

# Is Church Development ‘Natural’?

## *A Critical and Constructive Analysis of Christian A. Schwarz’s Biotic Church Growth Theory*

Lars Råmunddal

Ansgar University College and Theological Seminary  
Fredrik Franssons vei 4, N-4635 Kristiansand, Norway  
[raamunddal@ansgarskolen.no](mailto:raamunddal@ansgarskolen.no)

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to give a theologically and scientifically based answer to the question whether church development is ‘natural’ in the sense that Christian A. Schwarz describes in his book *Natural Church Development*. Giving a reasonable answer to this question requires, first of all, that an analysis and assessment be done on how Schwarz’s biotic church growth paradigm is constructed and what kind of historical and theological factors have formed Schwarz’s thinking. Part of this theoretical analysis is also to find out what kind of epistemology and ecclesiological ontology seem to be the theoretical basis for Schwarz’s theory. Finally, I will contribute to the debate on the function of biotic growth theory in church development practice. Here I argue mostly out of my own previous empirical research. My conclusion will be that I cannot find any theologically and scientifically sound arguments to support the theory that church growth is natural – or biotic – as Schwarz claims. From a practical viewpoint, I conclude that there is no plausible connection between biotic theory and the church development practices recommended by Schwarz.

### Keywords

ecclesiology – evangelical – church growth – church development – biotic church – nature – epistemology – ontology

### Introduction

The German church growth researcher Christian A. Schwarz (b. 1960) has developed a new church growth theory which he characterizes as ‘biotic’ – in

contrast to traditional church growth thinking, which he characterizes as rational, pragmatic and technocratic. Schwarz states the following on the new biotic approach to church growth and church development:

[...] We have chosen to call it 'natural,' or 'biotic' church development. 'Biotic' implies nothing less than a rediscovery of the laws of life (in Greek, *bios*). The goal is to let God's growth automatisms flourish, instead of wasting energy on human-made programs.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this article is to answer the question whether church development really is 'natural' in the sense that Schwarz describes and explains it is in his biotic church growth theory. I have formulated three more specific questions on this issue. My first question is: How has Schwarz's biotic church growth theory been constructed? Since Schwarz's concept is based on a general philosophy on what growth is and how it can be applied to churches, it is important to examine how Schwarz's theory is constructed and composed in order to engage in a critical discussion of his thinking.

My second, more specific question is: what kind of epistemology and ontology can be found behind Schwarz's biotic church growth theory? My contention in this article is that, if one does not understand Schwarz's (in many ways fascinating) justification for his new thinking – to see what lies behind the 'external' structure and composition of his thoughts and ideas – one will not be able to correctly judge the validity and credibility of Schwarz's thinking.

In order to refine the problem I ask a third question: How does Schwartz's biotic theory relate to his recommended church development practice presented in his new concept of church growth? It is fairly obvious that Schwarz's thinking is based on the premise that church growth happens 'automatically' if one but follows Schwartz's Natural Church Development (NCD) practices. Growth mechanisms are naturally released through the NCD practices, so to speak. Because of this I will examine the true relationship between theory and practice in the NCD way of thinking at the end of this article.

The focus of this article, then, is a critical analysis and assessment of Schwarz's biotic church growth theory – based on the question of whether or not church development is 'natural' in the way Schwarz claims it to be. The relatively narrow focus of this article means that it is beyond its scope to

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<sup>1</sup> C. A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 1998), p. 7.

provide a broad introduction to the history, content and use of NCD. Nor will it be necessary to comment on and discuss 'The Trinitarian Compass' which is Schwarz's latest addition to the NCD concept.<sup>2</sup> Due to the article's narrow focus and limited scope, it will not be possible to give a full description of an alternative ecclesiological thinking in relation to Schwarz's biotic church growth theory. However, when it is appropriate in the forthcoming analysis of Schwarz's theory, I will suggest what direction I believe such an alternative ecclesiological thinking should go in.

The outline of this article is made evident in my intent to respond to the three questions mentioned above. In the first section I will analyze the theoretical structure and content of Schwarz's biotic paradigm as well as the theological character of his new church growth theory. In the second section I set out to identify and critically consider Schwarz's fundamental epistemology and ecclesiological ontology. Finally, in the third section I will identify the relationship between NCD as a theoretical and biotic church growth model and its practical application as a church development concept. In conclusion, I will give a theological and scientifically durable answer to the aforementioned question: Is church development 'natural' in the sense that Schwarz uses the term 'natural'?

In regards to terminology used in the article, I follow the general principle that a concept should be defined or explained in the context in which it occurs for the first time. Yet it will be appropriate to inform the reader when I will use various designations of Schwarz's church growth theory. In certain places I use the term *theory*, in the sense of 'a set of ideas or notions the interrelationships of which are made explicit'.<sup>3</sup> An important characteristic of a theory is that it contains a system of ideas or statements that explain a phenomenon. In other words, a theory must have 'explanatory relevance'.<sup>4</sup> *Formally* speaking, it can be said that Schwarz's biotic church growth theory meets this criteria. But the question I deal with here is not one of formality, but whether or not the content and 'inner' construction of Schwarz's theory is theologically and scientifically valid.

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2 C. A. Schwarz, *Color Your World With Natural Church Development: Experiencing All that God Has Designed You to Be* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources), 2006, pp. 44–79. See also H. Hegstad's critical evaluation of Schwarz's application of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, in: *Halvårsskrift for praktisk teologi*, 24 (2) 2007, pp. 64–66.

3 D. Føllesdal and L. Walløe, *Argumentasjonsteori, språk og vitenskapsfilosofi* [Argumentation Theory, Language and Philosophy of Science] (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2000), p. 60.

4 K. S. Bordens & B. B. Abbott, *Research Design and Methods: A Process Approach* (New York: McGraw-Hill Co. 2008), p. 43.

Schwarz himself uses the word *paradigm* in the book *Paradigm Shift in the Church*.<sup>5</sup> In the more popular versions of NCD<sup>6</sup> – *paradigm* is translated with the word *model*. This is the case in the Norwegian editions of the book, while the word *paradigm* is still used in the English editions.<sup>7</sup> Schwarz uses this term in relation to the ‘technocratic’ and ‘dualistic’ paradigms and models he distances himself from. He also uses it in terms of his own biotic church growth theory. In this article I will use the terms *paradigm* and *model* in reference to Schwarz, and *theory* or *theoretical construction* in reference to my own terms. Additionally I will use the term *concept* primarily in the context of NCD being a practical church development instrument.

### The Theoretical Structure and Ecclesiological Character of the Biotic Paradigm

#### *The Logical Structure of Schwarz's Theory*

A structure is something that is put together with a specific purpose, often with different types of materials. Schwarz's biotic church growth thinking can thus be seen as a kind of purposeful construction, also composed of different elements or types of ‘materials.’ It can be said that the purpose of Schwarz's biotic theory is to describe the characteristics of the growth of the Christian church, as well as to explain the growth mechanisms that are present when growth is happening. Additionally, the purpose of Schwarz's biotic theory is to clearly show how one can stimulate growth in congregations through various practical action steps.

As mentioned earlier, Schwarz's church growth theory is composed of many elements of diverse character, of which I mention six. 1) Schwarz employs thoughts that have their origins and roots in traditional church growth thinking. 2) The term ‘Third Reformation’<sup>8</sup> and the ideas of realization of the universal priesthood, places NCD in a radical-Reformation tradition. 3) The theory is

5 C. A. Schwarz, *Paradigm shift in the Church: How Natural Church Development Can Transform Theological Thinking* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources), 1999 [German Edition: *Die dritte Reformation. Paradigmenwechsel in der Kirche*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: AUSAAT-Verl. 1993].

6 Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*; and Schwarz, *Color Your World With Natural Church Development*.

7 Schwarz uses the term *paradigm* in a popular way. Since he himself does not define the word, it is difficult to place him in relation to the contemporary usage of the term.

8 See Schwarz, *Paradigm shift in the Church*.

based largely on an extensive empirical study of more than 1000 churches in several countries. According to the research findings, growing churches demonstrate eight different qualitative characteristics. 4) In addition, one can find in the NCD concept many elements directly inspired by the New Testament view of the church. 5) However, the one distinctive feature of this concept is its special application to church knowledge about how nature works in the 'production' of life and the phenomenon of growth. Schwarz believes that growth mechanisms in the church have their clear parallels in nature. 6) Finally, it is clear that the NCD concept is both meant to be – and also sold as – a practical applicable church growth development concept. In summation, it can be said that Schwarz's biotic theory and church growth model is composed of many different elements; one can find both historical and theological reasoning, as well as empirical and biblical material used side by side – combined with knowledge and principles from nature. It can be said that the concept is a practical 'formula' for how the church ought to make arrangements for growth.

Considering the differences and variations in the factors mentioned above, it seems at first glance that Schwarz uses these factors a bit randomly in the construction of his ideas. At closer look, however, it becomes evident that Schwarz's church growth theory is not at all haphazardly composed but is logically and rationally presented. On the other hand, the kind of rationality that Schwarz demonstrates in building his theory can be viewed as 'hyper-rationalism'.<sup>9</sup> Such rationalism is characterized by the use of scientific and theological-scientific terminology and arguments with a clear religious or theological intent. How this type of rationality should be critically assessed will be dealt with during my discussion of Schwarz's epistemology and ontology. In Figure 1 below, I use the analogy of a house to illustrate the logical structure and composition of the NCD concept. With the help of this diagram I attempt to illustrate how the NCD 'house,' in relation to its framework and design, consists of two supporting structures, namely empirical and biblical material. The roof construction – which holds the empirical and biblical materials together, is the natural theology that Schwarz utilizes.

Schwarz pedagogically describes and explains what role the natural, biblical and empirical materials play in his theoretical construction. However, what is not explicit and clearly expressed in the same texts is the *epistemological and ontological foundation of the biotic church growth theory*. Considering the spread and use of the NCD material worldwide, as well as taking into consideration the confidence many people have in Schwarz's presentation of his church

9 See G. Sahlberg, 'Animal magnetism och naturlig församlingstillväxt' [Animal Magnetism and Natural Church Growth] in: *Forum för Tro, Kultur och Samhälle*, 2007:1, p. 42.

growth model, it is important to clarify how Schwarz reasons and argues for his new biotic church growth paradigm. It is also very important to answer the question of the validity of Schwarz's church growth theory.

A comment is necessary on the two arrows depicted in Figure 1 below. The arrow on the left shows that there are two strong factors that have influenced the creation of the theory, namely traditional or classical church growth thinking and what I call here the radical-Reformation ecclesiological concept of *realizing the universal priesthood*. I will return to both of these issues later. The arrow on the right side of the 'NCD house' shows what 'comes out' of the church growth thinking that Schwarz defends; namely, a practical church development concept.

The relationship between the practical applications of Schwarz's church growth theory and what I call its theoretical structure (cf. 'the NCD house' below) will be analyzed later on (cf. the last section of this article).

Schwarz puts forward two arguments to justify his biotic church growth theory. First, he points to the shortcomings of traditional or classical church growth thinking. Second, as mentioned above, he constructs his new biotic theory based on three main sources: empirical investigation, knowledge from nature, and knowledge from the Bible. It is obvious that this purportedly 'new' biotic church growth thinking stands in a two-fold relationship with the classical approaches to church growth: on the one hand, Schwarz heavily criticizes the old way of thinking about church growth and therefore keeps his distance from it; on the other hand, it is apparent that he is deeply dependent on the same traditional way of thinking for his 'new' church growth thinking. This is

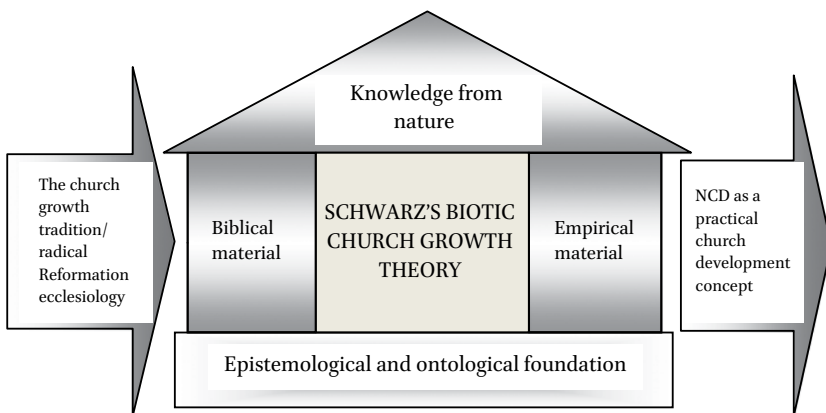


FIGURE 1 *The construction components of the biotic church growth paradigm.*

also the reason why it is not easy to place Schwarz either in what J. F. Hopewell calls 'mechanistic studies' of Christian congregations – or in what Hopewell calls 'organic studies'.<sup>10</sup> Based on thinking from what happens in nature, Schwarz's church growth thinking seems to be 'organic' – and therefore fits into Hopewell's organic category. But seen from his intention to describe which mechanisms trigger life and growth in congregations – and seen also from the viewpoint of his overall rationalistic approach – Schwarz might just as easily fit into Hopewell's description of 'mechanistic' studies.

### *Biotic vs. Traditional Church Growth Thinking*

Schwarz criticizes the traditional church growth thinking as 'technocratic'.<sup>11</sup> Schwarz does not clearly define what he means by 'technocratic', but from his description of the technocratic model<sup>12</sup> there is good reason to believe that someone with a technocratic approach thinks rationalistically, mechanically and pragmatically. To illustrate this way of thinking, Schwarz refers to a static cause-effect thought process along the lines of the kind we have when we approach a soft drink vending machine. In his opinion, not only is the church growth movement influenced by this way of thinking, but also Western churches in general.<sup>13</sup>

Schwarz states that in NCD one rejects the pragmatic and a-theological 'end justifies the means' approaches, replacing them with a principle-oriented point of departure.<sup>14</sup> He adds that NCD has no quantitative basis – as was the case with traditional thinking in the church growth movement. It is, rather, the quality of community life that is the key to growth – or, in Schwarz's own words:

Natural church development means bidding farewell to superficial pragmatism, to simplistic cause-and-effect logic, to a fixation with quantity, to manipulative marketing methods, and to questionable 'can-do' attitudes. It means leaving behind human-made prescriptions for success and moving on to growth principles which are given by God Himself to all of His creation.<sup>15</sup>

10 J. F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories & Structures* (London: SCM Press Ltd. 1987), pp. 23–26.

11 Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, pp. 6–7.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

For Schwarz a symbol of traditional church growth thinking is that of *a robot*. 'Regretfully, much of church growth literature in recent years comes closer in its thinking to the "robot" model than to the "organism" approach.'<sup>16</sup> He pits the 'old' church growth thinking against the 'new' in the following way: 'Technocratic church growth thinking is to natural church growth as a robot is to a human being, as a model from a wax museum to a living original, a plastic flower to a fragrant rose.'<sup>17</sup> Schwarz describes the consequences of traditional church growth thinking by utilizing a picture of a fully loaded old-fashioned wagon that two men are struggling to pull forward. The wagon is difficult to move because the wheels of the wagon are *square*, not round. This is an image of 'technocratic church growth' thinking, or church 'growth in our own power,' as Schwarz calls it.<sup>18</sup>

If we ask why Schwarz is so negatively one-sided in his description of traditional church growth thinking, we will primarily find the answer in Schwarz's personal relationship to the overall church growth movement. He describes his own development as a 'virtual breakthrough' and a 'mental revolution'.<sup>19</sup> In his own opinion, since he has taken a step into an entirely new way of thinking – one completely based on assumptions that are different to the 'old' church growth model, he needs to clearly demonstrate the contrast between the 'new' and the 'old'.

Despite his critique of traditional church growth thinking, Schwarz is obviously deeply connected to and dependent on the same tradition. We can see this from the fact that the growth of the church, according to both the traditional church growth model and Schwarz's own model, is understood to be a main criterion by which the church should be judged. The church growth tradition and literature works as a kind of conversation partner for Schwarz. Frequent references to D. McGavran, C. P. Wagner and others within the church growth movement reveal this. The one area where I believe we can see a dependence on earlier, more traditional church growth models is Schwarz's description of the spiritual gifts in the so-called 'gift test'.<sup>20</sup> The theology that Schwarz uses to identify and characterize the various gifts is nearly identical to the one presented in Wagner's book, *Your Spiritual Gifts*.<sup>21</sup> At a methodological level there are clear connections between them – since Schwarz, in line with the

16 Ibid., p. 62.

17 Ibid., p. 62

18 Ibid., pp. 6–7.

19 Ibid., p. 93.

20 C. A. Schwarz, *Der neue Gabentest* (Emmelsbüll, Germany: C & P Verlag, 1988).

21 C. P. Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1979).



traditional church growth movement, uses empirical research to find out something about church growth.

*Schwarz's Theory: Ecclesiological Characteristics and Guidelines*

The NCD concept is not a 'new' doctrine in the church and it does not pretend to be that. The point is that Schwarz claims that his church growth concept is reasonably free from dogmatic teaching in the traditional sense. There is, of course, an implicit ecclesiology that lies at the bottom of his concept with an ecclesiological foundation that leads one in a specific ecclesiological direction. In general, Schwarz's conception of the church must be characterized as evangelical. His focus on the growth of the church and the description of the functionality of the church has deep evangelical roots.<sup>22</sup>

This evangelical and intentional focus of the NCD concept makes its ecclesiology action-oriented and pragmatic in the sense that it prompts one to think about what will work for the church to grow. From ecclesiological positions other than evangelical, NCD's ecclesiology may be characterized by its empirical bias in the sense that it focuses, among other things, on that which is empirically measurable. Norwegian theologian Trond Skard Dokka states that the consequence of this empirical bias is that 'spiritual qualities in a non-empirical sense fall outside the visual field.'<sup>23</sup> This is generally correct, but it is clearly a fate that Schwarz's ecclesiology shares with much of the evangelical world.

As mentioned above, Schwarz's church growth theory and the NCD concept lead its users in a specific ecclesiological direction. One of the main theological ideas in the concept is the realization of the common priesthood. It is known that there were Christian groupings at the time of the Reformation that went slightly further than Luther in an attempt to realize the common priesthood and these have, in the past, been characterized as radical and belonging to the so-called left wing of the Reformation.<sup>24</sup> Schwarz himself calls his biotic theory and church-growth concept the 'third Reformation' (cf. the German book entitled *Die Dritte Reformation*).<sup>25</sup> This book is also interesting because Schwarz seems to use the history of theology from the age of the Reformation to defend his own theological way of thinking for his church growth theory.

<sup>22</sup> Schwarz, *Paradigm shift in the Church*.

<sup>23</sup> T. S. Dokka 'Anvendt ekklesiologi' [Applied ecclesiology]: in *Sine nomine*, 2 (1) (2000), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> For a description of the term 'radical (or left wing) Reformation', cf. D. Patte (ed.) *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 1049.

<sup>25</sup> Schwarz, *Paradigm shift in the Church*.

As previously mentioned, Schwarz's church growth thinking in NCD is non-dogmatic in the sense that it does not reflect any rigidly confessional dogmatic system. This leads to another consequence in that the concept is *non-sacramental* in the sense that important ingredients in most Christian church life, such as baptism and Holy Communion, are not mentioned or included as recommended church development practice. The signal this gives must be that neither the question of doctrine nor the sacraments can be said to be important for the development of the church, according to Schwarz. Perhaps this indicates that Schwarz believes that questions having to do with church growth belong on a different 'level' than questions concerning dogmatic and ecclesiastical decrees.

### The Biotic Paradigm Related to Schwarz's Epistemology and Ecclesiological Ontology

#### *Schwarz's Three Main Sources*

As shown in Figure 1, Schwarz builds his argumentation for biotic thinking on the foundation of the following three sources: 1) a large empirical study; 2) selected biblical texts (especially the New Testament texts that confirm his use of nature); and 3) the concept of nature or creation – which is used as an analogy for how the church is meant to function. These three sources stand in Schwarz's presentation in a certain relation to each other – where the analogy of nature, in many ways, is the central element in his thinking. These three sources are central to Schwarz's epistemological reasoning and justification for his church growth theory. Behind Schwarz's argumentation for the biotic theory, his *ontology*, i.e., his basic understanding of the church as reality can be seen. His description of this reality as 'bipolar' will be central to my discussion here.

I will first mention the empirical study that Schwarz undertook and the function it has in his thinking. According to his own information, in the early 1990s Schwarz examined more than 1,000 congregations in 32 countries on all six continents. Schwarz justifies the scientific reliability and validity of his project with reference to Christoph Schalk, German psychologist and social scientist, who coordinated and arranged the development of the project 'with rigorous standards for objectivity, reliability, and validity, and used approved methods from social science for the analysis of the data.'<sup>26</sup> There is no reason to doubt what Schwarz actually says here, namely that he and his

<sup>26</sup> Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, p. 19.

team 'internally' worked toward achieving scientific standards, claiming that the research results are controllable. A problem arises, however, in that the results of the research project have yet to be published, so that they can be internationally scrutinized and debated. The claimed scientific status of Schwarz's study and the NCD concept is thus in danger of being perceived as quasi-scientific.

Another worrisome aspect of Schwarz's empirical research is his claim that its results have general or universal validity. Schwarz justifies this by posing the question: 'How does one discover universally applicable church growth principles?'<sup>27</sup> He states that answering this question 'is not a matter of intuition, nor of studying a limited number of model churches. There is only one way to find an answer to this question, namely, scientifically sound research of churches around the world.'<sup>28</sup> The enormous effort behind the survey study Schwarz mentions here is the analysis of 4.2 million responses. Schwarz was motivated by such an extensive research method by 'the realization that without such thorough research it would be impossible to decide which of the modern "principles of success" are universally applicable and which are simply "myths".'<sup>29</sup> Schwarz adds: 'To my knowledge, our research provides the first worldwide scientifically verifiable answer to the question, "What church growth principles are true, regardless of culture and theological persuasion?"'<sup>30</sup>

Seen from a social scientific and methodological perspective, one can raise many fundamental objections to the way Schwarz generalizes the results of his empirical investigation. The kind of 'universal generalization' that Schwarz claims must surely be said to lie outside any recognized scientific thinking about the generalization of results from empirical studies. It is well known in science that empirical generalizations do not provide universal knowledge.<sup>31</sup> The fact that Schwarz *needs* to make this type of universal generalization of his empirical results, however, is a different matter. Given that both the Bible and nature (creation) hold general validity for him, it is quite 'logical' that his empirical data also need to gain this status. It has to do with the question of how Schwarz constructs his theory through comparing, equating and harmonizing the three different sources of his church growth theory.

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27 Ibid., p. 18.

28 Ibid., p. 18.

29 Ibid., p. 18.

30 Ibid., p. 19.

31 K. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London/New York: Routledge Classics, 1935/2007), pp. 3–9.

When it comes to Schwarz's use of the concept of nature, it can be said that we are facing a kind of *theologia naturalis* on the area of ecclesiology, as Schwarz himself also suggests.<sup>32</sup> He does indeed distance himself from the classic *theologia naturalis* thinking in theology, but he adds: 'Here, however, we are dealing with *principles of church growth*, not with questions about the character of God. It seems to me that in this context, learning from creation is not only legitimate, it is a must!'<sup>33</sup> For Schwarz, nature is synonymous with creation; and, central to his way of using the concept of nature, is the reference to what he calls 'the biotic potential' – i.e., the organism's inherent ability to reproduce itself.<sup>34</sup> When one deals with biotic processes, it is also important, according to Schwarz, '[...] for this inherent potential to have free rein [...]' While it is clear that growth cannot be "made" or forced, it is important to keep the environmental resistance to a minimum in order to create the best possible conditions for growth.<sup>35</sup> Schwarz transfers these 'truths' from the natural world directly to church reality. He states:

The same is true for church development. We should not attempt to 'manufacture' church growth, but rather to release the biotic potential which God has put into every church. It is our task to minimize the obstacles to growth (the 'environmental resistance') – both inside and outside the church. Since we have very little control over outside factors, we should concentrate on the removal of obstacles to church growth and multiplication within churches. Then church growth can happen 'all by itself'. God will do what he promised to do. He will grant growth.

1 CORINTHIANS 3:6<sup>36</sup>

Schwarz asks the question: 'What can be done to release the biotic potential – the growth automatism, by which God Himself grows His church?'<sup>37</sup> He answers this question by referring to four elements he sees as central for congregations who are in the process of developing church practices; namely: *quality characteristics*, *minimum strategy*, *biotic principles*, and *a new paradigm* or a new way of thinking about church growth.<sup>38</sup>

32 Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, p. 8.

33 Ibid., p. 8.

34 Ibid., p. 10.

35 Ibid., p. 10.

36 Ibid., p. 10.

37 Ibid., pp. 10–11.

38 Ibid., pp. 10–11.

With his identification of nature with creation, it can be said that Schwarz is making generalizations about nature. In other words, Schwarz makes the claim that life and growth principles that prevail in nature are generally valid for all churches – regardless of historical and cultural context. By doing this, as G. Sahlberg rightly points out, Schwarz ignores the fact that the word *nature* is one of the most value-laden terms we know.<sup>39</sup> We have also seen that Schwarz – with reference to how Jesus and the Bible refer to nature, uncritically uses nature as a parallel to the reality of the church. One consequence of this usage is that the same types of laws and principles that apply to life in nature also apply to life in the church. As a timely corrective to this way of using nature, H. Hegstad says [my translation]: ‘When the Bible uses phenomena from nature, it is as an expression of an analogy that expresses spiritual truth, not as a source of arguments.’<sup>40</sup> He adds: ‘Human societies, including churches, are cultural phenomena. The patterns that characterize human interaction are not laws like in nature, because they are expressions of human rationality and human choices.’<sup>41</sup>

Schwarz’s reference to the biblical texts must be characterized as selective and pragmatic. Biblical verses that can verify his own biotic theory are apparently his favorites. He seems to have a special interest in the nature and agriculture parables of Jesus, specifically the parables of the lilies of the field, the seed that grows by itself, the growth of the mustard seed, the four soils, the tree and its fruit, and the laws of sowing and reaping.<sup>42</sup> Based on these biblical references, however – references that in Schwarz’s opinion confirm his own biotic theory, there is little reflection done based on more traditional theological thinking of the normativity and actuality of the biblical teaching of the nature and function of the church. Admittedly, Schwarz says that if concepts and ideas (also taken from nature) contradict biblical truths, Christians must reject them. He also says that, with the help of the Bible, it is our task to distinguish between what is theologically sound and what is not.<sup>43</sup> With such statements he apparently places himself within an evangelical and conservative biblical tradition. However, in my opinion one of the main weaknesses of Schwarz’s church growth theory is that he has not taken a theological and

39 G. Sahlberg, ‘Animal magnetism och naturlig församlingstillväxt’ [Animal magnetism and natural church growth], 2007:1, pp. 40–43.

40 H. Hegstad, review of C. A. Schwarz, *Color Your World with Natural Church Development*, *Halvårsskrift för praktisk teologi*, 24 (2), p. 65.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

42 Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, p. 8.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

reflective approach to biblical normativity in his way of thinking about church growth.

In my view Schwarz does not make the fundamental and necessary reflections on what biblical normativity means – both in relation to the empirical reality from which he derives important facts and knowledge, and on the theological application of natural knowledge applied to the church reality and its function. I therefore make this conclusion: in his defence of his biotic model, Schwarz seems to be unaware of the danger of making the Bible the norm for all kinds of church thinking – for the benefit of the biotic model. In his model, empirical material, natural theology (applied to the church) and selected Bible verses are apparently given the same status and value.

The composition of an integrated theory on church growth from different elements gives Schwarz's theory and method a deductive character. Inductive knowledge – in this case taken from the empirical study, is also applied deductively in the context in which it is used. What could be called a more contextual approach – where the insights of church life and function occur in the dynamics between the biblical material (as normative) and empirical knowledge of the life and challenges of the church today (which is descriptive) – is not what Schwarz is doing, *but what he should have done* – in my opinion. Here I very much agree with N. M. Healy's critique of modern (and what he calls) 'blueprint' ecclesiologies, and with his strong argumentation for more concrete and contextualized ecclesiology.<sup>44</sup> As far as I can see, Schwarz's church growth theology fits with Healy's description of modern, 'blueprint' ecclesiologies like a glove.

### *Schwarz's Epistemological Position*

As we have seen, Schwarz obtains his knowledge of the true nature and function of churches by equating, harmonizing and generalizing three main sources: nature, the Bible and an investigation of more than 1000 churches worldwide. In my opinion, there is reason to ask what the basic epistemology behind this mixture of sources and this method of acquisition of knowledge is. With regard to the theological and ecclesiastical context in which this thought belongs, i.e., in evangelical church growth thinking, Schwarz's epistemological method may be assessed and discussed in relation to two epistemological positions: *critical realism* and *naïve realism*.<sup>45</sup>

44 N. M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life. Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 25–51.

45 P. G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994), pp. 19ff.

In my opinion, that which allows Schwartz's epistemological approach to be characterized as *naive realism* is the fact that he establishes little or no critical distance between reality and the knowledge acquired through the three sources described above. Naive realism is characterized by the fact that the acquired knowledge claims to be an exact reflection or mirroring of reality. To use P. H. Hiebert's term, there is a 'one-to-one correlation'<sup>46</sup> between the knowledge and theory Schwarz establishes with the 'world' or church reality he seeks to describe and explain. Naive realists believe, in other words, that their theology or theories and beliefs are in exact correspondence with reality, believing therefore that their theories or beliefs are necessarily true and universally valid.

We have here, as we have seen earlier, the important feature of NDC that Schwarz claims it has: that his theory or church growth concept has general or universal validity. In fact, I have also previously shown that Schwarz connects his large empirical study together with the use of selected biblical texts and the analogy of nature in an attempt to give a consistent explanation of the growth mechanisms of the church. This is also a typical feature of the naive realistic epistemological position. Hiebert says: 'Because knowledge is exact and potentially exhaustive, there can be only one unified theory. Various theories must be reduced to one.'<sup>47</sup>

What are the consequences of such an epistemology? The first thing to be said is that if one believes that he or she has 'seen the truth' and that it has general explanatory validity for a phenomenon, the person may have problems in relating to any who may disagree. I understand that Schwarz, both in written form and at NCD conferences does indeed respond to criticism. However, both the questions and answers he tends to respond to often address the utilitarian aspects of NCD and do not necessarily address the more fundamental epistemological issues of the model – as I pinpoint here. In light of the description of the basic epistemological method in NCD, I do not believe I am mistaken in my assumption that a more fundamental criticism of the epistemological construction and method of NCD will soon be rejected by Schwarz.

With the basic naive epistemological approach as the foundation of Schwarz's biotic church growth theory, it is also difficult to relate his approach to 'normal science' – in the sense of the usual academic and scientific way of working with theories in the field of theology. Another problem with Schwarz's method is that, while he argues strongly for NCD's 'scientific basis', he has not made his method and results public so that they can be inspected and debated

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46 Ibid., p. 26.

47 Ibid., p. 23.

in the scientific arena. NCD's and Schwarz's research and theory are thus in danger of being perceived as pseudo-science as I have previously noted.

Finally, this epistemological approach can lead to a kind of blindness to how contextual factors – such as culture and history – have influenced the creation of one's views or theories in ecclesiology.<sup>48</sup> With more recent approaches to the problem of epistemology, it is precisely this issue that will be highly focused. Naive realism is no longer 'a tenable epistemological position' – not even in the evangelical world, according to Hiebert.<sup>49</sup> In various scientific disciplines – including the humanities and theology – there is today a far stronger focus on the human element in all knowledge than before. *Naive realism* has therefore been abandoned in favour of what may be called *critical realism*. This position holds that our knowledge of the world or reality is partial or piecemeal, but it can nonetheless – as far as it reaches – be true. Our knowledge of reality is created through a complicated process through perception, interpretation, abstraction and generalization of reason.<sup>50</sup>

Interpretation always requires a theoretical or conceptual framework<sup>51</sup> – with a terminology, model and theory that are subject to scientific review and discussion. Our knowledge can therefore be compared to a map or a model of a *portion* of reality – that it says something important about reality. However, our knowledge of reality can never be viewed as identical to reality itself. According to Hiebert, 'Technically, we should speak of theologies, for each theology is an understanding of divine revelation within a particular historical and cultural context.'<sup>52</sup>

What are, then, the consequences of my epistemological critique of Schwarz's church growth theory? First of all, Schwartz's equalization, harmonization and generalization of different sources in order to give a unifying description and explanation of reality will need to be discarded. Secondly, the character of knowledge as contextual and partial means that one needs to be a bit more careful in asserting that something is universally valid, especially within the humanities and social sciences. Thirdly, in order for something to be

48 See Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, pp. 38–39, to gain argumentative support for the necessity of considering the *context* of the church as an essential part of our ecclesiological thinking today.

49 Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, pp. 26–27.

50 J. R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: Penguin, 1995); I. Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

51 B. Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science: A Multicultural Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 75–76.

52 Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, p. 30.



deemed scientific today, one should follow the accepted ways of empirically constructing knowledge about reality, in accordance with critical realism. When Schwarz uses a method that can be seen as *déjà passé* – a method that is only used in different versions of theological fundamentalism today – it discredits his claim to being 'scientific.'

### *Some Words on Schwarz's Ontology*

Behind every epistemology there is a more or less implicit understanding of reality; i.e., an ontology. Therefore there is also good reason to ask how Schwarz understands the reality of the church and how this reality should be described. Schwarz argues that his new ecclesiological model – with its implicit view of reality – is 'bipolar'.<sup>53</sup> 'Polarity is an ubiquitous phenomenon in God's creation,' he writes, and he continues by stating: '[...] The law of polarity states that for every force there must be a counterforce.'<sup>54</sup>

Polarity is a dynamic in nature (which he equates with creation) that Schwarz immediately extrapolates to the reality of church. Schwarz claims that the same polarity that exists in nature also exists in the church: 'where the church is referred to with both dynamic and static images.'<sup>55</sup> The two poles stand in '[...] a reciprocal relationship. The dynamic pole always creates organization (structures, institutions, rules or programs). The purpose of this organization is, in its turn, to develop further the dynamic pole.'<sup>56</sup> However, 'The problem is,' states Schwarz, 'that in most churches the cycle is broken down.'<sup>57</sup> Even if Schwarz connects the Holy Spirit's work to both the dynamic and static poles, his terminology and description creates a dualistic image. He describes the dynamic pole using such words as faith, God's Word, love, fellowship, and spiritual gifts. The static pole, on the other hand, is characterized by human organization and other 'man-made' things. He describes the static pole in terms of learning, ethics, sacraments, tradition, office, and arrangements, among others.<sup>58</sup>

However, Schwarz states that we soon encounter the dangers of dualism and monism here.<sup>59</sup> In Schwarz's terminology, monism considers the two poles as one. 'People who are influenced by this thought pattern are convinced that

53 Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, pp. 84ff.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

58 *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 95.

59 *Ibid.*, pp. 86–91.

if only the right pole has the right form (right doctrine, right political persuasion, right church growth program, etc.), than they don't have to worry about the left pole (the dynamic life of the organism called the church).<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, dualistic thinking is typical spiritualistic thinking – where one considers forms, programs, structures and institutions as spiritually irrelevant, perhaps even harmful, according to Schwarz.<sup>61</sup>

In relation to different ecclesiological ontological positions that we know from the history of theology, one can say that Schwarz, with his description of the church, avoids getting into what could be called an ontological reductionist position. Ontological reductionism occurs in an ecclesiological context where one emphasizes the realness of the church as a human fellowship. One also describes what is distinctive for the church as a special relationship of belief in relation to a transcendent reality, meaning God.<sup>62</sup> Although the type of monism Schwarz describes is related to things other than the ontological monism behind this reductionist ecclesiological ontology, it is quite clear that Schwarz cannot be described as an ecclesiological reductionist. In fact, Schwarz sees the church as 'something more' than 'just' a human community.

Given his understanding and description of the dualistic and spiritualistic danger, it may appear that Schwarz avoids the conclusion that the church is primarily a spiritual reality – while the church as a *human* community is seen as something secondary and not as important.<sup>63</sup> Schwarz's problem, however, is that – while he rejects a dualism of the spiritualistic type – he gets into a *theological*-dualistic description of church reality inspired by the bipolarity of nature-church. Generally I believe it is appropriate to claim that Schwarz's epistemological approach has, as an ontological consequence, a description of the church with dualistic features. Therefore, the attempt to give a theological description of the church as bipolar, just like nature, appears to be just as 'made-up' as the rest of Schwarz's biotic church growth theory. He creates, in fact, an inner logic that makes his thinking seem plausible; but measured by strict theological and scientific standards, his ecclesiological ontology must be described as untenable.

60 Ibid., p. 86

61 Ibid., pp. 86-87.

62 M. H. Hougsnæs, 'Kirkesyn og kirkeledelse' [Views on Church and Church Leadership], *Havårskrift for praktisk teologi*, 24 (2) (2004), pp. 15–25.

63 Such a tendency to conceive the church as having a bipolar structure is very common to modern ecclesialogists. Healy mentions the ecclesiological approaches of Karl Rahner, Karl Barth and Jean-Marie Tillard; see Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, pp. 28–30. See also H. Hegstad, *The Real Church: An Ecclesiology of the Visible* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co Ltd., 2013), pp. 26ff.

From an ontological point of view, Schwarz's description of the nature of the church must be described as *ontological realism*. However, because of the aforementioned quote from his epistemological approach, his ontology appears to be *naïve* and 'apprehensible'.<sup>64</sup> Such a view implies that one believes that the reality is whatever you claim it to be – or as you describe it. The alternative would have been an ontology of the *critical* type – which would argue that the human community (including the Church) is shaped by social, historical, cultural, political and financial conditions.<sup>65</sup> This would have consequences for both the epistemological approach and methodology in the exploration and description of church as reality.

### The Function of the Biotic Growth Theory in Church Development Practice

#### *NCD as a 'Popular Organizational Prescription'*

How does Schwartz's biotic theory relate to the church development practice recommended by Schwarz's new theory of growth? The question of how this new church growth concept is used in practice can, in my opinion, be assessed from at least two perspectives. The first one has to do with how the concept is presented and sold to the churches. I will argue alongside K. A. Røvik, who has written about what he calls 'popular organizational recipes' and how such recipes function in organizations and in businesses.<sup>66</sup> Such an argumentation assumes that I consider NCD a popular organizational 'prescription, or formula, for churches. The second perspective has to do with Schwarz's description of the 'growth automatism' which he claims occur when things are going right in a church.<sup>67</sup> My question is: Does growth arise 'automatically' in churches that use NCD?

In my book *Konsept og endring [Concept and Change]*<sup>68</sup> I describe some clear parallels between the so-called 'popular organizational prescription', as

64 N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (eds), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage 2008), p. 257.

65 Ibid.

66 K. A. Røvik, *Moderne organisasjoner: Trender i organisasjonstenkingen ved tusenårsskiftet [Modern Organizations: Trends in Organizational Thinking at the Turn of the Millennium]* (Bergen, Norway: Fagbokforlaget, 1998).

67 Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, p. 12.

68 L. Råmunddal, *Konsept og endring: En studie av hvordan lokale ekklesiologier formes [Concept and Change: A Study of the Formation of Local Ecclesiologies]* (Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag/KIFO Perspektiv/Church Research Perspectives, 2011).

Røvik describes them in a secular context, and what I call 'church versions' of such organizational prescription, which can function as concrete guidelines for church development. In my case this deals with NCD as well as church-stimulating material from Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Community Church in the United States.<sup>69</sup> While NCD is rated as a popular organizational prescription or guideline for churches, the fact is that the theoretical aspects as well as the more strategic and practical parts of the NCD model are used in both the marketing and in the recommended practical application of the concept.<sup>70</sup>

So what are the characteristics of NCD as a popular organizational prescription or guideline for churches? Røvik defines institutionalized organizational prescriptions as (in my translation): '[...] a legitimate prescription for how one can design sections or elements of an organization. It's a prescription that attracts – and has been an exemplary status, for multiple organizations.'<sup>71</sup> The word 'institutionalized' means that the prescription '[...] within a period is perceived by many people and often referred to as the right, the appropriate, effective, modern – and even natural way to organize.'<sup>72</sup> Typical for these modern and popular organizational prescriptions, according to Røvik, is that they have spread far – and fast – 'over the oceans and across continents, nations and organizations'.<sup>73</sup>

Another typical feature of these prescriptions is that they are intended to provide answers to questions and problems that can be considered to be typical of a specific time and place.<sup>74</sup> Røvik also shows that these prescriptions provide simplified answers that organizations often demand; the recipes are also introduced in a scientific 'form' and are thus presented as 'fact'. Røvik states that the reality and the problems that the prescriptions depict are 'often packed into a rationalistic language and presented as objective facts that have

69 Ibid., pp. 55ff.

70 Although S. Pattison's critique of managerial rationalization of churches is seen more specifically in relation to pastoral care, there are many points in his criticism which also affects Schwarz's ecclesiological construction and his application of this thinking as an organizational recipe for churches in their developing practices today, see: S. Pattison, 'Some Objections to Aims and Objectives': in G. R. Evans & Martyn Percy (eds), *Managing the Church? Order and Organization in a Secular Age* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 129.

71 Røvik, *Moderne organisasjoner [Modern Organizations]*, p. 13.

72 Ibid., p. 13.

73 Ibid., p. 16.

74 Ibid., pp. 126–132.

been observed and documented and presented almost as science-based insights'.<sup>75</sup> Røvik refers to researchers who have shown how 'common sense' seems more convincing for members of an organization if it is given a pseudo-scientific character. It reflects the fact that rationality and science are perceived as synonymous with the objective search for truth, carrying an enormous legitimizing potential in our civilization.<sup>76</sup>

As the reader probably has already discovered, it is not difficult to draw clear parallels from the selected features of popular organizational prescriptions as Røvik describes them – and NCD. This concept is clearly used to design parts of the life and organization in churches that use it. And the NCD concept has also acquired an exemplary status in many churches. As in more secular prescriptions, NCD has 'spread far and fast' in just a few years, to use Røvik's words. In my study (which is mentioned above) of two Norwegian churches (one free church and the other a local state church) that used the NCD concept, it was revealed through the research that NCD was considered to be the most appropriate and natural way to organize the church today. Moreover, I could find a clear belief in these two churches that NCD presents solutions to problems that the church faces today. My study also showed that there were very few people in these churches who questioned the NCD concept's own claim to be scientific and universally valid.

The fact that NCD can be characterized as a popular organizational prescription or guideline for churches may say something about the concept's character and how it should be considered from the users' point of view. It is *one* prescription among many for how churches can arrange their development. Such prescriptions are 'popular' in the sense that they are easily accessible to most people, but also in the sense that they should be considered as a non-academic approach to church development. NCD's claim to be professional, scientific and universally valid must be seen as a sales-related presentation that is typical of this kind of prescription or church developing concept.<sup>77</sup>

### *Does Church Growth Come 'Automatically'?*

In summation, Schwarz's biotic church growth theory mainly functions as an *explanatory* theory of how growth occurs and may affect churches. The biotic theory functions, in other words, as a kind of theoretical framework for NCD as

75 Ibid., p. 130.

76 Ibid., p. 130.

77 Råmunddal, *Konsept og endring* [*Concept and Change*], pp. 67–72.

a practical church development concept. A relevant question in this context is whether or not the theory is *true*. Will the growth of the church happen ‘all-by-itself’ – as growth occurs in nature – as NCD’s church development program claims?

Answering these questions would require relatively extensive research on the impact of the use of NCD. As a suggestion for response, however, I can refer to my own research in the two previously mentioned Norwegian churches.<sup>78</sup> My examination of the two congregations indicated that they had *not experienced any increased growth rate*, although they had used NCD’s recommended procedures and programs over a number of years. With the reservation that the situation may be different in many other churches, the experience of my two case study churches can, at the very best, indicate the problematic aspects of Schwarz’s conception of ‘growth automatism’ – or the so called ‘all-by-itself’ principle.<sup>79</sup>

Based on my research, I believe that I have sufficient reason for stating that, in the practical application of NCD, it seems that the theoretical framework of NCD (what I refer to in this article as biotic church growth theory) does not play any prominent or important role. Schwarz’s fascinating thoughts about life principles in nature with their extended parallels to the church are, in Schwarz’s own writings, the causes behind church development practices. However, in the daily life of developing churches, I believe that it is the practical and strategic part of the NCD concept that is primarily used. What is important, then, is to take the church profile, working with the so-called *minimum factor*, which focuses on the improvement of all quality characteristics of the church. All of these measures can be utilized without directly using biotic growth theory.

As I see it, NCD as a practical church development concept (without its specific theoretical and biotic background) has many strengths and elements that make its focus useful in churches. This includes, for example, the need for improved quality in different areas by focusing on the need for more long-term plans that are closely connected with the very nature of the church. This does not preclude the existence of large development needs in NCD as a practical church development tool. It would nonetheless be a useful tool in developing a terminology that can more aptly communicate with more established ecclesiology, organizational theory and church practice. Finally, if I were to dare offer some advice to NCD’s facilitators and users, it would be for them to drop much of the biotic theory, focusing instead on developing the practical,

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78 Ibid.

79 Schwarz, *Natural Church Development*, pp. 12–14.

quality-enhancing elements of NCD in terms of its application to the various types of church community.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to provide a theologically and scientifically based answer to the question of whether or not church development is 'natural' in the sense that Schwarz claims that it is in his biotic church theory. I believe that there are sufficient grounds for affirming that there is *no* basis for claiming that church development is 'natural' – at least not in the sense that Schwarz uses the term. I have argued that Schwarz's theory can be seen as a type of (hyper-) rational construction of thoughts – where the composition, harmonization and generalization of three sources are very central. These sources are empirical data, biblical texts and knowledge from nature. The construction of thought in the biotic theory may appear 'logical' and 'rational' as Schwarz portrays it, but it is the compilation of and attempt at harmonization of such diverse sources that poses its biggest problem. Schwarz's biotic theory may be seen as *logically incoherent* in a scientific and theoretical sense.

I have described Schwarz's theoretical construction in epistemological terms as *naive realism*, which is an epistemological position that most people in the theological academic world consider outdated. The ontology behind Schwarz's ecclesiological thinking can – not surprisingly, as Schwartz can be placed within an evangelical and conservative theology – be characterized as realistic and non-reductionist. However, Schwarz's ecclesiological ontology has a dualistic, or 'bipolar' character, owing to its 'nature-based' description of the church. This description can be described as both unusual in ecclesiology and unclear, evaluated from the perspective of common ecclesiological language and positions. If my interpretation of Schwarz is correct and reasonable, I can surmise that Schwarz's biotic church growth theory is constructed on a theologically and scientifically unsound basis – in terms of epistemology, ontology and methodology.

Since Schwarz's church growth theory – with its claim that church development is 'natural' and that church growth will come 'automatically' – can have implications for how church practice is organized, it has been of interest to me to say something about the relationship between (growth) theory and (church development) practice. On the one hand, I have pointed out that NCD must be treated as a holistic church growth concept, where biotic theory certainly plays an important role in both the presentation and the marketing of NCD as a practical, applicable and organizational recipe for churches. On the other

hand, I have pointed out that it appears that the theoretical (and biotic) aspect of NCD does not play any significant role in the *practical application* of the NCD concept. This may be due to the possibility that many users have discovered that biotic theory does not match well with church realities, e.g. that growth does not necessarily happen 'automatically' as the theory predicts. This can indicate that there is not a 'necessary' connection between the church growth theory itself and the application of the NCD concept.