

NATURAL CHURCH DEVELOPMENT
QUALITY CHARACTERISTIC IV

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Functional Structures

I spoke with Beth Nelson this week and she is going to send me our 31 survey forms. Then we'll be set, upon completion of this 8-part sermon series on the quality characteristics of a healthy church, to have a number of us do the survey. When the surveys are computer scored, she will come and help us to interpret the results.

Today our focus Quality Characteristic is "Functional Structures." If you want an example of non-functional structures just look at any "Dilbert" comic strip (like Friday's – where the boss asks Dilbert: "Why did you add this button to the user interface?" Dilbert answers: "You told me to." Boss asks: "Why would I tell you that?" Dilbert says: "You always suggest random changes to create the illusion of adding value." So boss commands "Well, remove that button." To which Dilbert says "It's only on your copy."

Near total dysfunction! And funny. But when something like that happens in a church it's not all that funny.

While by its title, you might assume that this could well be the most boring of the quality characteristics, interestingly enough, "functional structures" has proven to be by far the most controversial of the eight.

The false paradigms which consciously or unconsciously influence most Christians are especially harmful in this area.

Spiritualists tend to be skeptical of structures, deeming them unspiritual, while those from the so-called "technocratic camp" mistake certain structures for the very essence of the church of Christ Jesus. The traditionalists among us are more threatened by the adjective "functional" than by the noun "structures." "Functional" to them is an untheological, pragmatic and unspiritual criterion.

Christian Schwartz's research has confirmed for the first time an extremely negative relationship between "tradition – bound" churches and both quality and growth within the church.

The evaluation of the data from over 1000 churches on all continents was particularly interesting with regard to this quality characteristic. Despite the vast differences in structures from church to church within various denominations and cultures, those with high scores in the quality index have certain basic elements in common.

One of the 15 sub-principles that comprise this quality characteristics of “functional structures” is the “department head principle” (that is, that a church has “department heads for the individual areas of ministry in the church). I think that we do a fairly credible job in this area with either staff or lay persons heading nearly all the committees and boards of our church. We do have some ministry areas that are inactive, but we’re going to work on those.

This sub-principle typifies the core of this quality characteristic: the development of structures which promote an ongoing multiplication of the ministry. That is, leaders are not simply to lead, but to develop other leaders.

Any of us who accept this view will continually evaluate to what extent our church structures (our way of organizing our work of mission and ministry) improve our self-organization as a church. Elements that don’t meet this standard (such as leadership structures that discourage us, inconvenient worship service times, financial methods that discourage our stewardship, etc.) need to be changed or eliminated. In such a process of continued structural self-renewal, getting caught in traditionalistic ruts can, to a large extent, be avoided.

One of the biggest barriers to recognizing the importance of structures for church development is the widespread view that “structure” and “life” are opposites. Yet, interestingly enough, biological research reveals that dead matter and living organisms are not distinguished by their substance, as some folks might think, but by the specific structure of the relationship of the individual parts to each other. In other words, in God’s creation, the living and the non-living are formed from identical material substances and are distinguished only by their structure.

In fact, the intimate connection between structure and life was first expressed at creation. The act of creation is an act of forming and shaping. The opposite of “form” is the unformed earth, i.e. the lump of clay.

Wherever God breathes His Spirit unto formless clay, both life and form spring forth. And a similar creative act occurs wherever God pours out His Spirit within the church today – thus giving it structure and form.