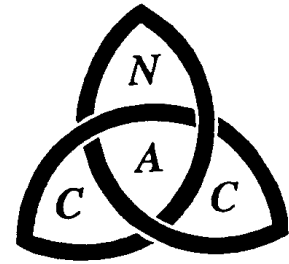


# NEWS BRIEFS

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## The Congregation – The Basic Building Block

The Pastoral Charge is the United Church's "unit of organization" (*Basis of Union*). It is also where Christ's church is most alive. It's where the real action is. It's where the rubber hits God's road. It's where we can most effectively carry out Jesus' command to make disciples of all people.

The NACC knows this well, and our full name, "The National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations", underlines that. So, while arguing for orthodoxy in the wider church will always remain a major priority, our first concern is for the local congregation. We're here to help it survive and grow in an environment which at times is dismissive, or even hostile.

We believe a congregation's growth – indeed survival - ultimately rests on how Christ-centred it is. If Jesus is at its heart, if his Spirit is vibrantly alive, if he is joyfully served, then healthy growth follows. And numerical growth – people in the pews - is a clear measure of how attractively the Christian message is communicated. The world badly needs the Good News – needs it pure and unadulterated. The need is great: as Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest."

That's the challenge Jesus gave all Christians: to satisfy the hunger people have to know him. For congregations, though, responding to his challenge can be complicated - an effective shared response requires a common vision, good planning, and coordination and cooperation. It also requires strong spiritual leadership (typically supplied by ministers).

Sound spiritual leadership and agreement on the "whats and hows" of congregational life are absolutely critical, and the NACC is anxious to be helpful in both areas. So we offer (1) Natural Church Development, a new initiative, which helps congregations decide what it is God wants from them and how best to respond; and (2) The Pastoral Relations Service, which serves to put orthodox ministers and congregations in touch with each other. We commend both services to you.

(OVER)

## Natural Church Development

Some months ago, each NACC congregation received introductory information about NCD. Through a consultant, this program helps a congregation analyze how it stands in eight areas, each of which is characteristic of healthy, growing churches: empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, healthy spiritual life, functional structures, inspiring worship, well-integrated small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships.

Using the results of a simple survey, the consultant helps in the development of a plan to strengthen whichever of the eight areas needs attention.

The NACC has provided funding to get NCD off the ground (one Maritime church is already using the process). Costs to local congregations are minimal - and almost microscopic if neighbouring churches link up to bring in the consultant.

Art Hiley, minister at Byron UC in London ON, is the NACC's first trained consultant. He says the idea behind NCD is that "a congregation needs to become a healthy place into which God can place his believers." He goes on to say, "If a congregation develops the [eight] characteristics, then growth happens 'all by itself'." He also points out the process can be repeated every year or eighteen months to maintain focus and momentum.

NCD is research based. In 1994, the designer, Christian Schwarz, analyzed over 1000 growing churches in 32 countries on all six continents. The approach can be used by churches of any size.

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## Pastoral Relations Service

Finding a new minister is one of the most critical challenges congregations face. The right person will build the spiritual health of the congregation; the wrong person might well destroy it.

Agreement on core theology is one obvious critical factor, and the Pastoral Relations Service is intended to be helpful here, helping orthodox ministers and congregations investigate possible fruitful partnerships.

About four times a year, registered congregations and ministers are mailed lists of who and what is available. The ministers get brief descriptions of the open congregations (i.e. NACC and others with an orthodox stance). Congregations simultaneously receive lists of clergy (and others in ministry) who are looking for a move.

A spin-off is advice to Search Committees. While demanding, the UCC's PR process is a sound one, but sometimes hampered by damaging misinformation. (Sadly, often provided by the Search Committee's advisors from Presbytery.) As a result the NACC has been asked such questions as:

- Is the *Observer* really the only place we can advertise? (Ans. - NO)
- Do we have to go the Interim Minister route? (NO)
- Do we have any say at all in choosing an Interim Minister? (YES)
- Can we cover for a while by handling things internally? (YES).

One way or another, the NACC can help answer such questions.

**Finally: If the NACC is to meet your needs, we need to hear what they are. Call or write with your suggestions, requests, . . . whatever. God bless -- GW**