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Presentation Transcript
The Advantages of Natural Church Development
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Victor was talking today about the course that God sets us each on and how we never know where that's going. We just get on the train and ride, right? That reminded me that I used to work for an organized Sabbatarian Church of God – with their national youth program – a number of years ago. While I was there I met a man named Guy Swenson. We've been friends ever since. He worked for the church as an aide to person who was responsible for the entire U.S. ministry of that church. The reason they hired him was because he had a business background. From his background, he brought some powerful ideas to the table about how to organize and create a structure that was going to help everybody.

One of the ideas that he brought was sort of self-study. I don't know what you would call it in business terms, but companies study their own behavior. They study their methods. They do that to learn what works and what doesn't work so they can make changes that increase the productivity of the organization. In his digest of the data about the church – especially church growth – he found that, in spite of a heavy orientation toward media evangelism, in the last decade of the church at that time, he found that the church grew primarily by member contact with their circle of relatives and friends and acquaintances. That was interesting because that church was spending millions of dollars on media evangelism and member efforts cost nothing – and they were doing the work, really, without even realizing it.

That's a really powerful fact when you consider that the members of this church were taught *not* to talk about their religion to other people. They couldn't help it! People would ask questions. You know, "Why are you doing this? Why do you act this way? What's different?" So he was fascinated by this. So he began to study evangelism in the Bible.

About that time, as most of us who were a part of that organization know, there was a huge disruption in the church, and Guy, and I, and Guy's boss, and many other people did a lateral move to a new church, based on the same ideas as the first one. A lot of us know the story of that, but our doctrinal beliefs were being undermined. So to maintain faith and practice, we were forced in mass to move.

In the new church Guy began to send information to the church leadership about evangelism in the Bible and how it worked. And after about eight years of no response, he called me up one day, and he said, “How would you like to do a seminar on evangelism with me?” And I agreed, and then I asked him what he thought we should say. His response was very interesting to me. He said, “Well, we don’t have to reinvent the wheel. There are people out there already who know what the Bible teaches about evangelism. It’s just not us. All we have to do is go learn what they know. We don’t have to figure it all out all over again.” So, a few weeks later, Guy Swenson and I and a friend, Jim O’Brien, attended a training in Chicago with a company called ChurchSmart. And we became trainers for a system called Natural Church Development.

We attended this seminar for four days. I was not bored for one single second – the whole four days. I was *captivated* by what I saw there. There were about a hundred people that came from all over the world. There were people from Mexico. There were people from Europe. There were people from Africa. There were all races there. There were people from Indonesia. There were four gentlemen from Indonesia, who had a hard time with English, but they were there. There were Catholic priests. There were Seventh Day Adventists. There were mainstream Protestants. There were Evangelicals. And there was Guy, Jim and Bill. And, of course, I was really suspicious, because I had been taught to be. But what I learned was this: These people training me knew more about what the Bible said about evangelism than I did. And they proved it to me. Since then – in LifeResource Ministries – we have been working on a massive series on Natural Church Development in hope that our church will begin to learn to apply the biblical principles of evangelism *for the first time*.

So today I want to set down the reasons why I believe NCD is the way to go when it comes to evangelism. As I mentioned earlier, this is introductory material, even though we’ve produced most of the series already. But I didn’t want to introduce something that I hadn’t created yet. So I thought I’d do a better job of an introduction if the rest of it was in the can already. So that’s kind of where we are.

So why do I like this program so much? Well, here’s my first reason. It’s based on the application of biblical principles rather than human ideas or efforts. God is the one who decides who gets called. And He is the One who decides what our part in that is going to be – not us.

There are all kinds of ideas about what kind of evangelism works – go door-to-door, walk up and down with a sign downtown, go through media, build hospitals, keep track of numbers, don’t keep track of numbers. Everybody has a spin on it. And some people can make all of those things work. Some of those things seem to work for a time, but in the end, they don’t unless they harness the principles of God. So success comes from God and not from our efforts.

I want to read you something in 1 Corinthians 1:24 that Paul wrote. He said in verse 24:

1 Cor. 1:24 – *But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s*

wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. Brothers, think what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards – let alone, by God's, right? – not many were influential, not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify things that are, so that no one may boast before Him. It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God, that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

So that was the approach that these people took to evangelism. They didn't want to think about all the great things that people have done. They looked into the word of God – and they looked one other place that I'm going to explain soon – to understand what to do.

So how do we find out the way that God works and what He wants us to do? Well, the first thing is to study the Bible, obviously. God's Word is for our instruction. We're told clearly in the Word. It's so clear. And we quote it so much. I'm not going to quote the scripture, but the purpose of the church is to *make disciples*. It's really simple. And everything falls in line if we do that. I suppose that, if it weren't for that clear statement, we'd have all different ideas about what the church ought to be. Some people would think it's a babysitting service. Some people would think it's a place to show off their clothes and cars. Some people would think that it's a social club. Some people would think it's a hospice. It probably is all of those things in some small way, but the goal – the *whole* thing, the most *important* thing – is that we make disciples. Some of us still have our own ideas, in spite of that clear statement and that's because we're foolish children and ignorant of the ways of God. That's just the truth of it.

Now there's another thing, though, that we a lot of times completely miss out on. Let's go to Psalms 19:1. Notice what it says here:

Psa. 19:1 – *The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of His hand. Day after day they pour forth speech and night after night they display knowledge.*

So David is telling us here that the creation teaches us things about God that we can't learn any other way. You can read that God is great in the Bible, but when you go out and look at the night sky, there is just something else there – right? – that we get. So that's God talking to us. He talks to us out of the creation.

Here's something a lot of people really hate to think about, too. Do you know what helps Christians learn more about the creation? Science. Science does. What would we know about the creation if we didn't have Hubble or an electron microscope – to look at the big and the little? I know that's really frustrating for some of us to admit, but real science – absent from human contamination – is just looking at what God made and understanding it.

Okay, let's take an example of that. Let's go to Matthew 6, and verse 28.

Mt. 6:28 – *Why do you worry about clothes?* It's a real-world problem. Why do you worry about money – where you're clothes are coming from, what you're going to eat? Now, I want you to notice what He said here. He said, "Let's go back into the book of Genesis and read..." No, that *isn't* what He said. He said, *See the lillies, how they grow.* Oh, you mean you can learn about why you shouldn't worry about clothes from looking at a lilly? Ohhh! What a revelation! Who was saying that? Jesus Christ. He said, *They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.* Now, that word *see* – *See the lillies, how they grow.* That word *see*. What does that mean? Does it mean *to look at*? No, it means *to study, to observe, to research, to delve into* – to see *in detail*. That's what that word means. It's not talking about casual observation, but talking about learning about God by looking at what God has made.

Now this is not an isolated incident, is it? Time after time after time, Jesus explains spiritual things by pointing to the things that God has made. The kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed – that's the littlest seed of all, but grows into the great grain. It's like a grapevine. It's like grain that is scattered on the ground. It's like a tree planted by a stream. It's like a little child.

So, how do lillies grow? I bet you I've read that scripture a hundred times and I never stopped to think about how a lilly grows. A lilly grows all by itself if you just plant it and water it. A miracle happens! And *how* they grow we have no idea. We don't know. But we do know what to do to make them grow. We can plant them and we can water them. It's about nurturing the organism. So that's why we look at things in nature.

The church is like an organism that has the ability to grow miraculously. If we just do the simple things that we know how to do, then He does a miracle. It's not like a machine. I have a coffee maker at home that makes great coffee, but cannot ever make another coffee maker. It can just make great coffee. A lilly can make more lillies. Christians can make more Christians. A congregation can make more congregations. It's the multiplication of growth, not straight-line addition. So this all correlates to church growth very, very directly. And the people at Natural Church Development have that word *natural* in there because their whole view comes right out of the Bible. They look at the Bible and at nature to understand what God is doing.

So, if we plant and water – or if it's a grapevine, we prune it – or a tree – that makes the plant healthy, doesn't it? It makes it strong. If we do that, then God takes care of the rest. Growth happens all by itself – if the Christian, if the congregation is spiritually healthy. A healthy grapevine produces lots of grapes. They all have seeds in them. They can be scattered around and make more grapevines. If the grapevine is stressed, if it's not getting watered or pruned or fertilized enough, it may not produce any fruit.

Mk. 4:26 – *He said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up – it doesn't matter what he does once he plants it – the seed sprouts and grows though he does not know how. It's a miracle! All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head.* It grows in stages.

So, according to Jesus, the way to understand church growth is by understanding church health. You don't have to play the numbers game. All you have to do is think about and work on becoming healthy spiritually. Then all of that other stuff takes care of itself.

My wife has petunias planted in the front and the back yard and cutworms are getting in there. So the plants are not healthy. All the blooms are dying. Right? So it's not producing bright blooms. That is a picture of what happens in the church, too. When it isn't healthy, it won't produce the seeds that are to be planted.

So I didn't understand that at one point in my life. And if you came from our church, you probably didn't either. So, you and I are kind of like Moses, who had to be told by his father-in-law – a Gentile – Jethro – how to organize people – how to take care of the camp of Israel. But it had to come from outside our system to understand it. Can we take it in? Are we humble enough to learn from somebody that doesn't think just the way we do about *everything*. Well, the answer to that question, for a lot of us, is no, unfortunately.

Okay, so that's the first point then. I like Natural Church Development because it's based on biblical principles and natural principles observed. It's not some "let's throw it against the wall and see if it sticks" human idea kind of stuff. It's right out of the Bible!

Here's the second reason: It's about spiritual health rather than numerical growth. Armed with the knowledge that the church grows if it's healthy, they did something that nobody else has ever done – at least, that I know of. They set out to study the church to see how it works – just like that scientist that puts that one cell – that one simple cell – under the electron microscope and finds out there is a whole universe of complexity in there. They studied all kinds of churches – growing and not growing. They looked at the church as a living thing, instead of a pyramid structure of hierarchy. "See the lillies, how they grow." That's what they tried to do with the church.

So they came to some really interesting conclusions about what makes a church healthy. Now, some of the self-righteous exclusivists in our church say that doesn't apply to us, because we're better than all those other people. So that doesn't apply. It doesn't fit us. But I'm going to show you that it does today.

I have no doubt that, if you could find some growing congregations in our church, you would find the same principles are applied there that apply in other organizations that grow. And if you surveyed our congregations that are not growing – it wouldn't be hard to find some of those – you would find them weak in the areas that Natural Church Development discovered makes a healthy congregation. After surveying millions of Christians in hundreds of – maybe even thousands of – different groups, they came up with eight concrete things that seem to be true across the board among growing churches and healthy churches. They did this because of what Jesus told us to do – to see the lillies, how they grow.

How does the church grow? What are the commonalities there? What are the factors that correlate to growth and success. We say, "They studied people, not plants." Well, do you

know why? Well, because Jesus told us to. If you want to understand faith, He doesn't just tell us to study plants. If you want to understand faith, look at a little child. If you want to understand spiritual passion, study the Bereans who studied the scriptures daily. If you want to understand commitment, look at the poor widow who gave everything she had. If you want to understand how an organization grows, look at growing organizations. It makes sense, doesn't it? It's kind of like Ray Charles told Jamie Lee Fox when they were making the movie *Ray*. Fox was frustrated because he couldn't play the piano the same way Ray Charles could. I don't know why, but he couldn't. Ray told him, "It's right there. It's right there under your fingers!" It's right under our noses. It's been there all the time. We just haven't looked at it. "See the lillies, how they grow." All we have to do is plant and water, and the miracle of growth – the conversion of people's spirits – the calling – will be done by God – outside of our experience, outside of our knowledge. All we have to do is watch and see what happens.

So they studied the application of organic principle. We've spent some time already on this in the presentation material, but here are a few examples of what I'm talking about. With God, growth multiplies rather than adds. When the church was scattered, for example in Acts 8, the people who had been taught by twelve disciples – hundreds of them – went out and taught people what the disciples had taught them. How many people was each one of those disciples responsible for and how many of those people went out and told how many more people? It's logarithmic, not straight-line. So the church grows like a dandelion. One grows up. It's yellow. Then it turns white. Then the wind blows the seeds everywhere. And that makes more dandelions and they produce how many white flowers with how many seeds? Paul thought he was stamping out the church and he was just causing it to grow. You can't kill it. We learn how the church grows from looking at organic growth in nature. That's what Jesus said was the point He was making.

Another example would be what, in Natural Church Development, they call the minimum factor. They say that there are eight elements needed for church health. They say that you work on the weakest one first. You figure out, in your congregation, what is the weakest one. And then when it is no longer the weakest, you begin working on the new next weakest thing. What they have is a barrel with staves at different heights. And the water pours out over the lowest stave. So when you raise that up, then there is another stave that is lower. So then you work on that. Where did that idea come from? Where did they get that idea? Well, did you know that there are four elements that make plants grow? Nitrogen, lime, phosphoric acid and potash. If these four are present in sufficient quantities, growth will happen all by itself. But if one is deficient, that deficiency must be corrected before growth can take place. If there are several deficiencies, you start working on the biggest deficiency first. You get the best results from that. Once that deficiency is fixed, the lesser deficiencies are addressed.

I notice the same thing when working with families. If there are no boundaries.... You know, it usually is not just one problem. If there are no boundaries, if there is no time spent with kids, if there is no affection, if there is no teaching, then I ask them, "What's the worst problem?" Usually I ask the kids, "What is the biggest problem?" They usually know what they're lacking more than their parents do. Whichever one of these is lacking most is what we focus on first, and we get the most "bang for our buck" – the most

encouragement, the most change. Then once we get that worst problem fixed, we move to the next worst problem.

Same thing in trauma treatment. If a person is traumatized by multiple events, the best practice tells us to work on the worst one first. Once we get that taken care of, then we just go to the next one. And that yields the best results.

So, they know that. They understand that. And that is the approach they have taken to solving the problem of an unhealthy church organism.

Another example is what they call interdependence. In an organism, all the parts are interdependent. Paul tells us the church is the same way. It's a body. It's an organism. And it has all these different parts that rely completely on each other. The brain is a good thing, but if it doesn't have any feet to move it around, it can't do very much. Eyes are really important. So that would be the way a healthy church would function. Various people with their roles, or maybe committees with their responsibilities, are not disconnected from the body, but communicating with each other and working together to produce the maximum benefits.

I do a lot of marriage counseling and family counseling. I see this all the time with couples – where they all have their own agendas and what they want, but they're not talking to each other about that. They try to, but it kind of goes like this (hand gestures) instead of like that (more hand gestures). So that's a natural law of God – how that works.

So the first reason I like NCD is because it's biblically based and naturally based, as well. The second reason I like it is because it's about spiritual health rather than numbers. Growth is a byproduct of spiritual health and it happens all by itself – if we get the health part right.

So let's look at the third reason I like NCD. It addresses the issue of equilibrium in the church. All organisms on earth fit into a carefully balanced ecosystem that self regulates. If there is an overabundance of rabbits out on the mesa, there are going to be more hawks and owls that appear. After the rabbits are all eaten up, the owls and raptors will disappear, too. It all levels itself out. Then some rabbits will come back. And it just keeps going. We know, too, that humans can disrupt ecosystems.

There was that story of a plague of mice in a province in India and all of sudden there were cobras. That was just a natural thing. There is now more food for cobras, so they're breeding more and have more little cobras. And because of all the cobras, they put a bounty the cobras, so people started breeding the cobras for the bounties, and they had way more cobras than they needed. They did just the opposite of what they were trying to do. They messed with the system. The cobras would have gone away after they ate up all the mice. So each ecosystem has its own set of tensions and self-regulating abilities. The tension there was the tension between the number of mice and the number of cobras. It's always going back and forth.

In the church – and not just the church, but in the government, in the army, in all big corporations, in all little congregations, all families – there is a tension between too much freedom and not enough – too much control and not enough. If you have too much control in a company, people get discouraged. They don't do good work and they go looking for greener pastures where they can do good work – where they're not going to be limited by the rule. If there is no control, people become frustrated with the lack of standards and boundaries and not knowing what they're supposed to do. So they leave, looking for a place where they will know what is expected of them.

Evolutionists said for years that life evolved from a simple cell. But the more science develops the ability to study those very simple cells, they see how complex they are. They are not simple. Every cell is highly organized, but they also multiply organically. So what we learn from this is, that it's not structure *or* freedom. But it's *both* together in an *organic* way. We see many organized churches in the Church of God who are losing membership because there is too much control. It's harder and harder for them to function effectively because of the attrition they're suffering. And in the independent church – that's all the people that left the organizations – we see no structure at all between groups, so it's hard to do much work together, because we're all divided. There's no organic cohesiveness there between us.

And the principle applies to governments, businesses, churches, families, bridge clubs, sports teams. Any time you get people together, some of them are going to focus on the organizational part of it, and some are going to focus on creativity and freedom. And both think the other side is wrong, when, in fact, they are both right, as long as it is done in an organic way. What we need to learn to do is.... God is *both* of those things and we can't put other people down for being like God, even if they are different from us. We have to learn that tension is supposed to be in the church. The problem, though, with humans is that this tension tends to break down in most groups. The organization will tend to go one way or the other. Some think that God is not the author of confusion, so let's get organized. We "vill" have church and "ve vill" like it! Others think, "Well, you can't control the Holy Spirit, so let's all be free to use our gifts and follow our hearts, and not have any rules." That doesn't work either. Neither one of those work. But nature tells us that God is *both* ways. And everything He has created has both structure *and* freedom. It's just not too much structure or too much freedom.

So, in the church, we are to be subject to the elders, and it's also true the "Jerusalem above" is free. So how do you put both of those together? Well, when you do that well, then you have what God wants. So NCD addresses this issue in a realistic and practical way. But not only that. It does it in a biblical way, as well.

Now I realize that I'm offending people on both poles when I say these things. And if I haven't offended, then I probably haven't explained it well enough. But until we can all come to embrace the need for both structure and freedom of choice, we will never have the mind of God on this issue in the church. We will continue to suffer huge problems – primarily instability – because we don't have it right yet and it's not working for us.

The first reason I like NCD is the application of scripture and the creation for learning. The second reason is because it's about the cause of growth instead of growth itself. It's about spiritual health. And the third reason I like is because it directly and forthrightly deals with the curse of the Church of God – imbalance between control and freedom.

Now, for one more reason, NCD is not “one size fits all,” but it's adaptable to *any* church. If memory serves me correctly, Guy Swenson learned about Natural Church Development when he and his daughter, Katie, attended a Seventh Day Adventist Seeds Conference. Ah, that's kind of interesting – a Church of God guy going to a Seventh Day Adventist group to learn from them. I applaud him for doing that. That's where they talked about evangelism – at the Seventh Day Adventist Seeds Conference. And here he learned that they had taken NCD material and they had *contextualized* it for *their* people – for their church. Unlike the Church of God, they realized that the principles are biblical, are natural and are timeless. And they apply to all creation, not just to Protestant Christians.

There are no doctrinal points in Natural Church Development at all that affect how it works or how to apply it. Not any. So it's applicable to any congregation. And because all congregations are different, what each one must do to apply it to be healthy is different. One church might have loving relationships as the low point in their church, and so they would work on that first. Other people might not be very passionate spiritually, so they would need to work on that. So it's not a “one size fits all” thing at all. This will fit anybody. There is no program you apply. “Let's all go to the food bank,” or “Let's all learn to be more loving,” or “Let's have more sing-alongs.” It's not like that. Each group evaluates itself and applies the biblical principles the way it would work best for them. They get to decide that.

It's interesting. In the aftermath of the evangelism seminar that Guy and I did, there was a quick wave of enthusiasm that then later turned to rejection or indifference in the Church of God. In thinking about the things that people have said to me about NCD and that have come up, formed two reasons why NCD hasn't been that acceptable in the Church of God. One is that it is completely foreign to us in the way we think. It's so different from the way we've ever thought that it's just hard to wrap our minds around it.

I remember a man who told me that the board of a Church of God ministry decided that it really wasn't that good, because it didn't have anything about children in it. See, that understanding – or lack of it – comes from the way we think about kids. We think about children as something that we need to single out and separate apart from us and have a program for them, instead of *including* them in with everybody else. If you look at the eight things that NCD says need to happen to make a congregation healthy, every last one of those things has kids written all over it. But we can't see it because we don't think about children in a healthy way.

And some of us can't let go of the idea that, if we didn't think of it ourselves, it's no good. So we've shot ourselves in the head right off the bat there. And the idea that we should study nature and human behavior to understand church health drives some of us

crazy. That smacks too much of Godless science – that kind of thing – when really science is just understanding what God has done.

And the second reason that I think people have shied away from this.... And you can tell how much it has deterred me from talking about it, can't you – that people have shied away from it? I'm talking about it until the cows come home. Most of our organizations are too tight to allow the use of spiritual gifts or too loose to have a way apply the principles. Considering the demands of NCD seems impossible to us, because of these extremist positions that we find ourselves in. There really is, in my mind, no solution for that except to say that, when faced with extreme challenges, extreme measures are called for.

I'm talking from experience here. I was told that I didn't have *permission* to put on this seminar. So I had to choose whether I was going to keep my career or teach Natural Church Development. So I said, "Well, actually I *do* have permission, just not yours. In fact, I have a mandate." And I remember a seminar Guy and I did not long after the initial one. And a lady listened to us talk for two days and then raised her hand and asked us how these ideas could be applied in her organization when it didn't seem to her that the ministry would ever allow it. Guy's response was, "Well, Bill and I are not the ones to ask about that. We had to leave. We couldn't find a way to implement it." So there is a way to approach it, but sometimes – and sadly – extreme measures are necessary.

So I think about it all. It's a bit scary to realize that the principles that work for church growth – that come from nature and the Bible – are foreign to us and difficult beyond belief. That doesn't say a lot about the state of our health. But I keep reminding myself that I don't have to fret about that. But I learned from my trip to Chicago all over again that truth is where you find it, application is by those who are willing, I don't get to decide where it's found or who is going to apply it, and what I know I'm allowed to teach. So I do. And I do it enthusiastically with the hope that some will be encouraged to become healthy Christians and healthy congregations. And, by the way, I'm a certified trainer of NCD, and anytime you're ready, I can help you get started and it won't cost you a penny.

The series we've been working on is nearly complete. Many of the modules are already available. So, if you'd like, you can look for them on the Website – www.liferesource.org, where we have contextualized Natural Church Development for the Church of God.