

PAST, HERITAGE AND INDIGENOUS PROCESS: BOLIVIA

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Country of Origin: Bolivia

Serving in: Bolivia

WHAT DID WE RECEIVE?

The Church of the Nazarene began its work in Bolivia in 1945, but the official date is April 18, 1946. From its beginnings, the Church of the Nazarene in Bolivia started the work in response to the social needs; where a church was started in a community, a day-school was also started. They were fulfilling the mission of the church by helping with human development.

We received the Biblical doctrine of entire sanctification, not well understood, a doctrine without praxis and praxis without doctrine. I say this because having a doctrine that one could not apply and there were some outward practices that had nothing to do with the doctrine of a pure heart.

We received a missionary church that in her first decades had notable expansion and we had several missionaries, each one doing a specific ministry in his or her field. We received theological education, starting with a Bible School and ascending to a Theological Seminary, although the methodology used was memorization and repetition with very little theological reflection.

An international church, one of the few churches with this characteristic, for certain, very interesting but costly. In a certain manner it raises the self-esteem of our members and leaders in our cities when mega-churches are built taking members from other denominations, but hardly affecting the Church of the Nazarene.

A church with a representative government, one that is not at the extreme of either congregationalism nor episcopatism; as testimony of this type of government we have not suffered divisions, much less significant fractures.

We have received a church that works with the poor and we continue to work with them; if we have some members from the middle class they are the result of the second or third generation of our believers.

WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

As the church started in the Aymara context during the first years, in one of the largest indigenous groups situated near the seat of the government, we adopted a community theology, practicing the pre-colonial cultural value of “Ayni” (today for you and tomorrow for me), “Ayllu” (community) and “apthapi” (join together to redistribute). As proof of this practice, many of the camps and meetings that took place in the rural areas of the altiplano no registration fee was charged. The same takes place among the Quechuas; but of course, this only occurs where the colonists did not destroy these values.

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For worship we translated our hymns into Aymara (repeating only the style of the mother-culture, converting it into a sub-culture) but not into Quechua or Guaraní who are also significant ethnic groups in the country. Later new hymns were composed with an Andean flavor in cooperation with CALA (Comisión de Alfabetización en Literatura Aymara [Commission on Literacy of Aymara Literature]), along with other sister denominations.

We participate in an evangelical ecumenical group (although some in our context understand poorly the word “ecumenical”) and we are charter members of the National Association of Evangelicals in Bolivia, and also of the group United Evangelical Churches and lastly, we are co-founders of the Educators and Institutions Fraternity (1965, 1966 and 1995 respectively).

We have had district camps for children, adolescents, young people, young marrieds and adults; many times the attendance has reached 1,000 people.

WHAT WAS DONE WELL?

There was expansion of the church. Numerical growth in 1993 showed that the La Paz District in Bolivia reached a denominational world record on Jubilee Sunday of the church.

Transition of leadership to the nationals. Because of social and political problems in the country it was necessary to pass the leadership to the nationals although the church was not prepared, as the vertical leadership style of the missionaries had accustomed us to be dependent. However, it has been for the good of the church to assume our role as the Bolivian church, to count on our national leaders and to make joint decisions wisely for our future; leadership of the people, for the people and with the people.

WHAT WAS DONE POORLY?

Quantitative growth without qualitative growth. We have been more concerned about the statistics than thinking about the quality of life of the believers; emphasis on evangelism without discipleship. In the year of grace to correct membership lists, 2002, the result was about 30% non-existent members.

Good theology without praxis. I am convinced that we have good theology as it is totally Biblical, but it is not put into practice. Only about 25% of our full members live and think in a manner consistent with our theology.

Paternalism on part of the missionaries. A lot of dependency and lack of creativity on part of the national leadership. Some pastors that worked with the missionaries still ask the district for help to paint their church building.

WHAT HAVE WE STOPPED DOING?

Social action. We closed our day schools and the clinics that had existed from the decade of the 70's. Why? It was said that we did not have any professional Nazarenes during this period to be in charge of the projects that had been started, nor did we find adequate individuals for this work.

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Our missionaries no longer opened new works as they were more dedicated to the control of the statistics and the finances. We did not promote national missionaries to open works in important cities in the country.

The pastors no longer worked full-time for the church; only 5% of all pastors are considered full-time. Of course, there used to be more when they received a subsidy. On the other hand, the church is failing in its stewardship as it forgets to tithe and sustain the servants of God.

We have stopped giving emphasis to the doctrine of holiness. We have dedicated more time to evangelism, how to be “a system in movement”, the Jesus Film and others at the international level but we have not been given strategies to share our doctrine, nor have we made a national effort to do so.

There is a new awakening and need to know our identity. When many new independent evangelical groups arise it is necessary that every Nazarene know who he is and what he believes. It is easy to lose identity in a globalized world.

Another thing we have done badly is the division of districts, without proper analysis and feasibility studies. As a result, there are districts that are stagnant or going backwards, except the districts located in key cities.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

Bolivia has six districts, a total of 246 churches with a membership of 10,507. A revision and redistribution is needed of the districts that would have links between urban and rural areas and an adequate proportion of ministers. In relation to vision, reaching new geographical areas, two important cities as Sucre and Potosí, from La Paz with district missionaries. The largest district is trying to promote supporting a missionary to reach new cities and geographical areas.

Theological education continues to equip leaders, maintaining an average of 30 residential students and 150 in the extension program.

Compassionate ministries: work in conjunction with Christian NGO's. In relation to secular education we were one of the founders and sponsors of the Bolivian Evangelical University; the church in her vocation of service in rural areas has solid cooperation among the brothers and sisters. However, the majority of the churches in the country do very little in relation to social responsibility.

A clinic is starting to be constructed in Santa Cruz. Now we have hundreds of professionals in our churches that without doubt will allow us to raise new projects in the near future.

The theology of mission, “...includes everything God wants his people to do in the world. So it includes evangelism and social responsibility, given that both are authentic expressions of the love that desires to serve man in his necessity” (John Stott).

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Reviewing the history of the Church of the Nazarene in Bolivia, the years in which the work grew the most were those in which there was a response to social needs, not just spiritual ones. It is how the day schools of the first decades of the church were registered and in the 1980's the agreement with Compassion International, although this has been more of an accessory nature, not helping in the transformation of the person and his or her development.