

## **PAST, HERITAGE AND INDIGENOUS PROCESS OF THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE IN PUERTO RICO**

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*Country of Origin: Puerto Rico*

*Serving in: Puerto Rico*

The Church of the Nazarene in Puerto Rico started its work officially in 1944. This in spite of the fact that already in 1942, Rev. C. Warren Jones, who was Secretary of the Department of World Missions, had met with Rev. José R. Lebrón Velázquez, pastor of a group of independent churches called the Church of the Savior.

The purpose of the meeting between Jones and Lebrón was to study the possible union of the Church of the Savior and the Church of the Nazarene. After this conversation, which allowed for establishing bases for the possible union, Rev. Howard V. Miller who was one of the General Superintendents, in 1943 accepted Lebrón as a recognized minister of the Church of the Nazarene. On October 31, 1943, the union of the churches was formalized and at the same time Lebrón was named district superintendent and was assigned as missionary in charge of the work in Puerto Rico.<sup>1</sup>

The first district assembly was held in 1949, with the participation of five churches. It is necessary to recognize one of the elements of major relevance in the course of the Church in Puerto Rico: the indelible fact that the work of our church began under the leadership of Puerto Ricans, in contrast to the countries of Cuba and the Dominican Republic. Rev. Lebrón Velázquez served as superintendent and missionary from 1944-1952. Even in 1952 when he was no longer superintendent or missionary, he continued to pastor First Church until 1955. The exit of Rev. Lebrón from our denomination is mainly due to the dissatisfaction on the part of some leaders of the headquarters of the church, who concluded that in spite of the development and growth of the church, it was not representative of the “official doctrine of the denomination”. For this reason, in 1952 Rev. Harold Hampton and his wife arrived to serve as missionaries. In this manner, the direction of the church passed into hands of North American leadership.

### **WHAT WAS DONE WELL?**

Having the openness and disposition to start the work by naming a Puerto Rican leader. The historical evidence gives testimony to the excellent work done by Rev. Lebrón at the start of the work. Our church in a very short time became the most well-known church in the country as Rev. Lebrón was the producer of a “pioneer” Puerto Rican radio program called “The March of Faith”, which was transmitted by 20 transmitters throughout the entire country. The work of Rev. Lebrón was very extensive and extremely significant, not only for our denomination but for evangelical work in Puerto Rico. Unfortunately due to lack of space I can not include more information.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Rev. José R. Lebrón Velázquez, on February 7, 1990 by Samuel Pérez.

The arrival of North American leaders to the country without doubt significantly contributed to the task of imprinting doctrinal identity according to our denomination. The North American leadership lasted for almost 19 years from 1952-1971. Under this leadership came significant ministries with great benefit, including the Bible Institute, under the direction of Rev. William Porter and his wife Juanita, and the acquisition of a large property where the Nazarene Camp was built. Although the contribution of all the missionaries, among them Rev. Harold Hampton, Lyle Prescott and Harry Zurcher, was excellent, it is no less certain that the contribution of the Porters had the greatest reach as Puerto Rico was their home for 22 years. The emphasis on sending missionaries was a vital and significant factor. In spite of being a church with not a large membership, we have sent four families to the mission field.

### **SOME ACTIONS THAT HAD NEGATIVE RESULTS FOR THE CHURCH**

The unfortunate situation between our founder, Rev. José R. Lebrón Velázquez and the leadership of the denomination. The exit of Lebrón had a negative effect on the Church of the Nazarene in Puerto Rico. From that moment, an attitude of “suspicion” developed towards the national leaders. On the other hand, this provoked a feeling of lack of self-esteem, psychological and economic dependence among the national leadership. Another negative factor according to our memory of history has consisted of the “poor” way of handling issues that have to do with doctrines that are different from ours, particularly the issue of “glossolalia”.

The unintentional “ambiguity” in regard to the formation of workers and the lack of a dynamic program of studies has not favored the church. This has created the need to recruit ministers from other denominations which evidently have not always contributed effectively to our doctrinal heritage. The denominational “hermeticism” has not contributed either. We have been very isolated, even within the same denomination. Finally, the most damaging element was the fact of not being able to implement in a “dynamic” manner the vision and mission of our denomination; this in spite of the extraordinary potential of our church in the country.

### **THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION PANORAMA**

One of the major contributions in the missionary labor in the formative years of the church was the establishment of the Bible Institute in 1954. Four years later, in 1958, the first graduation was held with five students.<sup>2</sup> Even when across the years there have been multiple projects in the area of theological studies, currently we only offer a program of studies that leads to ordination through the Bible Institute. We are in dialogue with other Nazarene institutions with the intent of offering graduate level studies.

### **INDIGENOUS PROCESS**

It is important and necessary to recognize the extraordinary awareness of “indigenous process” that there has been in our country since the beginning. As was mentioned, the founder of the church was a Puerto Rican, Rev. José R. Lebrón Velázquez. He was named and recognized as the first Nazarene district superintendent, missionary and pastor in Puerto Rico. After the exit of our leader, North American leadership took hold of the reins of the work and we recognize the extraordinary contribution of each missionary. At the same time, the exit of

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<sup>2</sup> *El Nazareno* (May 1958).

missionary leadership caused the national leaders—among which was Rev. Benjamín Román Díaz who was named as the second district superintendent and the first after the arrival and exit of the missionaries—to develop a tremendous effort in the space of 15 years, taking our church to declare itself as a regular district (self-sustaining) in 1980. In 1993 a second district was created in Puerto Rico. This same year Rev. Pedro Cruz was named district superintendent of the East District and Rev. Raúl Puig as district superintendent of the West District. The creation of the new district came about due to the uneasiness and dissatisfaction of some leaders who thought that with the creation of this new district indigenous process would further the work.

## **CHURCH GROWTH**

We have to recognize that through the years, the growth of the church in terms of “membership” has been “conservative”. The most significant factors that explain this can be summarized thus: lack of development in the vision and mission of our denomination; the evangelistic efforts; follow-up and discipleship have been well intentioned but “by chance”.

The growth in membership during 1957-1971, when the leadership was in hands of the missionaries, was 1,433 won and 1,009 lost for a net gain of 828. During 1972-1989, under Puerto Rican leadership, we won 4,621 and lost 2,262 for a net gain of 1,899.<sup>3</sup> In 1990 the statistics show 4,107 gained and 3,231 lost for a net gain of 853.<sup>4</sup> As was indicated, the creation of the new district took place in 1993.

## **COMPASSIONATE MINISTRIES**

The contribution of our districts has fundamentally consisted of significant financial support. In a complementary manner, some local churches have united and have done some humanitarian help and health clinics in different countries in the Caribbean, including Haiti, Dominican Republic and Cuba.

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<sup>3</sup> District Minutes, 1972-1989.

<sup>4</sup> Summary Report, General Secretary Research Center, Church of the Nazarene.