

THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE IN ARGENTINA

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Country of Origin: Peru/Argentina

Serving in Argentina

OUTSTANDING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PIONEERS

Two couples are remembered as the initiators of the work in Argentina. Rev. Frank and Lula Ferguson along with Rev. Charles H. and Catalina Miller arrived on October 14, 1914. At that time, the two couples belonged to groups that had joined the Church of the Nazarene. They are described as being passionate evangelists, willing to sacrifice whatever it took to reach the inhabitants of this nation. September 3, 1919, is the date of the opening of the Church of the Nazarene on Argentina soil, in the Miller's house, who opened up their dining room for public church services and meetings for family prayer.

1. Strong evangelistic ministry

On October 5, 1920, one year after its beginning, there were **two missions**; regular celebrations of public services five times per week; two services for married and single ladies, prayers services and Friday night Bible studies, along with **regular Sunday morning services** in two different places.

2. Sustaining educational ministry

The second District Assembly of the Argentina Mission District took place on October 10 and 11, 1922, and during the procedures, announced three missions, three Sunday Schools and seven preaching points. In every step of these beginnings it is important to note that **Sunday school** was a strong point directed towards children was used to reach their parents too.

3. Outstanding importance of literature

The printed page had a decisive role, principally with the publication *La senda antigua* (The Old Way) which later became *La vía mas excelente* (The More Excellent Way). Folders, materials for evangelization, articles by well-known authors, along with their translations of holiness books, **were printed and distributed** with the income they generated.

4. Formal and theological education

Another predominant aspect was the opening of the **Coeducational Evangelical School** on 1976 Gaona Street, with an enrollment of 25 students during February 1923. Also outstanding was theological education directed by Rev. Charles Miller, which also served students from other denominations, at the **Nazarene Bible Institute**.

5. Ample ministry for both men and women

During June 8-14, 1931, the ninth District Assembly was celebrated. It was an unforgettable time as Dr. J.B. Chapman visited Argentina, being the first General Superintendent of the Church of the Nazarene to do so. During this opportunity he had the privilege to ordain

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four licensed ministers as **Elders**, the highest ministerial distinction that the Church of the Nazarene gives, as he ordained two men and two women.

STAGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT

The following points, and especially numbers 1 and 2 (1919-1979) are presented with the highest respect and honor to those who lived during this time; these, with the light that they had, knew how to mark the path and maintain the torch lit to pass on to following generations. I find the most accurate way to synthesize this part is with the words from the sermon, “The marks of Christ” given in the Seminary chapel in 1981 by Dr. Lucía de Costa, the first Nazarene converted in Argentina: professor, pastor, apostle and indisputable missionary. She challenged us as future pastors, by closing her message telling us: “We did the work with much less; you have more so do something bigger”.

1. SIGNIFICANT ABSENCES THAT AFFECTED US

A leadership that multiplied. The first two decades (1919-1939) elapsed without major changes; strong leadership y vision, but foreign, that was not able to transmit the vision and passion to the nationals, and much less, delegated authority, to make them true protagonists. The exceptional cases were by the grace of God more than a defined emphasis on training. The absence of national leadership with power and capacity to make decisions resulted in the majority of the times we had acculturation in place of evangelism.

A ministry of compassion. Attention was not given to the needy as compassionate ministries were not considered part of the church’s responsibilities; the markedly spiritualized gospel neglected the person’s body and soul. A mutilated gospel cannot help but mutilate individuals and families. Without being offended or offending anyone, we can mention that ignorance and poverty were considered evidences of a spiritual life.

Formal education. There was no further growth in formal education as part of the Church of the Nazarene and this was a loss that we could not recuperate from for many years. Starting over continues to cause pain for those who are in charge of the task. One can notice how over the years priorities changed and as a result, the mission of the church was only inside the churches.

Decentralization. In a country where the distances are very difficult to overcome, growth only comes if the administration and the leaders are nearby the field and mission and not so far away. This needs to be more than just a challenge; it needs to become a reality as a result of continual planning and being expressed in all the levels of leadership in the church. It is not surprising that after 12 years of work (1931) it was reported that there were only three organized churches, with a total membership of 132 full members, 70 associate members and 265 enrolled in Sunday School.

2. AN ECCLESIOLOGY WITH MORE LIMITATIONS THAN OPPORTUNITIES

The following decades (1939-1979) saw the expansion of the Church of the Nazarene; spreading out from the capital and the province of Buenos Aires to enter the interior of this great country. As nationals we could not escape the models imposed upon us during the early years,

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and so wherever a Nazarene missionary arrived, whether an Argentinean or North American, they continued giving and teaching the same characteristics that did not pass for the Gospel, rather, they were cultural additions that **fragmented the Christ they were preaching**: policies and models that were being imposed by those who were assigned and reassigned in their functions in the country.

As a consequence of the expansion, a form of governing appeared, that stopped being a model of administration and converted itself into a factor of power and dominion, **centralism and hegemony in Buenos Aires**. The fact that there was only one district meant that the pastors were assigned from Buenos Aires to distant and unknown parts, totally removed from their culture, and aggravated by sudden pastoral changes, in some cases, every two or three years. The pastors stopped being pastors and in a certain way, in exile in their own country.

A church with doors that open inwards, the outstanding characteristic of this stage, it was nothing more than, the natural consequence of the nationals' fearful participation and involvement, not only in **leadership in making decisions, but also in the expression in their cultural forms and modes**. The doors were closed to worship God as the man from the Pampa, the northeast, the *litoral*, or from Patagonia would; it had to be done American-style. Holiness passed to the external as equal or more important than the internal; a special service and parallel to the appearance.

The universal priesthood of all believers passed for having extreme care in not doing what is only the pastor's job. It is no wonder that Argentina was during these years one of the countries with the least growth in South America, while other groups and denominations grew. When the authority was passed to the nationals, it truly arrived late, as many fought in good faith to be the leaders worthy of such distinction, an internalism that weakened not only the strength to keep on growing, but also the image of the leadership.

3. TOWARDS AN HOLISTIC GOSPEL

The years 1979-2004 are witnesses of the major efforts of an evangelical people called the Church of the Nazarene, not only to correct the path that had been taken, but to begin a new one that would bring it closer the true mission of the Gospel of Christ, that proposes and promises to be the hope for such a needy world. The pressure to correct the path that had been taken grew and it was shown in various ways, from the beginning of the decade of the 60's, not only in the demands, protests, dissent, healthy discussion; but also in the lack of understanding, the indifference and even the direct or indirect marginalization. The accomplishments have been done at the cost of losing leaders, breaking structures and creating new models that continue to be paradigms of our Arminian-Wesleyan theology.

Decentralization of the district administration has been successful to the point that we now have ten districts, two of which are Phase III. One of these districts works exclusively with the indigenous peoples of the northeastern part of the country. In this district there will soon be a program for training missionaries. In this new stage of our development it would not be out of place to say that the capital, Buenos Aires and the districts in the interior are now mission fields for the Argentinians.

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The decentralization of theological education is another success story. A series of extension programs were used successfully so that each district can be training their own pastors. We believe the struggle between residential and extension programs has been overcome.

A new vision of the church was given and was encapsulated in phrases such as “Each One, Win One”, “Each Pastor, Train a Pastor”, “Each Church Plant a Church” and even later, “Every District Superintendent Train another District Superintendent”. We have been challenged to put these into practice.

We were able to point out some of the weaknesses we had: churchism—everything happens in church, clericalism—everything is done by the pastor, believerism—the Christian is just an observer. We proposed remedies for each case: a ministry with prayer cell groups, with mentors. Several new ministries were opened in the church where each Christian was able to express freely their faith and serve the God that had saved them.

As the subsidy from World Mission was withdrawn, paternalism and dependency were dealt with; the church became less dependent, national leaders multiplied, projects became self-supporting and churches were able to finance themselves and there were bi-vocational pastors.

The South America Region continued their philosophy of leadership and vision. The harvest that we received came through many trials and tears. There were moments of anguish involved in accepting the process of change, but in the end, the pain was less than plowing the barren earth and watered by prayers and tears, ready to be sown and to wait for the harvest which has come.

We will need to periodically revise our future pathways so as not to repeat the errors of the past and give to our church the contextualization which should not be lost to reach the whole person, according to the Gospel and mission that has been given to us.

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