

A HISTORICAL OUTLINE OF THE CUBAN CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

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Country of Origin: Cuba

Serving in: Cuba

“Because the church should be a community with memory, which remembers both successes and problems, to such a point that the memory of the past is converted into the present and decisively defines the future... the capacity to significantly remember renewal, get inside the heart of history so that we can become really contemporary and universal.”¹ One of the weaknesses of Latin American Nazarenes is that we do not activate our historic memory, which is slowly becoming weakened. “We live in a dangerous ‘present-ism’ with respect to the present and in a not less dangerous ‘eschatological-ism’ with regard to the future.”²

The Cuban Nazarenes have been sailing in a sea of forgetfulness with respect to our own history, which has been accompanied by a continual manifestation of the grace of God in more than a half century of existence in our country, “The most beautiful land that human eyes could possibly see,”³ serving as an instrument for the advancement of the Kingdom of God on earth.

As current Nazarenes, we must mention what we have received from those who came before us, foreigners and nationals, men and women of God who crossed seas and skies to bring us the message of salvation and holiness with passion. We received from them a doctrine which we have conceived and given birth; it is our inheritance. Perhaps because of the socio-political context of the era and some cultural patterns and norms, which were mostly imported and imposed, both the transmission and reception could have been better. We have not been able to correct what we now realize went wrong. Our own identity which was born in a revival of the heart and which we need to maintain, because the definition of our commission is to proclaim the Gospel in holiness and love as we find it in the Bible and as an experience in our own lives.

It is not an easy for any missionary to start a church or a denomination in any part of the world, especially when it is a foreign country and culture. “Not having adequate support and being surrounded with people satisfied with their way of life could break the heart of any missionary.”⁴ This is how our church began in Cuba in 1902. Leona Gardner preached the message of salvation to the Cubans for 25 years without seeing very much fruit in this young church. Then followed a period of 18 years of silence when no attempt was made, either national or foreign, to continue the mission. Although there had been an inheritance the nationals did not take an interest in making this church their own and continuing this beautiful and sacrificial labor. In 1945, a year after Gardner’s death, Lyle Prescott and his family arrived in Cuba to restart the church. Two years later, John Hall and his family came, and a little later, Spurgeon Hendrix and his family among others. The Cuban Revolutionary process intensified in 1953 and triumphed in 1959 and the missionaries were forced to leave the country. “The 30th of

¹ Anastasio, Archbishop of Antioch and Albania.

² Dr. Plutarco Bonilla.

³ According to Christopher Columbus, 1492.

⁴ Leona Gardner.

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October of 1960, they left a note on the Seminary's dining table with the names of the nationals who should form the emergency committee for the business of the church."⁵ All were lay people, including Pedro H. Morejón, who became the district superintendent. They did not have one ordained elder. Without foreign support and without the guidance of trained elders, these leaders, with the help of God, maintained the church and were able to continue the work and allow for national development.

From 1959 to the 80s Cuba experienced a social revolution which provoked great spiritual confusion. Marxist Leninist concepts and their attitude towards the church made many people lose their faith so that huge numbers immigrated from the churches and the country. The example of those who stayed has been an inspiration to Nazarenes today. We are trying to put into practice what we believe and the legacy that we have received. They confronted with courage and faith the discrimination and attacks that characterized those years and gave birth to a church that is alive and more active than ever.

One of the most important characteristics of our church is our evangelistic and missionary struggle because it has had to confront risks and difficulties and overcome them. The years between 1959 and 1986 were extremely difficult, almost stopping numerical church growth. In the report of the 1985 district assembly there was a remnant of only 300 members. In this same year, our church had representation at the General Assembly. Four years later, in 1990, the church doubled its membership to approximately 700 members and 18 churches. A new missionary and evangelistic thrust in new geographic areas, both urban and rural, brought growth. By 1997, we had reached 2,780 full member, 23 organized churches, 7 missions, 39 preaching points, 17 elders and 17 licensed ministers and more than 20 lay workers. By 2000, we had 3,421 members, 24 churches, 16 missions and 155 preaching points. This shows that the church has grown and continues to grow; we are now more than 6,000 Nazarenes, with 45 organized churches, 10 missions, 110 preaching points, 18 elders and 29 licensed ministers.

But we understand that winning people for the Lord is not our only task; through Compassionate Ministries we are trying to "feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned and ministering to the needy as opportunity and ability are given."⁶ We include with compassion other essential elements, such as the transformation of the person so that they might glorify God in all the dimensions of their life.

In our context, there are many limitations which impede us from doing compassionate ministries; but we must not believe that proclaiming the Word of God is sufficient; we need to put compassion into action and serve our neighbor better, lightening his heavy load. We strive so that our social actions continue to be a reality in our Cuban church. This was the desire of Dr. Bresee, when on the morning of the 6th of October, 1895, in his first service when he preached from Jeremiah 6:16, where he declared that "The only new thing in the organization was the determination to preach the Gospel to the needy and give them a church that they would consider to be theirs."⁷

⁵ Quoted by Leonel López in "Una Reseña Histórica de La Iglesia del Nazareno Cubano", Thesis for the Instituto Superior de Estudios Bíblicos y Teológicos, Havana, Cuba, 2000.

⁶ General Rules, *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene 2001-2005* (Kansas City: NPH, 2001), 36, ¶27.1 (5).

⁷ Timothy Smith, *Historia de los nazarenos* (Kansas City: CNP, n.d.), 127.

The needy are always present in our congregations and communities and Compassionate ministries reaches out to them whether they are Christians or not. In general, the neediest are the elderly that live alone in precarious living conditions. The pension that they receive is so small and the amount of food that they can buy in the state-run stores through subsidized prices and ration books is very little. To meet this need, local churches through Compassionate Ministries purchase and receive food for these elderly people. In this way these elderly citizens are able to have a better diet and more resistance to all sorts of diseases and the depression that is often observed at this stage of life.

Our churches in the center and the western part of the island—who are a little better off—sponsor those churches in the east and in the province of Pinar del Rio where the needs are most visible, with clothing and food. Also two of the churches in Havana help in different ways a considerable number of mentally ill patients in two of the city’s hospitals—including spiritual help; we have the approval from the authorities to do this activity. Those who want to live a compassionate lifestyle, we have to “find Jesus, do it for Jesus and to Jesus, seeing the face of Jesus behind each dying person, each wounded person, each mentally ill person, the undesirables, the unwanted.”⁸ Cuban Nazarenes pray that God will help us preach His Word every day and evangelize our country but we need to do this without forgetting our nearby or distant neighbor’s pain and hold out our friendly hand in the midst of pain and despair.

As well as compassion, we give special attention to all Christian theological and education programs we are developing. Our objective is to cultivate a generation of competent leaders, filled with Spirit, and this desire has started to grow in the hearts and minds of our pastors. We are thrilled by the number of pastors and leaders who are studying in the different programs that the Cuban Nazarene Theological Seminary offers. “The leaders of the auxiliary organizations place emphasis on the development in their areas, especially Sunday School.”⁹ In the same way, the extension seminary will soon reach 20 pastors and 100 lay leaders of our church. This program is producing more pastors and leaders for the Cuban Nazarene church. All this is stimulating, although we realize we have a long way to go, but there is one thing we are sure of, that there is a huge wave of interest amongst the Cuban Nazarenes, to invest their lives in God’s work.

These educational programs feed our theological mission. The vision of our mission needs to be improved, even though as Nazarenes we know that we are not a mission, but a church with a mission; but this mission could bring great results in diverse contexts. These results become more visible and more powerful when the mission has to face the process of social change, however, even though the church has to take risks it can not stop being missionary, and should it stop, it would no longer be church. Taking this into account, what can we say of the mission of the Church of the Nazarene in Cuba after more that a half century of existence and in almost half a century of revolution and process of social changes?

⁸ From an interview with Mother Theresa, “Pencil in the hands of God”, quoted by Dr. Fletcher Tink in a SENDAS Master’s class, “The local church as a ministering community”, on the campus of Cuban Nazarene Theological Seminary, Havana, Cuba, June 2002.

⁹ Quoted by Rev. Leonel Lopez in his report as district superintendent at the 35th district assembly, Havana, Cuba.

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From the beginning we have been a missionary community. We recognize that on occasions our mission has not been well oriented, especially our holistic mission, but as the years have passed and through our reflection and dialogue, we have started to give this special attention. Our prophetic testimony, preaching the Gospel to our suffering nation, and reach them in their basic needs, including their need for God, has been our priority. The invisible years between 1960 and 1980, the massive immigration to the United States, the fall of the Soviet bloc, and the socio-political economic crises that our country has had to go through during the so called “special time” had announced only the disappearance of the mission of the church but also the death of the church. In each of the battles, God’s action has been seen, waking up our creative talent and giving us the boldness of Acts 4:29, for our liturgy and proclamation in the congregation.

We strive so that our praise and worship does not lose its original meaning of worshipping God and praising his name, and in worship expressing our weakness and his strength and that through his mercy we have not been consumed.

Grace: It is the time to testify—publicly—to what God has done in our lives, thanking him for what he has done and what he is doing and even for what little we have.

Intercession: This is the recommendation of the Apostle Paul; when we intercede for one another, we are functioning as the Body of Christ.

Petition: This is one of the things we do most in the church, unfortunately, on occasions not in the best form, because before we ask we ought to give of ourselves. When we give well, we will have the privilege of receiving.

Sacraments: Baptism; when we baptize our members we do so with the conviction that they die to the world and are raised for Christ. When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we do it with true repentance, for the consolation and joy of our souls. We do not frighten our congregations with sermons on divine punishment but we stimulate them to come with confidence, assuring them that we are one at the same table.

Offerings and Tithes: Even though atheism and dialectical materialism have damaged us in this respect, the church has very clearly defined its mission as the need to give money for the glory of God and as participation in the life of the church.

Stewardship: God has delegated to us the administration all the goods that we have in our hands, nothing that we have belongs to us, our responsibility is to look after it and multiply it.

Fellowship and Service: These are virtues of the people of God that we can not forget. Fellowship, prayer, sharing our bread, and being responsible for each other makes the church grow.

Discipleship: Discipleship is one of the fundamental pillars where we are taught why the church exists and what is its mission.

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Evangelism: There are not many options in Cuba to do evangelism. Although we do not have at our disposition mass media and we cannot celebrate evangelistic campaigns publicly where we might be able to reach multitudes, nothing stops the Cuban churches, among them our church, from preaching, and people's front doors, hospitals, funeral parlors and streets are fields ripe unto harvest where we reach multitudes. "We believe that the church that does not evangelize will very soon no longer be evangelical."¹⁰ This will not be the case of the Cuban Nazarene Church which is advancing firmly and, identified with its liturgy and proclamation, improving its theology of mission every day, and living like "holy, Christian people with mission."¹¹ From our historical context and the processes of social change, we are confronting the challenges we have as Cuban Nazarenes during this "decade of multiplication."

¹⁰ A saying of Alexander Duff.

¹¹ *Core Values* of the Church of the Nazarene, 2000.