

THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE IN COSTA RICA

by Mario Vargas Castro

Country of Origin: Costa Rica

Serving in: Costa Rica

WHAT DID WE RECEIVE?

The Church of the Nazarene in Costa Rica was not started by North Americans, but by our brothers and sisters from Nicaragua; as we are neighboring countries they started a church on the border in Los Chiles in the 1950s.

During 1960 the Latin American Mission went into Nicaragua with Evangelism in Depth. As a reward for his services to this program, Nicaraguan Nazarene pastor Ignacio Hernández was offered a grant to do postgraduate studies in the Latin American Biblical Seminary in San José, Costa Rica. He immediately got in touch with the district superintendent in Nicaragua, Rev. Cecil G. Rudeen, asking permission to start a church in San José. Rev Rudeen felt that this was a good idea.

After getting permission from the Board of General Superintendents in Kansas City, this work was started in January 1963. There were no funds available to support this new missionary, however. The Nicaraguan Mission Council made arrangements to use some funds available to support this new work. This economic help was used to pay traveling expenses and to rent a house as a preaching point. The Nicaraguan church supported with friendship and prayer.

On arrival in San José, pastor Hernández made contact with a Nicaraguan Nazarene family that he knew when they were in his country. The Mendoza family had been praying that the church of the Nazarene could start in work in Costa Rica. The first Sunday school was celebrated on February 20, 1963, with 20 people present. During Sunday school on March 17, 1963, the first person accepted the Lord.

Pastor Hernández was finishing his studies and had to return to Nicaragua to pastor the First Church of Managua. However the District Superintendent asked him first to organize a church in Barrio Mexico, a neighborhood near the center of San José. On March 2, 1964, in the presence of Rev. Dean Galloway, the District Superintendent of Nicaragua, the first Church of the Nazarene in Costa Rica was organized.

The Mendoza family were the first Nazarenes to testify of faith and holiness in San José and this first congregation of the Church of the Nazarene was organized with 10 full members and 13 associate members waiting to be received as full members. Rev. Diego Manuel Ortiz was named as the new pastor. This is how the work started in Costa Rica. The Nicaraguan district became known as the Nicaragua-Costa Rica district with offices in Nicaragua.

At the beginning of the 1970s a new training center was built in El Alto de Guadalupe, Goicoechea, called the Central American Nazarene Seminary, to prepare future Nazarene

Costa Rica (Mario Vargas)

leaders. Later as students started to come from, the Caribbean and South America the name was changed to Nazarene Seminary of the Americas. Due to this, the new District of Costa Rica was created. The first District Assembly was celebrated from April 13-15, 1972, in the Nazarene Seminary of the Americas, as pastors, missionaries and delegates were present. Rev. Marshall G. Griffith was named as the new Superintendent. At that point there were two organized churches and two missions, 44 full members and 34 associate members.

On February 2, 1979, during the eighth District Assembly, General Superintendent Dr. Coulter thanked Rev. and Mrs. Allan Wilson for the good work done and for the growth of the new Pioneer District of Costa Rica. At that point it became a National Mission District and Rev. Ezequiel Juantá was elected as the first District Superintendent. That year the reports showed 434 full members, and 146 associate members in 12 churches and 5 missions.

WHAT HAVE WE BEEN ABLE TO ACHIEVE?

From 1979 onwards, the leadership of the Costa Rican district was in national hands. They were responsible for the growth of the Costa Rican Nazarene Church, with financial support from the Nazarene Mission through Alabaster offerings and subsidies to buy land and build churches and parsonages.

In the fifteenth District Assembly, celebrated on January 18, 1986, the district was divided to form the Central District and the North District. Before the division the District had 1079 full members, 447 associate members, 23 organized churches and 6 missions.

At the present the Nazarene Church of Costa Rica has two districts, one is Phase III and the other one Phase II; there are 31 organized churches distributed geographically from the center of the country to the border with Nicaragua. There still are no churches in the south of the country. At present there are 2206 full members, 311 associate members, and 3 missions.

WHAT DID WE DO WELL?

One of the things that we did well was the program which was developed between 1980 and 1990. This program was a joint effort between the District, the Seminary and the Mission. We mention this because it was during this time that the church saw more quantitative growth, thanks to the practical ministry projects of the students of the Nazarene Seminary of the Americas. Another great asset was the financial help received by the District which was invested in land and administrative costs. The Mission sent Alabaster money and Work and Witness teams.

We need to mention here that the majority of the land was bought in the decade of the 80s in a period of relative economic stability. This meant that the prices were good and it was easy to make the transactions. One of the achievements was to be able to have the first evangelical university of the country, (the Nazarene University—UNAZA). Many pastors, leaders and lay people came to study at the university as it was recognized for its sound doctrinal teaching and the quality of the professors.

Costa Rica (Mario Vargas)

WHAT DID WE DO WRONG?

One of the great problems of the Costa Rican Nazarene Church has been the lack of national leaders. The majority of the pastors have been students from different countries who stayed to pastor because there was a need.

Another weakness has been the fact that experienced pastors have not trained younger leaders, or “Timothys”, to take their place or to pastor in new churches or missions. There have not been sufficient messages to young people about the calling to the pastoral ministry. We do not have model churches. The theology taught has been very intellectual with little praxis; many pastors are not prepared to change, causing some stagnation to the development of the church. Another problem is that the leadership has also spent the subsidy without working carefully to prepare for self support of the next generations.

One loss occurred for the Costa Rican Nazarene Church when we gave away the university charter that the Nazarene Seminary had as the “Nazarene university” (UNAZA). For various reasons the license was passed to the Missionological Institute of the Americas, today known as the Evangelical University of the Americas (UNELA).

Very little has been done in the area of Compassionate Ministries. Social action in the district among the churches has not been carried out apart from a few attempts when medical teams and Work and Witness teams came from abroad.

WHAT HAVE WE NOT DONE AND WHAT HAVE WE NOT FOLLOWED UP ON?

We have stopped:

- Planting churches
- Establishing preaching points
- Carrying out aggressive evangelistic programs
- Having revival and healing campaigns
- Helping people to improve their standard of living.

FINAL WORDS

Even though the overall picture is not all positive, we believe that the Nazarene Church in Costa Rica will begin to start a new course. There are many lay people studying theology in the decentralized program (ETED). The number of centers for theological studies as well as the number of students is increasing. Several lay people are beginning to receive a call to the pastoral ministry and some have even stepped out in faith and have begun pastoring while others are preparing to be teachers in the decentralized program (ETED). We need to go back to our foundations, learn about our past, and work towards forming Christian members according to the profile set up for us by Dr. Phineas F. Bresee:

Costa Rica (Mario Vargas)

A Nazarene is...

- “A redeemed person who has been saved from sin, and enjoys the Holy Spirit as a child of God.”
- “A person who has experienced the second work of Grace, entire sanctification, receiving heart cleansing and the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and can testify to this experience.”
- “An excellent student of God’s word.”
- “A missionary of the Cross.”
- “A faithful and generous administrator of both tithes and belongings, supporting the Lord’s work by means of tithes and offerings.”
- “A happy, victorious triumphant person, full of praise.”