

## **Natural Church Development**

### **By Bob Young**

Christian Schwartz wrote a book with this title. From the text of Mark 4:20, Jesus' parable about the seed placed in the ground and germinating in unseen and unknown ways, Schwartz develops the concept of natural or automatic church growth. He suggests that the presence of certain researchable and identifiable characteristics causes the church to grow automatically.

I applaud the apparent intention of the book, but I question whether church growth based on developing certain identifiable characteristics is empowered by God or by human efforts. Schwartz's interpretation of the key verse presents an interesting disconnection. In Jesus' parable in Mark 4:20, the seed automatically does what it is designed to do. However, in the parables of Jesus, the seed is the word of God, not the church. To me, the system outlined in Schwartz's book seems manipulative. Schwartz suggests that if one can successfully bring certain characteristics together, the church will grow automatically. Is such growth natural, automatic, from within; or is it artificially induced by external factors?

I want to present a different view of natural church growth. What does "natural" mean? Natural does not mean without planning. Natural means that the process occurs according to nature; in this case, according to the nature of life, faith, and the church. Natural may be understood to mean "according to natural law." One writer described an authentic Christian as one who does what comes naturally when one's nature is changed from carnal to spiritual. In this sense, Christians are naturally compassionate, evangelistic, and helpful. What would happen if the church developed spiritually in such a way that it could accomplish God's purpose by simply doing what comes naturally, acting according to its God-given nature?

I believe the Bible says exactly that. The church when it honors and lives out its biblical nature becomes what God intends it to be and does what God calls it to do. Four primary tasks of ministry and missions—evangelism, developing a local church, developing indigenous leaders, and planting additional churches—can occur "naturally."

### **EVANGELISM**

How can evangelism occur naturally? Is there a natural process of sowing spiritual seed? Is evangelism a part of the biblical nature or DNA of the church?

In Jesus' parable, the seed is spread intentionally and non-selectively. Even those who do not appear to be good prospects are touched by the seed sown in their hearts. In one sense, spreading seed is not natural; it is intentional. Sowing does not happen automatically. If the seed is not spread, the harvest cannot be reaped. The right seed must be spread. The seed is spread by in many ways: preaching, teaching, example, presence, sermons, brochures, and conversations are some examples.

Even though sowing is intentional, some methods are more natural than others. It is not natural to sow the seed randomly by shooting it into the air. The gospel seed travels across bridges. Bridges require two points of contact. Think of already existing relationships or acquaintances, establishing new contacts, friendships, and work relationships, or other

personal relationships. One can seek to build relationships with the intention of sharing good news. It is difficult, almost impossible, to send the gospel across empty spaces. Merely sharing information without relationship is less than natural. Further, if the seed germinates, it is harder to nurture spiritual growth.

### **CHURCH DEVELOPMENT**

Can churches develop and grow naturally? Is natural church development healthy and unnatural or artificial church development unhealthy? How does the church develop naturally? What does artificial church development look like?

Once the seed bears fruit and there are Christians in a certain location, once the time of initial intense evangelism is over, how does the church to grow naturally? I believe natural church development is a healthy process. Healthy churches grow and reproduce. What does a healthy church look like? Here are some goals for a new church (not sequential).

- Develop a biblical view of mission and purpose, guided by God's purpose for the church
- Develop a biblical view of God which informs worship: centering on God, centering on the identity of God's people, centering on the development of community
- Natural spiritual growth—both corporate and individual; spiritually developed members; holistic, contextualized spiritual life
- Natural fellowship growth, healthy churches want to be together, nurturing and progressing on the spiritual journey
- Natural development of leaders, structures which encourage the ministry of every member throughout the entire spiritual body
- Natural development of workers, every member, individual ministries, according to gifts
- Natural evangelism, as you are going, make disciples, so that the local church is the mechanism for spreading the gospel in its surroundings

### **LEADER DEVELOPMENT**

Can leaders develop naturally? What does natural leader development look like?

The development of leaders within a church is a natural process. People naturally grow and mature spiritually. Those who become spiritually mature naturally become teachers and leaders. The development of biblical structures is not natural. One must study and learn the leadership structures God wants for his church. Biblical leadership models may not seem natural to those who are deeply immersed in secular leadership. Biblical leadership is often natural within a community or family, but is not natural within an organization or business.

### **CHURCH PLANTING**

Can new churches be planted naturally? What is natural church planting?

The desire to spread the word naturally leads to new Christians who live in places away from the "mother" location. When there are Christians in a place where no church assembles, it is natural to plant a church and for the church members to work and worship in their own communities so that the gospel can continue to spread.