



## Defining Congregational Effectiveness by Ann A. Michel

What makes a church strong? Too often, measures of church success seem illusive and intangible or, alternatively, superficial and arbitrary. However, new broad-scale empirical research is helping to define the qualitative factors of congregational effectiveness and their impact on growth.

In 2001, the U.S. Congregational Life Survey queried more than 300,000 worshipers in over 2,000 congregations throughout the United States. It claims to be the most representative profile of U.S. worshipers and their congregations ever undertaken. Principle survey authors Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce present its findings in *Beyond the Ordinary: Ten Strengths of U.S. Congregations* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004). It is helpful to consider their work along side that of German researcher Christian Schwarz in *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (ChurchSmart Resources, 2003). His research, aimed at identifying the causes of church growth, was conducted in the mid 1990s with 1,000 churches in 32 countries.

Woolever and Bruce ask “What make a congregation strong?” and then correlate those factors with growth; while Schwarz surveyed growing churches to assess their characteristics. In Woolever and Bruce’s model, a congregation can be strong, but not growing; while Schwarz assumes that strengths are by definition what make you grow. This underlying distinction explains many differences in the books. But there are notable similarities in the qualitative factors of congregational life found to be important.

U.S Congregational Life Survey’s “Strengths”	Natural Church Development’s “Quality Characteristics”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Growing Spiritually</li> <li>▪ Meaningful Worship</li> <li>▪ Empowering Leadership</li> <li>▪ Having a Sense of Belonging</li> <li>▪ Participating in the Congregation</li> <li>▪ Sharing Faith</li> <li>▪ Welcoming New People</li> <li>▪ Community Involvement</li> <li>▪ A Vision for the Future</li> <li>▪ Caring for Children and Youth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Passionate Spirituality</li> <li>▪ Inspiring Worship Service</li> <li>▪ Empowering Leadership</li> <li>▪ Loving Relationships</li> <li>▪ Holistic Small Groups</li> <li>▪ Need-oriented evangelism</li> <li>▪ Gift-oriented ministry</li> <li>▪ Functional Structures</li> </ul>

Both books see church growth as holistically connected to congregational health in highly individualized ways, rejecting the preoccupation with numerical measures in favor of a more subtle and nuanced understanding . *Beyond the Ordinary* denounces overly simplistic, cookie-cutter approaches to vitality; while *Natural Church Development* criticizes growth strategies built around a pastor’s pet project or mimicking mega-churches.



## Growth Factors

The U.S. Congregational Life Survey found only three strengths positively associated with numerical growth: caring for children and youth; participating in the congregation; and welcoming new people. Many presumed growth factors -- age of the congregation, worship style, local population growth, theology, and style of leadership -- were found to be unrelated to growth.

Schwarz deems all eight of his quality characteristics essential to growth. According to his analysis, a church can grow through other means (i.e. effective marketing or a superstar pastor); but any church that hits the mark in all eight quality characteristics will grow. Schwarz is confident that he has uncovered the “natural principles of growth,” which like the laws governing growth and reproduction in the biological sphere, are part of God’s created order.

## Half Full or Half Empty

*Beyond the Ordinary’s* authors write that knowing what makes a congregation strong is more helpful than identifying weaknesses. A church can best develop by concentrating on its strength. This optimistic view might tempt a church to ignore its shortcomings. *Natural Church Development* draws on the metaphor of a barrel that holds water only to the point of its shortest stave to illustrate its contention that a church’s growth is blocked by its least developed characteristics. Identifying and improving the “minimum factor” is critical says Schwarz. Ultimately, however, the question of whether strengths or weaknesses are more important is a false dichotomy. Both books appreciate the holistic connection between different facets of congregational life and advocate leveraging strengths to shore up weak points.

## Hope for the Small Church

Both research efforts contradict the popular notion that large churches are by definition good churches. In the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, small congregations tend to be stronger than large or mid-size congregations in five of the ten areas -- growing spiritually, participation, sense of belonging, sharing faith, and empowering leadership. Schwarz goes further, maintaining that small churches compare favorably to larger ones on nearly all relevant quality factors. Both studies claim small churches are just as likely as large ones to attract newcomers. Schwarz found growth rates decrease as size increases -- so much that Schwarz declares size a strong negative correlate to growth. Large, growing churches exist; but to Schwarz they are exceptions to the rule.

## New Ways of Thinking

The broad scope and sweeping claims of *Beyond the Ordinary* and *Natural Church Development* invite methodological debate and tempt us, perhaps, to over interpret their results. But the value of these works goes beyond the specifics of their findings. Their greater contribution is to reframe the church effectiveness debate, sweeping aside many myths about growth and affirming the importance of the quality of church life.

Despite the authors’ upbeat tone, they issue a wake up call. Woolever and Bruce’s conclusion that much of what congregations do best is extraneous to growth and Schwarz’s high threshold for achieving growth are sobering reminders of why growth eludes so many churches. Nevertheless, these three authors offer real hope. Appreciating the diversity and complexity of congregational life, they affirm the giftedness of individual congregations. *Beyond the Ordinary* and *Natural Church Development* remind us that God already has given churches what they need to flourish and succeed.

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