

Natural Church Development and “From Evidence to Action”

A brief comparison

In recent years the Church of England has funded some major research into Church Growth. They published their initial findings in “From Anecdote to Evidence”. This was followed up with “From Evidence to Action” (FEA) which highlights some of the findings along with recommendations and tools for action based on the findings.

There are strong parallels between the findings of the initial report (From Anecdote to Evidence) and the research findings of Natural Church Development. There are also clear parallels with the processes and methodologies found in From a Evidence to Action and those of NCD.

Comparison of FEA and NCD		
	FEA	NCD
Key Scripture	I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 1 Corinthians 3:6	I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 1 Corinthians 3:6
Research base	Initially 1,700 individual respondents over 18 months.	Initially 1,000 churches, now 70,000+ over 20 years.
Language	“the researchers concluded that there is no “single recipe” for growth, but they found evidence to show that there are some common factors which appear to be strongly linked to growing churches of any size, and in any place or setting.”	“there is not <i>one</i> key to church growth, but at least eight different keys.” CYW* p.104 “These are the qualities that all growing churches have in common, regardless of cultural, theological and size differences.” CYW p.88
Growth factors	Eight common factors of growing churches	Eight essential quality characteristics
	“A growing church is likely to”	“qualities that all growing churches have in common” CYW p.88
	...have clergy and lay leaders who innovate, envision and motivate people	Empowering Leadership
	... have a clear mission and purpose and clergy and congregations who are intentional about growth	Empowering Leadership
	... understand its context, actively engage with it and with those who might not currently go to church	Need-oriented Evangelism
	...be willing to self-reflect, change and adapt according to its context	Effective Structures
	...have lay people as well as ordained clergy active in leadership and other roles	Gift-based Ministry

	...be welcoming and build on-going relationships with people	Loving Relationships
	...nurture disciples (encouraging people to explore and deepen their faith and live it out in their daily lives)	Passionate Spirituality Holistic Small Groups
	...actively engage children and young people	No parallel
	No parallel	Inspiring Worship Services
Method	A cycle of self-reflection and review. Leadership/congregational discussion factor by factor.	An annual cycle of assessment through detailed core-congregational survey of all quality characteristics (QC).
Process	1. Review strengths and weaknesses	1. Survey of core members
	2. Choose priorities based on findings	2. Review the results, focussing on the weakest QC.
	3. Plan specific action	3. Set Action Points to address the weakest QC.
	4. Act	4. Implement the action points

*CYW = "Colour Your World with Natural Church Development" by Christian Schwarz

There is no parallel in FEA to the NCD quality characteristic of Inspiring Worship although on p.8 of the original summary report it states that one of the "common ingredients strongly associated with growth in churches of any size, place or context ... [is] being intentional in chosen style of worship". For reasons which are not explained in FEA this does not feature in the list of growth factors now identified in FEA, but it is a further parallel with the NCD research findings.

One of the 8 factors in FEA is activity with children and young people. This has no parallel in NCD as it is not a universal principle (e.g. not necessary in a church in a retirement village) and NCD's research suggests that what you do is not so important as the way in which you do it – i.e. it is not a programme approach. FEA makes clear the importance of the parents of these children as well as the children themselves, and clearly a long-term strategy for growth cannot ignore the age imbalance of our churches, where they are represented in the wider community, and the need to be significantly more effective in reaching the younger generation

The CofE research findings and the toolkit of FEA with very similar findings to those of NCD demonstrates the value of NCD to the Church of England, with its principles and tools that can help churches address the issues raised by FEA and to prioritise them effectively in a growth strategy.

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 2016