

Natural Church Development: A Renewal Movement with a Prophetic Gift

Natural Church Development (NCD) is best understood as both a renewal movement within the Church and a prophetic gift to the wider Church. It is not the whole Church, nor does it seek to replace the historic traditions. Rather, **its calling is to help local congregations become healthier, more alive, and more fruitful in their participation in the mission of God.**

Throughout Christian history, different traditions have carried different emphases. The Catholic and Orthodox churches have focused on preserving and transmitting the apostolic faith through the sacraments, worship, and continuity with the universal Church. The historic Protestant churches have emphasised fidelity to Scripture, the proclamation of the gospel, and the reform of the Church according to the Word of God. Pentecostal and charismatic movements have reminded the Church of the present work and power of the Holy Spirit.

NCD does not compete with these callings. Rather, it serves them.

Its particular contribution is to ask a practical but profound question: what allows Christian life to flourish? Through decades of research, Christian Schwarz discovered that healthy growth occurs naturally when the conditions for life are present. This led NCD beyond church growth techniques to a rediscovery of a deeply biblical principle: **God is actively at work in creation and in his Church, and our task is to cooperate with his life rather than attempt to replace it with human effort.**

In this sense, NCD offers a prophetic corrective to many Western tendencies. The Western Church has often excelled in theology, structures, programmes, and institutions, yet sometimes struggles to connect these to the living reality of God's activity. Schwarz's emphasis on "God's energy" reminds us that Christianity is not merely about maintaining systems or defending doctrines. It is participation in the life of the Triune God.

NCD is deeply Trinitarian. Its concern is not simply understanding the doctrine of the Trinity but helping believers and congregations live in relationship with the Father, follow the Son, and cooperate with the Holy Spirit. Likewise, its emphasis on gift-based ministry reminds the Church that every believer has a unique contribution to make - that genuine growth occurs through interdependence rather than individualism.

The Church does not need bishops to stop being bishops, theologians to stop being theologians, pastors to stop preaching, or denominations to abandon their traditions in order to embrace NCD. Rather, **NCD helps each tradition fulfil its own calling more fruitfully.** It helps congregations become places where doctrine becomes life, worship becomes participation, gifts become service, and mission becomes a natural overflow of God's activity.

NCD's gift to the wider Church is not a new denomination, a new theology, or a new structure. **Its gift is the recovery of a biblical understanding of health, growth, and participation in God's life.** It reminds the Church – and individuals - that while we are responsible for cultivating the conditions for growth, God alone gives the growth. In doing so, NCD serves the wider Church best - not by trying to become the whole Church, but by faithfully offering the particular gift it has been given.