

In 2008 Vestavia Hills UMC participated in a Natural Church Development (NCD) survey. NCD is a way of understanding church health and growth that views the church as a living organism. The focus is not on numerical growth, but on improving the health of the church, with the understanding—impressively documented by research—that when a church is sufficiently healthy, numerical growth will follow. These concepts are explained in the book *Natural Church Development* by Christian A. Schwarz.

The Natural Church Development survey measures the health of a local church in eight areas or *Quality Characteristics* that have been found to be essential to healthy church growth. After receiving our 2008 scores we developed an action plan to improve our lowest characteristics. Now after two years we have taken the NCD survey again. Both our 2008 and 2010 scores are included below. Any score above 50 is considered healthy. Any score above 65 is considered very healthy, and puts us in the top 15% of churches nationally. All but two of our 2010 scores are above 65, and the lowest two are still above 50. Our next step is to develop an action plan to improve the two lowest scores, implement the plan, and then measure our *Quality Characteristics* again in 2012.

### **Quality Characteristics**

**Empowering Leadership.** Leaders of growing churches concentrate on empowering other Christians for ministry. They do not use lay workers as "helpers" in attaining their own goals and fulfilling their own visions. *What is measured:* **To what extent is the ministry of the leaders focusing on equipping other Christians to serve?**

**Gift-Based Ministry.** When Christians serve in their area of their spiritual gifts, they generally function less in their own strength and more in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus ordinary people can accomplish the extraordinary. *What is measured:* **To what extent are the tasks in our church distributed according to the spiritual gifts of individual Christians?**

**Passionate Spirituality.** The NCD research indicated clearly that church development is dependent neither on spiritual persuasions (such as charismatic or noncharismatic) nor on specific spiritual practices (such as liturgical prayers or spiritual warfare, etc.). The point separating growing and non-growing churches is a different one: "Are the Christians in this church on fire? Do they live committed lives and practice their faith with joy and enthusiasm? *What is measured:* To what extent is the spiritual life of our members characterized by prayer, enthusiasm, and boldness?"

**Effective Structures.** The NCD research confirmed an extremely negative relationship between traditionalism and both growth and quality within the church. Leaders in healthy churches continually evaluate to what extent church structures improve the self-organization of the church. Elements not meeting this standard (such as discouraging leadership structures, inconvenient worship service times, demotivating financial concepts) are changed or eliminated. *What is measured:* To what extent do our decision-making processes, operating procedures (official and unofficial), and board and committee structures facilitate rather than hinder the fulfillment of our church's mission?"

**Inspiring Worship Service.** The NCD research revealed that services may target Christians or non-Christians, their style may be liturgical or free, their language may be "churchy" or "secular"—it makes no difference for church growth. What does matter is whether worshipers feel that they have encountered God during the worship service. *What is measured:* To what extent is attending our worship service an inspiring experience?"

**Holistic Small Groups.** The NCD research documented that multiplication of small groups is a universal church growth principle. It also showed that for these groups to have a positive effect on both quality and numerical growth within a church, they must be holistic—they must go beyond just discussing Bible passages to applying it to daily life. In these groups people can safely share personal life concerns and learn to serve others, both inside and outside the group, with their spiritual gifts. *What is measured:* To what extent do our small groups meet the real life needs of members in a holistic way?"

**Need-Oriented Evangelism.** The key to church growth is for the local congregation to focus its evangelistic efforts on the questions and needs of non-Christians. This "need-oriented" approach is different from "manipulative programs" where pressure on non-Christians must compensate for the lack of need-orientation. *What is measured: To what extent are the forms and contents of the evangelistic activities related to the needs of those you are trying to reach?*

**Loving Relationships.** NCD research shows that growing churches possess on the average a measurably higher "love quotient" than stagnant or declining ones. Genuine, practical love has a magnetic power far more effective than evangelistic programs that depend mostly on verbal communication. *What is measured: To what extent are the relationships of the members of this church characterized by a high degree of love and affection?*

<b>Quality Characteristics</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2010</b>
Empowering Leadership	61	68
Gift-Based Ministry	62	77
Passionate Spirituality	56	58
Effective Structures	49	71
Inspiring Worship Service	49	60
Holistic Small Groups	54	75
Need-oriented Evangelism	49	68
Loving relationships	76	72

# Natural Church Development Vestavia Hills UMC

