

Thinking Growth Naturally

God's principles for growing living organisms

Scripture invites us to consider the principles by which God sustains and grows living things in the world He has created and sustains. These principles are used by God to grow His Kingdom as well.

Scripture teaches that the local church is also a living organism that God wants to grow – the Body of Christ. The local church shares similarities with other organisms God has created and sustains. Its potential for growth lies in its health, not its size.

NCD has shown through international research that healthy growing churches are more successful in releasing the potential for healthy growth because they apply these natural principles and treat the church more as a living organism to be grown rather than an organization to be built.

A fundamental part of the NCD paradigm is learning to see the church as a living organism to be grown through understanding and applying these principles.

Partnering with God to stimulate healthy growth

Jesus gives a picture of the partnership God expects to have with His people in growing the Kingdom. In the Parable of the Growing Seed, Jesus said:

*"This is what the Kingdom of God is like. A farmer scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know why. **All by itself** the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."*
(Mark 4:26-29)

In this parable, Jesus shows Kingdom growth is a cooperative effort:

- the **sower creates an environment** that maximizes the potential for new life and growth by consistently removing the obstacles to healthy growth.
- but **God alone brings that life and growth** (which appears to happen "all by itself" to the farmer)

The role of church leaders and God's people is similar to that of the farmer. They cannot give life and produce growth. Only God can do that. All they can do is maximize the potential for growth. This is done by a continual process of identifying the barriers which impede growth within the life of the church and seeking to remove them. In this way the potential for "all by itself" growth is constantly maximized.

Quality as the foundation for quantity

To truly think of the local church as a living organism is to acknowledge that quality (health) is just as important to church growth as quantity. In fact, quality is the essential foundation for quantity.

The health of any living organism directly impacts its capacity to grow and reproduce. The groundbreaking international research by the Institute for Natural Church Development International has shown a clear correlation between quality and quantity. Churches that focus on improving their health are more likely to grow numerically and reproduce ministries. Likewise, churches failing to heed the "health warning" are in decline.

Not just any growth but "all by itself" growth

It is important to recognize that the parable speaks of "all by itself" growth. This is not growth brought about principally by continually offering a diet of new programs. It comes by progressively understanding the dynamics of the church as a living, growing organism and continually working hard to identify and remove the barriers to its life and growth. This is what the farmer does in raising a successful crop.

For many church leaders who are used to setting the course of the church, taking the congregation with them and praying for God's blessings on the plans that have been developed, this is a difficult shift to make. It is difficult for many church leaders who see the church predominantly as a (spiritual) organization to be built rather than an organism to be grown. It is difficult to contemplate leading a church where "all by itself" growth is the norm – where God's Spirit is constantly at work among His people without first seeking the blessing of the pastoral team.

Yet this is the essence of the Natural Church Development paradigm. It is a process of coming to understand how God grows healthy organisms – of which the church is one – and then cooperating with Him by doing what is necessary to remove the barriers to "all by itself" growth.