

# **THE NAZARENE PAST IN MEXICO: HERITAGE AND INDIGENOUS PROCESS**

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*Country of Origin: Mexico*

*Serving in: Mexico*

## **BEGINNING YEARS OF PIONEER MISSIONARY AND NATIONAL WORK**

In 1903, five years before the historical birth of the Church of the Nazarene, individuals from the United States, members of the Texas Holiness Association, moved to the south of Mexico but without specific plans. Under the direction of Samuel M. Stafford, who was on his way to Guatemala where he had been assigned, stopped in Tonalá, Chiapas, where he started preaching and teaching the Biblical doctrine of holiness, at a time when this doctrine had awakened a large movement in different places in North America.

In a span of seven years, they established missions in several cities, including San Jerónimo, Oaxaca, (now Ciudad Ixtepec), Jalisco, Chiapas, (now Arriaga), Calera and Tonalá, Chiapas, and other places in the State of Guerrero. Among the group that established this work were individuals who had enough of their own economic resources that they were able to sustain themselves and to invest in buying properties and building church buildings. From this beginning until 1907, there was no talk of training workers to give continuity to the missionary work, at least in the southern part of Mexico, because the missionary team was enough to establish the church in the places they strategically chose.

In January 1907, Rev. Charles Miller was sent by the Holiness Association as a missionary to Mexico City. In May of the same year, he established a very close relationship with Dr. Vicente G. Santín, a medical doctor that had been a member and pastor in the Methodist Church, and had been seeking the experience of entire sanctification. Dr. Santín attended Rev. Miller's mission and found the experience of entire sanctification and immediately joined in missionary work. Also, Dr. Santín, from this time and due to the impact of the doctrine, joined the new congregation of professionals and university students which in a few years produced preachers that became ordained ministers in the church.

In October 1908 when the unification and official organization of the Church of the Nazarene took place, the missionaries and the works they had started in Mexico became part of the new denomination. On October 24, 1908, the First Church of the Nazarene was organized in Mexico City under the ministry of Rev. Charles Miller, who remained there until 1912. During the period between 1912 and 1919, due to the Mexican Revolution, all foreigners were expelled from the country and so the missionaries in the south and center had to leave the work they had started.

The leaving of the missionaries apparently stopped the development of the Church of the Nazarene. Lay people in every mission took up the responsibility of maintaining the unity among themselves, although on the denominational level the work was supervised by missionary J.D. Scott who lived in Guatemala and from there visited Mexico. In October 1919, Dr. Vicente G. Santín was named Superintendent of the Foreign Mission in Mexico. From that moment,



### *Mexico (René Jiménez)*

national workers were sent to take care of the missions and churches that had been established in the south and center of the country. On January 9, 1922, the first Bible School was founded, which months later changed its name to the Mexican Nazarene Seminary. The first graduation took place in 1926. The Seminary closed its doors in 1947 after 25 years of fulfilling its mission of preparing ministers for the Church of the Nazarene.

In the north of the country, there were missionary movements that introduced the Church of the Nazarene along the border with the United States. A movement arose during 1907, through Mrs. Santos Elizondo, a Mexican-American citizen who resided in El Paso, Texas. She established a mission in this city with Spanish-speaking people; five years later the work was officially organized. At the same time, she moved to the Mexican side and founded a mission on the border, in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and established an orphanage that was maintained until 1941. During the same period the Church of the Nazarene in the Los Angeles, California had a ministry to minister to the poor and reached Mexican workers who lived in the United States. Through the same group, the church crossed the border in Baja California. In 1946, under the leadership of Dr. Ira L. True, the Hispanic work was organized in both territories including the work that had been established in Chihuahua. The preparation of pastors had greater impetus on the border with the United States and Baja California; it was from there that individuals were sent the help the work in Ciudad Juárez and other places. Another movement came out of the Hispanic ministry of the Church of the Nazarene in San Antonio, Texas, moving into the northeast part of Mexico, particularly the city of Monterrey.

In 1943, in accordance with the General Board of the church, the work was separated from the United States and the North District was formed. At the same time, the decision was made to organize Mexico into two districts: North and Central. In 1947, the church was organized into three districts: North, Central and Southeast. By 25 years later, due to growth in membership and the number of churches, nine new districts had been created. Currently, Mexico has 13 districts: ten Phase III, two Phase II, and one Phase I.

### **VARIOUS PROCESSES AND APPRAISALS DURING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WORK**

From 1903 until 1908, missionaries did all the work. There were approximately 17 individuals but no one prepared others to continue developing the vision. They maintained the Bible studies, medical works, carpenter shops, constructions, administered the print shop and depended on their own economic resources. There was no program for training or preparation of preachers although they did teach by example. However, it was preparation to maintain the faith, not to prepare leaders, to such a level that when they were exiled in 1913, their absence was felt and the vision stopped.

The initiative that came from the election of the first national district superintendent, to prepare workers and to establish the Mexican Nazarene Seminary (1922), made the Church of the Nazarene develop to reach new cities, barrios and rural areas. Parallel to the ministry of the pastors, lay evangelists and founders of new congregations were the colporteurs. The colporteur was a well-known figure in the Presbyterian and Methodist churches that arrived in Mexico before the Church of the Nazarene. They were the pioneers that opened the way to evangelists;



*Mexico (René Jiménez)*

many were victims of ignorance and Catholic religious fanaticism and suffered persecution and death threats.

The first known reference to statistics is what was published in a report of the superintendent of the Mission District of Mexico in 1927; it was reported that there were 12 organized churches, 12 pastors including himself, and 745 full members. In these statistics there is no mention of new missions but it is evident that there were some; nor is there any mention of the number of associate members. For almost 50 years, the Church of the Nazarene grew by means of a large number of lay people called to the ministry, most with a job to support their families economically. The number of pastors that graduated from the Seminary was limited and the majority of them also depended on the resources obtained from another job. The challenge of the ministry was obedience to the call of God, without hoping for a salary.

The denomination's Department of World Mission helped in a relative way to develop the church by naming the first district superintendent, and as the denomination grew, including its resources, gave economic help to the pastors to encourage them to give up their secular jobs and dedicate themselves to full-time ministry. From 1956 until 1975 the Mexican church proposed to raise the level of economic support from the local churches and to make the districts Phase III districts. The resources provided by the denomination to help the pastors ended in between 1970 and 1972. From 1972 on, new districts were organized and the church had better development.

During the first 50 years the declaration of the mission and the objectives of the Church of the Nazarene were not emphasized, as we read in the *Manual* of the church, although there was a consciousness of the distinctive doctrine of Christian holiness. The vision that the preachers who were formed at the Seminary and that the districts had was to preach the Good News of the Gospel and to bring the new believer to a totally consecrated life. This implied publicly and verbally declaring the faith and practicing a profound devotion in prayers, completely distancing oneself from all Roman Catholic customs, watching how one dressed and the length of the hair (in the case of the women), correcting language, and totally distancing oneself from worldly diversions (in some cases sports were considered an activity that damaged the faith).

Lay preachers, elders or those with a district license maintained special care for their pulpits. They did not give their pulpits to preachers from other denominations. This helped make almost uniform the knowledge regarding Biblical doctrine and holiness customs throughout the local churches in whatever locale that the Church of the Nazarene covered geographically during the first 50 years. Theological terminology was known by the preachers but was not generally used from the pulpit. This became more popular due to the influence of the students who graduated from the Nazarene Bible Institute, established in San Antonio, Texas, and later became the Spanish-American Nazarene Seminary. This was also influenced by the system of ministerial studies by correspondence that the same seminary extended in all of the districts. Under the direction of Dr. William C. Vaughters, the Nazarene Seminary in San Antonio, Texas, meetings with the pastors had every two or three years so that they could receive special courses on Biblical exegesis and theology. These meetings took place in the south of the country and they were called "Pastoral Institutes". This was another resource that helped to form



*Mexico (René Jiménez)*

the identity of holiness doctrine with the use of terminology of systematic theology. The work of Mexican Nazarene Seminary, Pastoral Institutes, theological studies via correspondence and the doctrinal publications of the Herald of Holiness joined with the disciplined life that was applied to lay and pastoral ministry, produced a generation of great preachers, teachers and leaders the gave impetus to the growth of the Church of the Nazarene with an identity that gained respect from the other historical denominations in the country.

## **DATA OF GROWTH AND CHALLENGES**

In regard to the numerical growth of the church in Mexico, we must mention some facts that Dr. Vicente G. Santín stated in his report of 1927, in which he reported 745 members. In an article written by Rev. Alfredo H. Santín for the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the denomination in 1958, he makes reference to a membership of 10,000 in the country; this shows an 1142% increase in members in 32 years. Eight years later, in 1966, we have information that reveals 160 organized churches in four districts in the country, with a total membership of 14,700, which indicates a 47% growth. In 1983, 17 years later, we had a membership of 19,923 which is equivalent to 35% growth or 2.09% on average per year. In 2003, 20 years later, we had a membership of 43,563 that is equivalent to a 119% growth (almost 6% per year average). Up to 2003, we had 586 organized churches, with an increase of 366% since 1966, with an average of 10% growth during 37 years.

Of the 32 States that form the Republic of Mexico, the Church of the Nazarene still has not formally established its ministry in two of the states. Of the 103.7 million people that live in Mexico, the Church of the Nazarene makes up 0.04% of the population. We have a big challenge.

## **SOME LESSONS**

One of the lessons which can be seen from history is that the preachers who were used by God during the time the early missionaries left, even though some of them had a university background, they were able to work with the local preachers who came from poor and lower class sectors of society. They were able to do this without intellectual superiority realizing that when God calls to the ministry we need to obey his call with or without an academic title. Those who had a privileged education sought to raise the educational level of their ministerial colleagues in order that the Gospel could be preached to the people where they were sent. Another lesson from the past is the zeal of the Mexican Nazarene pastors who were willing to preach and teach Christian holiness without counting the cost, without a salary and often serving bivocationally.

Nazarene Mexican pastors have also encouraged the new generations to look for academic theological training. Training started with correspondence courses that developed into a Bible School. As time passed Bible Institutes were born, and later the Seminary. Each of these institutions reached their academic levels.

## **FINAL REFLECTIONS**

If we compare the passion and ministry results of our past Nazarene pastors with the current pastors, we would have to say that the current ones are more academic and professional



*Mexico (René Jiménez)*

but do not share the same passion for the mission of the church, and as a result the mission of the church is more theoretical. There is a tendency that the church is fighting for its survival using modern models and styles of sensational evangelism instead of Bible-based proclamation and the mission of the church. This leads us to reflect on how to prepare future pastors for this country, for a more missional ministry and a deeper passion for Biblical preaching without losing professionalism.

There is a movement of young lay people who have graduated from the universities and other higher studies who are studying the Master's degree offered by SENDAS, with plans to enter the pastoral ministry, teaching or as missionaries. This gives us hope for the near future. With God's help, the church in Mexico will become a church that sends missionaries and workers to other parts of the world with vision and passion.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Data taken from the historical archives of the First Church of the Nazarene in Mexico City. The Santin family gave permission to see documents which include: letters, bulletins and the magazine, *El Piloto Nazareno*, June 1958, June 1976, November 1977 and the catalog from the Seminary from 1931.

The historical summary included in the Bible that was especially printed for the Mexico's Centennial Celebration, November, 2003, written by Rev. Eduardo Duque Madrid.

Personal interviews with veteran pastors in the North, Central and South zones of Mexico.