

HISTORY OF THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE IN THE CARRIBEAN

Compilation of Papers of the Hispanic Caribbean: Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico

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It is necessary to establish and show the marked contrast in relation to the context of these three countries, even though they form part of the Caribbean. The socio-political and economics realities are diametrical opposites, a fact we definitely need to consider in our approach to the themes in discussion and to our own reflection.

One evident element that can be taken from the papers that we are seeing was how the contextual reality of each country played a predominant role in the arrival of a “North American” church to these Caribbean countries that speak Spanish.

In the case of Cuba, their socio-political reality represents a very particular case. Of the three countries in the Hispanic Caribbean, Cuba is the first country to receive the Church of the Nazarene. In 1902 sister Leona Gardner started her work in Cuba and continued for 18 years. However, it was not until 1945 with the arrival Lyle Prescott and his family that the church started the work in a systematic way. Nevertheless, during the early years of the Cuban Revolution, the missionaries had to leave suddenly. The Revolutionary forces took control in 1959. We could probably classify church growth in Cuba as a “miracle”. There was slow growth between 1959 and 1986, with only 300 members in the 1986 district assembly. Today the Cuban church has 6,000 members, 45 organized churches, 110 preaching points, 18 ordained elders and 29 licensed ministers. It is important to note that from 1960 onwards, construction of church buildings has been prohibited. The church buildings that we have in Cuba were built before 1960. At the moment, our Cuban church meets under multiple limitations in what they call “house churches”.

With regard to theological education, the “miracle” is repeated. Those of us who have had the great privilege to visit and teach in Cuba can strongly affirm that it is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that motivates our leaders to motivate themselves to prepare themselves theologically. The great lack of financial resources and infrastructure have not been able to dampen the indescribable enthusiasm and desire for theological training. Even though we have a “seminary” it cannot meet the demands and needs of all of those who are interested in getting more training. To meet this need, theological education is also being done by extension which very soon will reach 20 pastors and more than a 100 lay leaders. I need to point out that SENDAS offers a Master’s degree program to those who qualify.

There has been a lot of uncertainty in Cuba from the decade of the 60’s to the present. Neither mass immigration between the 60’s to the 80’s to the USA, nor the fall of the communist system, nor the economic crisis aggravated by the North American economic “blockade” have been able to impede to work of the Gospel. We can affirm that Cuban Nazarenes are an incredible witness to the world.

Caribbean Region (Samuel Pérez)

The work of the Nazarene Church in the Dominican Republic started in 1975. One of the major relevant factors in the Dominican church was the extraordinary vision of Dr. Louie Bustle and the singular contribution of Dr. Jerry Porter. These gentlemen managed to establish an extraordinary plan for growth. It is important to note what in my view is one of the most revealing factors of the work in the Dominican Republic: the development and growth of the church in only 28 years. However, in spite of the phenomenal growth, the premature departure of the missionaries, according to Rev. René Acosta, caused a period of uncertainty and internal doubts, which affected or deteriorated the growth of the work. Another factor which affected the growth was that thousands of Haitian Nazarenes were deported back to Haiti. On the other hand, many churches were closed because they did not follow the denomination's vision and doctrine. All these elements combined to reduce the number of members from 10,250 in 1990, to the present member 7,967 in full membership now. However, the national leadership together with the missionaries has made plans to reach 20,000 new Nazarenes by 2008.

With regard to theological education, the Dominican Republic has nine extension centers, with a current enrollment of 150 students. Even when the doors were opened at the Dominican Seminary for resident students in 1988, because of financial reasons the program was closed. At this present time SND only offers extension classes.

The work of Compassionate Ministries has had ups and downs. Apparently the micro-business initiatives to help pastors and their families were not effective. At the present time, Compassionate Ministries is a great support in holistic evangelism and include in their programs medical attention, holistic health and support in times of natural disasters, among others.

When we look at the beginning and development of the Puerto Rican church we can truly affirm the extraordinary assimilation of the church's doctrine. The development and economic support of the Phase III districts is a great success story. Missionary awareness has been another successful area as we have now sent four couples to the mission field. However, we need to examine carefully the area of growth among our members. When one observes, in light of the information we have received from the authors of others papers, such as the growth of the church in Cuba and the Dominican Republic in spite of tremendous limitations on financial resources and infrastructures, and the socio-political disadvantages, one must ask, what are the primary elements in church growth? What hinders the growth of the church in states or countries that have all available resources? Is it possible that the socio-economic and political realities influence church growth? Evidently, these questions oblige us to formulate new and different questions.

How have we set our priorities? How do we recognize and meet the most urgent needs? How do we establish an adequate balance in the development of our ministries? The fact that we recognize our ups and downs points to integrity and an increased sense of ministerial responsibility. The importance of history for our present and our future is that it is an instrument that helps us to revise, formulate and affirm our missionary task. Theology is dynamic and requires dialogue with other disciplines.

Caribbean Region (Samuel Pérez)

In the light of what has been said here, I would like to conclude this brief exposition by suggesting some unavoidable questions to any Christian generation. What are the non-negotiable elements in the church's mission? What are the unavoidable imperatives of the Gospel? Every generation has tried and will have to try to answer these questions. We must not enter into sterile discussions; we must recognize that structures, programs, strategies, and projects are not infallible and do not necessarily have to go on forever. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, the church needs to be more creative, more determined, and more aggressive in all of her day-to-day tasks. From the missional point of view, I would like to indicate that our missionary task is not exclusively limited to "geographic" aspects or unreached peoples. It is important to put the same or even more importance on reaching our "generations". Our church's mission is not a question of geography *or* generation but geography *and* generation.

It is evident that the community of faith has a huge challenge on how to reach a generation that has a post-modern vision. Our new generation presupposes and imposes the development of a relative worldview which is understood by the church. The church needs to make new and effective strategies to reach and minister to this generation. As a church it is urgent that we invite, include and permit young people to take part in discussions, events and theological conferences. It is urgent that we open spaces to listen to their questions, opinions and recommendations because they represent these new generations. It is our responsibility to transmit and communicate the inheritance of holiness to the next generation.