

## A Brief Comparison of The Healthy Churches' Handbook by Robert Warren and Natural Church Development by Christian Schwarz

**The Healthy Churches' Handbook** by Robert Warren was first published in 2004 and brought together the original Growing Healthy Churches Material widely disseminated across the Church of England. It provides an approach to enable churches to take a snapshot of their life together measuring themselves against 7 marks of a healthy congregation. These "marks" were identified by studying the life of 25 churches in Durham diocese which had grown by 16% or more in the early 1990s, bucking the trend of decline across the diocese. This was done through a day conference of 100 members of these 25 churches which identified common characteristics or "marks".

**Natural Church Development** by Christian Schwarz was first published in the UK in 1996. Schwarz had posed a similar question but over a much broader canvas. His international research of over 1,000 churches in a wide variety of contexts sought to establish if there were any common characteristics in churches that were growing and he identified 8 "quality characteristics". His research has now extended to over 80,000 churches worldwide.

### Comparing the Two Approaches

In his introduction (p.5) Warren gives a brief comparison of the two approaches. He notes first the similarities of the two approaches, namely the "emphasis on nurturing the qualitative side of church life, rather than majoring on numerical growth". He then goes on to identify what he sees as differences in approach, however he reveals some misunderstandings about NCD.

1. Warren states that the "7 marks" of a healthy church are expressed in terms of values, goals and characteristics, whereas in NCD the "8 quality characteristics" are expressed in terms of activities. This assertion is not borne out by Schwarz' writings where it is always clearly stated that it is the quality of an activity that is significant.

2. He refers to the "light structure" of Healthy Churches enabling a health check to be taken in a 3 hour session. In fact the NCD process of taking a health-check through a congregational questionnaire takes less than 1 hour, however the results are much more thorough and robust, based on an anonymous survey rather than open discussions within groups.

3. Warren states that "Healthy Churches has a much lower doctrine of numbers" compared to NCD and cites as an example NCD referring to "the leadership of a church being rated as 64.6%". In fact, whilst NCD does quantify the results of the survey, it never refers to a percentage score, simply a comparative number, and it never scores the "leadership of a church", it only ever evaluates the quality of the leadership culture of a church. Without doubt, the results of an NCD survey are much more objective and detailed than a healthy churches "health check".

There are many similarities in the approach taken by "healthy churches" and "NCD", and between the "7 marks" and the "8 quality characteristics", although there are also important differences.

In his book Warren refers to Natural Church Development. On page 15 he compares the two approaches as “Marks or Activities” and suggests Natural Church Development (NCD) describes roles and activities. As mentioned above, Schwarz is at pains not to refer to activities and stresses the importance of the quality characteristics of the life of the church and takes a position very similar to Warren. The example Warren gives is of the quality characteristic of “empowering leadership” being an activity. Schwarz however points out that all churches have leaders, what is important is the quality of that leadership and that in growing churches it is empowering - this is about values held and exhibited by the leadership. Schwarz is at one with Warren when he says that because of the diversity of churches, you can “not suggested particular activities were necessarily the key” to church growth.

Warren goes on to suggest Schwarz encourages churches without small groups to create them. In fact Schwarz’s point is that all churches have some kind of small groups (not necessarily a bible study group), it may be a finance committee or a mid-week communion service etc, and in growing churches all expressions of groups that are small were found to have the quality of being holistic - much as Warren describes on page 15.

Healthy Churches and NCD are at one with Warren’s statement on p.16 that the marks (Quality Characteristics) are formulated in terms of characteristics and values rather than activities.

### Comparing the “7 Marks” and the “8 Quality Characteristics”

The Marks and the Quality Characteristics are not identical but there is clear overlap between the two sets, as indeed there are between the Quality Characteristics and the Marks themselves. This paper does not attempt a detailed comparison, but that can be made by comparing the two books.

Quality Characteristics	Marks
Empowering Leadership	Seeks to Find Out What God Wants
Gift-based Ministry	Operates as a Community
Passionate Spirituality	Energized by Faith
Effective Structures	Faces the Cost of Change and Growth Does a Few Things and Does them Well
Inspiring Worship Services	Energized by Faith
Holistic Small Groups	Operates as a community
Need-oriented Evangelism	Outward Looking Focus Makes room for All
Loving Relationships	Operates as a community Makes Room for All

### Conclusion

Fruitful church growth can only take place within a healthy environment – the evidence is that healthy churches grow. Both these approaches have their place, essentially working in the same way in the same field. The NCD approach is more consistent and robust, but both seek to achieve the same purpose, to enable the local church to grow through becoming all that God wants her to be.