to the bishop.

The act of completing the survey begins introspection.

Keith Norris, Mason City, a member of Our Saviour's leadership team, said, "People



COLLINS



NORRIS

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start to think differently about the congregation. They began considering the themes of the questions. How caring is our congregation? How do we practice spiritual habits?"

The news

The leadership team deliberately planned how to share the results with the congregation. Natural Church Development suggests emphasizing the positive first and spending time celebrating that.

"We started with bulletin paragraphs announcing that results were coming," Collins said. "Then we shared the good news, the congregation's high scores. We resurrected our vacation Bible school puppets and wrote a puppet show to use during worship services."

The puppets portrayed children discussing the survey results and explaining *empowered leadership*, a congregation strength.

Collins said, "We had fun. On a Sunday when Pastor Dahlen was away, we had a lay service. It was relaxed. We even threw a couple dozen T-shirts into the congregation, like is done at ball games, T-shirts that say *I go to church. Wanna' come?*"

Celebrations continued—Dahlen's 25th ordination anniversary, an every-member celebration, a celebration of members being called into the outside world.

Then, work

Next, the leadership team tackled the lowest score—*passionate spirituality*.

"To work on this low score, the leadership team set year-long goals," Collins said. "We wanted to encourage congregation members to get to know each other so they'd wave to each other in the parking lot, talk, tell their stories, connect. We knew the leadership team's job wasn't to do the work to make this happen.



More fun!

Some congregations call their leadership team the *Church Health Team*, but Our Saviour's, Mason City, went agricultural with team members called *Buds* and the adult vacation Bible school the *Miracle Grow*. Immanuel, Independence, called its team *Martin's Movers*.



It was to get others involved—to ask *them* to do the work.”

Dahlen said that members began telling their personal faith stories as part of worship services.

He said, “Some stories are predictable—I was born and raised in the church, confirmed, went to college, married, and faith is very important to me. Other stories were not predictable. One was from a woman who had a falling-out with her son and felt the power for reconciliation through faith years later. A 16-year-old leadership team member told about encouraging her dying grandmother with the words, *Grandma, your faith is important to you.*”

Our Saviour’s members look forward to these faith stories, Dahlen said, and Norris pointed out how surprising it is to witness the number of individuals who have come forward to speak about their faith before the congregation.

Other creative ideas resulted. Our Saviour’s adult vacation Bible school (reported in the October 2005 issue of the *STAR*) plans its second session in July.

Kathy Grant, Mason City, another member of the leadership team, said, “The last day of this year’s session will be a family event for the entire congregation called *Amazing gRACE*. After Sunday worship will be a brunch, then a team race all over town using clues that, hopefully, will direct everyone to the park for a catered picnic.



GRANT

“We’re working to make our congregation a more inviting place. That, in turn, will help our members grow in faith. We are working on making each and every member feel the love of Christ so that they share their faith with others and invite them into our community.”

Peace, Ridgeway

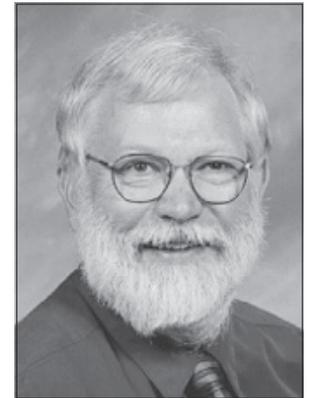
Seven synod congregations have used Natural Church Development (see page eight). Another is Peace, Ridgeway, which learned that it, too, might work on *passionate spirituality*.

As a result, the congregation has spent a year emphasizing prayer. Sunday worshipers submit prayer requests that are used later in the service. Mission minutes are scheduled before worship service prayers. They allow members to talk about prayer in conjunction with their personal faith experiences.

“Natural Church Development works,” said Rev. Phillip Olson, one of Peace’s pastors. “The data from the surveys is revealing and helpful, and we’re ready to start a second round with 30 more people taking the survey.”

Olson will not predict what will be the weak link this time.

“It will be a surprise,” Olson said. “It is going to be interesting.”



OLSON

Tips

Grant said, “A congregation should consider Natural Church Development if it feels like it has a lot to offer but doesn’t know exactly where to go next in terms of meeting the congregation’s needs. The process helped Our Saviour’s see what needs we were meeting and where we should *step it up* a bit. We focused on areas where we needed some help.”

Those who have used Natural Church Development offer this advice—

- Follow the directions and work the process.
- Be prepared to be surprised.
- Take risks.
- Be creative.
- Let the Holy Spirit bring a presence to the table. Be patient in going from *This is the issue* to *How do we address it?*

Synod offering

The ELCA’s evangelism staff recommends Natural Church Development for mission congregations, and Rev. Darrel Gerriets, assistant to the bishop, uses it at New Hope, Farley.

“It helps a mission congregation become strong,” he said.



GERRIETTS



ANDERSON

The synod's coaches are Gerrietts, Anderson, and soon Rev. Thomas Jones, Immanuel, Independence. The coaching is offered without charge, so the only up-front cost is \$300 to offset ELCA expenses.

Jones said. "It's a good tool to strengthen congregational ministry. The process is clear, easy to understand, and theologically sound. It helps a congregation celebrate strengths while it highlights the leverage points that can increase spiritual health."

His congregation produced a daily Lenten devotional, developed daily Bible readings, increased Sunday Bible studies by 30 adults, and plans a weeknight opportunity.

"Any congregation can benefit from the process if it's willing to face the element in its ministry that needs improving and then work at growing," Jones said. "Natural Church Development helped Immanuel gain confidence in itself, and the congregation began asking *How can we grow?* There is always room to grow in Jesus's love and our ministry."

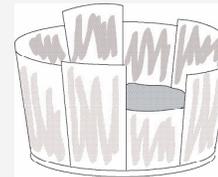
Norris said, "Rev. Anderson did a great job explaining that we are the ones responsible for our Natural Church Development."

The process helps congregations take that responsibility.



JONES

Natural Church Development



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