

Bringing Light and Life through Natural Church Development

by Jeannette Buller and Tara Miller

Many cell churches have begun to use the Natural Church Development Survey developed by Christian Schwarz to help their churches become more healthy. Here is the story of one cell church that has used the survey to create a healthier environment for cell groups to flourish.

For many years, Light & Life Church has made its home in the urban setting of Escondido, California. One hundred and fifty adults gather together for worship each Sunday morning. Over the past several years, the church has been slowly transitioning from a traditional ministry model to a cell-based approach.

Pastor Vern Burgess desired to maintain a healthy ministry balance in the church, especially in the midst of so many changes. He began by requesting that the members of the board read *Natural Church Development* by Christian Schwarz. Encouraged by the board's response, Pastor Burgess then suggested that the church take the Natural Church Development survey to delve more deeply into each area of the church's life. The survey was administered to the congregation in August of 1998.

Pastor Burgess initially found the results rather discouraging. None of their scores were above 50 and their minimum factor in the area of Functional Structures came in at just 18. After his initial disappointment, the pastor recognized that knowing where he needed to focus his energies was the first step toward increased health.

These were the results of the NCD survey for Light & Life Church:

| | |
|----------------------------|----|
| Empowering Leadership | 24 |
| Gift-Oriented Ministry | 20 |
| Passionate Spirituality | 38 |
| Functional Structures | 18 |
| Inspiring Worship Services | 41 |
| Holistic Small Groups | 33 |
| Need-Oriented Evangelism | 27 |
| Loving Relationships | 36 |

Making Changes

Since Pastor Burgess was strongly supported by his board, the cell groups and his congregation, he knew he could easily obtain approval to address their minimum factor. But he wanted more than approval. He wanted ownership. To this end, Pastor Burgess enlisted a business consultant to help him gain congregational ownership, and together they developed a plan for presenting the survey results to the congregation in way that would kindle the desire for change and growth.

With the board, cells and congregation now firmly behind him, Pastor Burgess was uncertain about how to proceed. As is the case in many older churches, some members found the thought of changing time-honored structures and practices threatening. However, changes clearly needed to be made.

As Pastor Burgess read *Releasing Your Church's Potential* by Bob Logan and Tom Clegg, he noted that one essential area of Functional Structures was the clarification of values and vision. So he went to the board to inquire. No, they had never clarified values and, yes, they did have a vision statement... somewhere. This seemed to be the place to start.

Just as the board began to study scripture in earnest to determine their values and vision, membership on the board changed and the whole process came to a standstill. At this point, Pastor Burgess began to sense the need for a consultant who could help develop clear core values for their church. He specifically wanted a consultant who understood the cell-based model of ministry so the change process would be compatible with their desire to

continue moving in the direction of cell-based ministry. He called Bob Logan's office for assistance. Bob recommended Jeannette Buller, an NCD consultant who has spent many years working with cell churches. Soon Jeannette arrived and began consulting with Light and Life.

Identifying Values

It was now October 1999, more than a year after the first survey had been taken. In order to capitalize on any remaining energy generated by the initial desire for change, Jeannette knew they needed to see some movement and some results soon.

Jeannette suggested that Pastor Burgess begin by soliciting a response from core leaders in the church regarding values that are important to the congregation. This step was intended to increase participation and solidify ownership from a broader segment of the congregation.

The pastor gathered together the core leaders and told them a story:

"You are walking down the street a few blocks from here when you overhear two people talking about our church. One of them asks the other, "Do you know anything about Light & Life Church? What kind of church are they?" The person asking the question is not interested in the programs offered or the theology professed, but wants to know more about the nature and personality of the church. What are they like? What are their priorities? What makes them unique? The other person responds, "Yes, I know a little about that church..."

Pastor Burgess then asked each of the core leaders to list three to seven qualities they would hope to hear from the person responding to that question. Additionally, he gave the board members a long list of possible values and asked them to choose the top five. Then he asked them to reflect on these six statements:

- 1.) If the church were really the church, what would it be doing?
- 2.) What makes you angry (something that happens in the church)?
- 3.) What do you get passionate about?
- 4.) How do you invest your time and money as a church?
- 5.) What is your biggest criticism of the church?
- 6.) What are the essential functions of the church?

The story, the list of possible values, and the six statements were all designed to engage people in the process of reflecting on their core values. After collecting this input from the core leaders, Jeannette scheduled a board retreat for January 2000 to consolidate and solidify the values of the church.

The primary tool Jeannette used to facilitate discussion on the retreat was the "APA analysis." This approach helps a group focus on what they would like to Achieve, Preserve, and Avoid as the church continues to grow. The structure allows visionaries the chance to talk about goals and dreams they would like to achieve, while providing more cautious participants with the opportunity to voice concerns regarding necessities to be preserved and pitfalls to be avoided.

One recurring theme that flowed through the weekend's conversation was how each concern and issue that was raised would affect the cell groups and how their ministry context would influence the direction of the church. By participating in this exercise, the board was able to pinpoint common issues that came up in all three of the APA categories. With Jeannette's help, they were able to use this list of common issues to determine their seven core values. The board discovered that even a group of individuals as diverse as they were could arrive at agreement on essential values.

Following the retreat, the pastor developed a series of sermons on the seven core values. The grand finale of the series was the unveiling of the new vision statement that incorporated all of those.

The Value of the NCD Process

When asked about the value of bringing in a consultant, Pastor Burgess cited several areas of significant impact. Jeannette provided a needed impetus in encouraging them to continue on with the process and not lose heart. She also kept them accountable to carry though on the tough assignments. The pastor appreciated being able to participate in the retreat discussion as a participant rather than a facilitator. He felt that the consultant was able to help people not only come to agreement, but also to create a strong sense of ownership over the values they discovered.

In June 2000, Pastor Burgess and Jeannette felt that the time had come to take another survey. Their scores showed a dramatic improvement over the last time. Their previous minimum factor of functional structures had increased from 18 to 51. The 33-point improvement was reason for celebration. Additionally, every other score had increased by 5-30 points, giving them two scores in the 65+ range. The score for Holistic Small Groups increased dramatically from 33 to a healthy 65. Even their new minimum factor of Gift-oriented Ministry had increased by 20 points.

Below is a chart comparing the results of the first and second NCD surveys:

| | Old | New |
|----------------------------|------------|------------|
| Empowering Leadership | 24 | 45 |
| Gift-Oriented Ministry | 20 | 40 |
| Passionate Spirituality | 38 | 51 |
| Functional Structures | 18 | 51 |
| Inspiring Worship Services | 41 | 46 |
| Holistic Small Groups | 33 | 65 |
| Need-Oriented Evangelism | 27 | 55 |
| Loving Relationships | 36 | 66 |

These scores pleased the pastor and his leadership team and encouraged them to press on toward future improvements with even more energy. Pastor Burgess expresses his gratitude for the Natural Church Development survey, team and consultants, who helped him and his church focus their energy in a direction of positive change, health and growth. He is now continuing to work with Jeannette to address their new minimum factor. Rather than finding Natural Church Development to be a distraction to cell groups, Pastor Burgess found that increasing the overall health of the church produced an environment that contributed to the health and growth of the cell groups.

Natural Church Development is a process of evaluation, reflection, planning and action. It is not a quick fix or a program to get through, but a continual process of focusing on improving church health which can result in churches mobilizes for God’s glory and the expansion of his kingdom.