

PAST: HERITAGE AND INDIGENOUS PROCESS OF THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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Country of Origin: Dominican Republic

Serving in: Dominican Republic

RETROSPECTIVE FOCUS

In August 1975 the work of the Church of the Nazarene in the Dominican Republic started. The arrival of Dr. Louie Bustle¹, current World Mission Director, and later, Dr. Jerry Porter, current General Superintendent, marked a change in the paradigm in the evangelistic task in the Dominican Republic. The message of holiness and the testimony of the first Nazarenes impacted the lives of many unconverted that went to the altar convinced of their sin and testifying with tears the presence of Christ in their lives. The holiness movement crossed the boundaries of the church and impacted other denominations. Many pastors and members came to us interested in forming part of our membership. In the first district assembly in 1976, we already had 12 churches and 228 members. Many of these congregations already had their own church building.

WHAT WAS DONE WELL?

The preaching of the message of holiness, plus the testimony of the first Nazarenes were determining elements for the rapid growth of the church. The presence of the Holy Spirit was a constant in our evangelistic labor. Our founders held a clear vision for growth. The themes of that time revealed the content of the vision: Every One Win One, Every Pastor Win a Pastor, Every Church Plant a Church; Quisqueya for Christ; Without Holiness No One Will See the Lord. These themes became part of the permanent language of the first Nazarenes.

The building of churches, parsonages, buildings for education centers, buildings for conference centers: in 1978 we had a property of over 10 hectares and buildings for mass events, as well as cabins to house the participants.²

Other positive elements were the evangelistic groups from the United States, Puerto Rico, Mexico and other countries. The system of tents, evangelistic campaigns in parks, choral concerts with groups from Puerto Rico and the United States, the campaigns in the local churches preached by our missionaries, as well as personal contact with the community were all elements of great impulse in the development and growth of the church.

WHAT ASPECTS RESULTED NEGATIVE FOR THE CHURCH?

The premature exit of our founders. The founding missionaries were focused on the practical part of the holiness message. They concentrated on a vision of growth, of revival and passion for the lost. But the form of adoring God, the culture and the idiosyncrasy of the first

¹ Taken from the book, *Miracles are Happening in the Dominican Republic* by Louie and Ellen Bustle, 1978.

² Data from minutes of the first District Assemblies, 1976 and 1978.

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Nazarenes was not their concern; there was a spirit of liberty, the Nazarenes did not feel punished or censured for their culture.

The new missionaries, concerned about order and the establishment of an organizational culture, produced, without meaning to, a paralysis in the growth spiral of the Church in the Dominican Republic. Their vision was oriented towards the distinctives of the church, something that we still value, the theoretical teaching of our doctrinal system, the teaching of the policies and government of our church. These actions were useful and necessary to forge in the Nazarenes a profile of identity as a denomination. However, along with this, they added a reactionary zeal against all forms of worship that could appear Pentecostal. The censured expressions such as the use of musical instruments like the tambourine, *guiras*, drums; musical genres like *meringues*, *cumbias*, etc.; also visiting other denominations and inviting preachers from other denominations.

The pastors had to finish their studies before starting their pastorate. On the other hand, the naming of leaders that came from other denominations notably affected the growth of the church, the development of national leadership and the system of doctrinal identity. When our founders left, the true and authentic Nazarenes had not reached the preparation and maturity necessary to assume control of the church. So, with the exit of our first missionaries, the church came under control of an interdenominational leadership. The struggles between them and the zeal for those who came from the inside of the church produced confrontations that damaged the spirit and the internal and external environment of our church. Many valuable young people were expelled and today are national leaders in other denominations. Many churches closed, pastors were fired and expelled, as a result of a dysfunctional leadership that came to our young church with an agenda marked by ambition.

CHURCH GROWTH IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

The growth of the church in the Dominican Republic was an undeniable fact. During the first years, the growth of the church was significant. The statistics reveal that in 1990 we had 10,253 Nazarenes; the current membership is 7,964.³ However, although some factors that figured negatively in the process of consolidating the church were mentioned earlier, I would like to add some factors that contributed to this drastic reduction in membership:

- Thousands of Haitian Nazarenes were repatriated by the Dominican government to their country of origin.
- There were judicial conflicts between superintendents and pastors.
- The massive firing of pastors and church closings.
- Lawsuits and ministerial disciplines.

These and other factors notably influenced in the membership of the church. These reasons caused the authorities at that time to solicit the authorization from the General Superintendent in jurisdiction a special permission to update the membership roles of the denomination. Currently, the Regional goal for the Dominican Republic is 20,000 new Nazarenes by 2008. All of us are working to reach that goal.

³ District Assembly minutes, 1990 and 2004.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Theological education in the Dominican Republic formally began in 1976, directed masterfully by Dr. Jerry Porter. The Program in Christian Ministry was attractive for hundreds of students interested in ministerial preparation. SENDAS was an extension of the Central American Seminary located in San José, Costa Rica.

In 1988 the opening of the Dominican Nazarene Seminary was approved, with a residential system. In 1994, due to economic pressures, the residential program was closed and the seminary concentrated exclusively on a decentralized modality. Currently we have 9 centers and 150 students enrolled.⁴ A strategy has been designed according to the mission and vision of the Church of the Nazarene and the International Board of Education. A total ministry, authentic and congruent, is our theme. We want to form ministers according to the expectations of the Gospel and aligned to the evangelistic and spiritual mission of our church. Knowledge, training, character and the context form a fundamental part of the program design of our institution.

INDIGENOUS PROCESS

The national contribution to the development of the church was notable from the beginning of the work in the Dominican Republic. The significant contribution of the nationals in the legal field with the incorporation of the church in accordance to the laws and state requirements. The new converts gave buildings, properties and other means for the church in the country. The pastors that graduated from the Seminary in San José, Costa Rica were immediately placed in the theological task of the local Seminary, so contributing to the formation of ministers for the work. The church currently has more than 18 graduates of Bachelors's, Master's and Doctoral programs in different areas who are integrated in the Seminary as in other areas of service to the church.

COMPASSIONATE MINISTRIES

Compassionate Ministries started at the end of the 1980's and signified a great economic help for the pastors. At the beginning, there was only the program of educational scholarships for pastors' children. Later, other programs to help with micro business for the benefit of the pastors were started. The majority of these programs failed due to poor supervision and poor administration. Currently there is in the Dominican Republic a national Compassionate Ministries coordinator and a coordinator for each district. Compassion is then an arm to help the church in its task of holistic evangelism and includes programs such as medicine, holistic health, help in times of disaster, and others.

REFLECTION

In light of our history and taking it as a referential framework, to employ the theology of mission to the present and future of the church, one needs to seriously reflect on the following aspects: (1) The great quantity of believers that leave our churches; (2) The reasons and causes of those exits.

⁴ Dominican Nazarene Seminary catalog, 2002-2005.

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Thinking of the quality of the spiritual life of our believers, their family relationships, as well as their commitment to the faith, do our members have the abundant life that Jesus offers? (John 10:10). What about the pastors' children who have gotten off track and the marriages of pastors who do not adjust to the demands of the gospel? What of our doctrine? Are we congruent in the way we preach it? Are the numbers or the multitudes gathered within four walls truly indications of real growth? Do these multitudes have a doctrinal system and an organizational culture that will allow them to survive a changing world lacking in values and principles? How do we make the church a healing community, one of relational growth that becomes something attractive to belong to and not just a center to recruit individuals?

Evangelization must contemplate man as an integral being, with necessities that go beyond the spiritual that include the social, the physical and the emotional, according to Matthew 9:35. So, the theology of mission must be employed in the present and in the future of our church to be able to think seriously about the spiritual quality of our members, the formation of pure and integral character, and for an integral ministry, besides quantitative growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Resume the way and road of holiness, and promote it our Christian people; purity of heart and a life of total surrender to God.
- Fortifying our organizational culture, through permanent activities that highlight the values and principles that give us identity and define our reason for being.
- Establishing more rigorous policies for the recruitment and selection of the pastors and leaders called to the ministry, taking into account the institutional objectives and our sense of mission.
- Use of more rigorous criteria in the dynamics of Christian discipleship.

CONCLUSION

The history of the Church of the Nazarene in the Dominican Republic is like the history of any social group. To make roads where no one has ever walked is difficult, errors are made, not hitting the target, almost always wanting to do better. Healthy and functional systems never seek scapegoats, but revise their structure, question the symptoms and finally assume a shared responsibility for the factors that could have had negative results. Opening ourselves up to constructive criticism will allow us to fine tune the institution without losing the essence and institutional identity.