

THE NAZARENES IN NICARAGUA: PAST AND PRESENT

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Country of Origin: Nicaragua

Serving in: Nicaragua

INTRODUCTION

I have the honor and privilege to share reports and reflections about the Church of the Nazarene in Nicaragua with this theological conference. I shall be covering the past and present and some of the challenges we need to meet in the future. My country, a land of volcanoes and lakes, inspired the great poet Rubén Darío to write: “Nicaragua is formed from strength and glory, Nicaragua was made to be free.” This sovereign land has been impacted and illuminated by the glorious message of the gospel, the message of holiness brought and spread around by the Church of the Nazarene.

OUR PAST

Genesis: The evangelistic task was started in my country by a Nicaraguan, Dr. David Ramírez, who had a reencounter with the Lord Jesus in the Nazarene church in Chicago, Illinois. The message of holiness impacted his life and the glorious experience of entire sanctification cleansed his heart and fired him with an ardent missionary zeal which motivated him to preach the gospel of Christ to everyone he met who did not know the Lord.

In 1937 he returned to Nicaragua as an “unofficial” missionary. That means that he was there without the authorization of World Mission in Kansas City. He used as his base the port on Lake Nicaragua, called San Jorge, in the department of Rivas. From there by mule and horseback he started to visit the villages and towns as an itinerant evangelist preaching the gospel. Many times he had to respond to dangers, threats and extreme financial limitations as well as health problems because of his age especially difficulties with loss of sight.

Every day he prayed fervently that God would send North American missionaries to start the work in our country. At the same time he sent letters to Kansas City urging them to consider the need of sending missionaries to Nicaragua. Six long years went by in which our founder did not stop praying, working and sending letters to Kansas, until at last God answered his prayers and his letters to Kansas by sending the first North American missionary couple in 1943.

Harold and Evelyn Stanfield were a young married couple. This couple carried out the major part of the pioneer work in the country serving for 18 years in an evangelistic ministry. Rev. Stanfield served the Lord as a pastor, district superintendent, mission director, director and professor at the Nazarene Bible Institute, and of course he was the person who started, promoted and began to establish the work in Rivas and other parts of the country with help from the national leaders.

On the 26th of December 1943, the first Sunday school was celebrated in San Jorge with 24 students, and that same evening 8 people accepted the Lord. On the 13th of August 1944, the church celebrated the first baptismal service where 12 people received this sacrament. In the

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same month in 1944 the first Church of the Nazarene was organized with 19 full members in the town of San Jorge, department of Rivas, becoming the birth place of the Nicaraguan Nazarene church. The first district assembly took place in 1947, at that time we were District No. 91 of Guatemala.

DEVELOPMENT AND CONSOLIDATION

The central operative point for the development of this incipient missionary work was the town of San Jorge. That was where the mother church was and that was where the missionaries lived.

But the vision was to grow. Evangelistic outreaches were carried out in the city of Rivas, the towns and communities of the entire department, and slowly to all of the country. Those ardent and valiant Nazarenes challenged hell itself, as dangers, persecution and belligerent opposition by the enemies of the gospel were what they had to face daily. However, the work advanced. Our missionaries and national workers were highly committed to advance the kingdom of God and the International Church shared our commitment.

In 1946, a new North American couple, Cecil and Edna Rudeen, arrived in Nicaragua. Cecil had the vision to found the Nazarene Bible Institute destined to train pastors and leaders for the sacred ministry. In 1948 the doors were opened and five students began their studies under the supervision of Rev. Rudeen who was the first director. This center became the “birth place” for many national ministers. For 29 years it produced committed workers for the Lord’s work in Nicaragua.

The Nazarene Bible Institute (IBN) had its doors open from 1948 until 1977. More than 100 students were trained there in this period, both men and women. The majority of those graduated are still active in ministry serving the Lord in Nicaragua or in other countries. Some are now retired. In 1955 the first five national pastors were ordained. Because of their relevance and significance in history I am going to name them: Daniel Vega Sánchez, Ignacio Hernández, Abelino Palma, Diego M. Ortiz y Víctor González. Four of them are still living. González is with the Lord. Palma and Ortiz live in the United States. Vega and Hernández live in Nicaragua, retired but still serving the Lord with a lot of love.

It is important to mention here that the International church sent 15 couples and 10 single ladies as missionaries during a period of three decades. Also they supported us with investment for buying land for church buildings, parsonages, medical clinics and schools.

QUANTITATIVE ADVANCES

According to the data given by Rev. Diego Manuel Ortiz, in his book *Recordar es vivir* (To Remember is to Live), during the period 1943-1975 the church advanced to 76 geographic locations, reaching a membership of 1,431 full members. The church in this period celebrated 29 District Assemblies. This covers 32 years of work. The same author informs us that by 1991 we were in 100 geographic points, reaching 4,618 full and associate members, and that we had celebrated 44 district assemblies.

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This advance was also accompanied by actions of a social character as an attempt to present the gospel holistically. Medical clinics were established in San Jorge (Rivas), San Isidro (Matagalpa) and Pantasma (Jinotega). They also founded schools in Rivas and Boaco. The nurses attended the people while simultaneously the Nicaraguan Nazarene Christians were evangelizing the people. They were able to evangelize both children and parents through the ministry of the schools.

However, the advances in the work were shaken by two events which are relevant to mention:

A painful separation. A good group of lay Nazarenes left the church to organize the National Nazarene church. This brought tensions and discouragement. Even though no pastors left the church, it did affect the statistics, the income and the spiritual life of the church.

The exodus. Although it is hard to be precise about numbers, during the Sandinista Revolution many pastors and lay members left the country for different reasons. Many were searching for the “American Dream”.

OUR PRESENT

After 61 years of existence, the church of the Nazarene in Nicaragua presents the following picture: We are present in the 16 departments into which the country has been divided. In some the work is strong while in others it is weak or incipient. Such is the case of Zelaya (Atlantic Coast) where the work was started only recently in 1997. We have four districts. These are:

South District. The departments of Rivas, Granada and Carazo.

Central District. Managua, Masaya, León, Chinandega, Boaco, Chontales and Zelaya.

South East District. Río San Juan.

North District. Estelí, Madriz, Nueva Segovia, Jinotega and Matagalpa.

The total number of members is 8,243 full members, 1,579 associate members, 147 pastors, 125 organized churches, 31 missions, 12 theological education extension centers (ETED), 132 students of ETED, 14 schools (both primary and secondary) with 2,150 pupils, and 6 Compassionate Ministry projects.

CRITICISM AND SELF CRITICISM

In this part in no way do I want to minimize either the work or the person of the missionaries and national workers involved. On the contrary, I need to affirm the moral debt which we have to these brothers and sisters whose ministry blessed us. However, we must recognize that fact that they were not “perfect” and neither was or is the “system” perfect. It has to be noted that not everything was done or is done today in the best way.

1. The Missionaries’ administrative and leadership style was centralized. There was a kind of division between “the mission” and the District. During all the time that the missionaries were present there was a Mission Director who according to the rules had to be a missionary. This person was the only one who could make decisions and control the resources. The

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empowering and participation of the nationals in the leadership of the church was a slow process. For more than 20 years the district superintendents were North American missionaries.

2. National leadership was not prepared to face either the political changes in the country or the changes in leadership of the church. With the victory of the Popular Sandista Revolution the country entered in a new stage of its development. The revolution transformed all the political, economic, juridical and social structures. As the Commander Carlos Fonseca Amador would say, “what is needed is not to change the men who are in power but to change the system.” The revolution was a change of system. The church did not escape the impact of all of this. A little before the Sandinista victory the last missionaries left the country and unfortunately the only national district superintendent that we had also left. All of the properties were registered under the name of the General Board of the Church of the Nazarene whose offices were in Kansas City Missouri, USA and given the political leanings the Sandistas looked with suspicion on this. Providentially the General Board gave Power of Attorney to a Nazarene ordained minister who along with the new District Superintendent dedicated a lot of time to the task of bringing up to date and legalizing all the properties.

3. The Bible Institute was closed impeding the ongoing process of training and preparing of pastors for ministry. Although there were other alternatives for theological education from the Nazarene Seminary based in Costa Rica, and even though an attempt to reactivate the Instituto Bíblico Nazareno (I.B.N) was made in the superintendence of Rev. Nicanor Mairena, it was never the same again. I.B.N was unrepeatable.

4. Discipleship is another aspect where we have been vulnerable, not only with new Christians but also with the whole church.

5. We have not been able to grow along with the rhythm of population growth. Comparing the years that we have been carrying out evangelism we need to note that our growth has slow. Really we are still a very small church.

6. Holistic mission was not emphasized as much as it should have been in every part of the work. We did start schools and clinics but were unable to make them self sufficient economically. These actions were somewhat dispersed. I believe that we have put too much emphasis on “the salvation of souls” forgetting man’s need of integral or holistic salvation including the following aspects: spiritual, physical, economic and emotional.

7. We have kept silent with regard to the difficulties and problems that our country faces. We have not raised our voice against the governmental repressions. We have not spoken out against the corruption in government, social injustices, the loss of moral values and human rights violations which the majority of the people, including the Nazarenes, suffer. The country’s riches in just a few hands provoke this. Being silent makes us accomplices.

CHALLENGES

1. To expand holiness teaching and establish a church in the cities, towns, villages and communities where we do not yet have any presence.

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2. We need to raise educational standards in theological education in our task of preparing pastors and leaders for the church in all the country.

3. There is a need to cultivate interdependence and cooperation between national leadership and the International Church of the Nazarene in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

4. We need to work for the unity of the Nicaraguan Nazarene Church with the International church.

5. The gospel needs to be incarnated in the lives of ordinary Nicaraguan people in concrete social actions. We need to start the medical clinics again, we need to maintain and amplify the education projects, influence in the country's economy, promote and defend Human Rights and denounce injustice from whatever source it may come from.

6. We need to put into practice the discipleship program in order to guarantee qualitative and quantitative growth in our church.