

THE NAZARENE WORK IN VENEZUELA

By Carlos Cordero

Country of Origin: Venezuela

Serving in: Venezuela

“...when our airplane finally landed near Caracas there were still many questions without answers: where would we live? How would we start Bible studies, train potential workers, buy properties and make plans for churches and parsonages? In life there are always many questions without answers. But I trust in that God has ALL the answers. TODAY I just need to know that God has promised me that the Church of the Nazarene will reach the needy in Venezuela with the Gospel of Christ.”¹

Theses were part of the uncertainties and convictions of the Porters as they started their ministry in Venezuela. The Church of the Nazarene came as an instrument of God to reach people with a renovating, Biblical and Christ-centered message for each person, making an emphasis in a deeper work produced in the heart and not limited to merely the external. The message arrived in a context characterized by religious legalism, the church filled a space that was lacking with its message, but not free from “resistance” due to the intense manner the church was categorized as “false doctrine”.

The beginnings were characterized by discovering that “the church had arrived before the church” that is to say, before it was organized there were Nazarenes in Venezuela due to the radio ministry of “La Hora Nazarena” (The Nazarene Hour). Various individuals had written and were located and became the seeds for churches in distinct places in the country.

The church was born in the country during the time that the denomination celebrated its 75th Anniversary. A special offering was collected to open the work in Venezuela. This reached a total of more than \$500,000 and so it was not necessary to hold back resources to establish the church in the country.

The Porters implemented a plan of pastoral support for the first “pastors” that consisted in help that was reduced after six months according to the means that the local congregations could do their part. Many were “called to the ministry” during this time and sadly many “lost the call” when the subsidy ended. Without meaning to, this created an image of a “gringo” church with money and resources to pay and buy. This influenced the development of the church as it did not have “those benefits” permanently. This formed a generation (in its majority) dependent on the resources for EVERYTHING and annulled in a great manner the possibility of thinking that the Venezuelans could do things with their own resources.

In the midst of these situations the church was organized and was developing dynamically by the Porters’ attentive leadership, who promoted two key elements:

¹ William and Juanita Porter, *Venezuela: La nación y la misión* (Kansas City: Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones, 1987), 26.

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EDUCATION and EVANGELISM. Both had help from the Puerto Rican church, who with great passion and enthusiasm came to the cities and towns sharing the Gospel their special Caribbean spirit. Among them were tremendous preachers, teachers, worship leaders, committed lay people and others. The first camps were organized by them and they became the church's main evangelistic resource. Every year hundreds of young people (and some not so young) came to share a week of fellowship and training. Many of our leaders were called or confirmed there during these events.

Theology courses were received with much hunger. Individuals traveled up to 8 or 9 hours to be there for a week and to receive the first intensive courses in the ministerial training program. This set the example for the church in regard to education and evangelism, added to the dynamic and enthusiastic character of the Venezuelan, and contributed to notable growth in the first years in the areas of membership, churches, finances and others.² The Porters had among their many successes the philosophy of "teach others" that functioned in evangelism, education and the organization of mass events and whose activities were very well developed.

The Porters had to leave the country and this change brought about a loss in the rhythm that the church had. The new leaders became brief "experiments" because instead of having full-time leaders, they became VERY busy people, occupied with other tasks that they almost did the work "in their spare time". These frequent changes, besides losing the rhythm, also brought a change in philosophy and distancing from the mission to the nation. The missionary became to be seen as a functionary that did the job without taking into account the nationals. Some good leaders left the country and today have fruitful ministries in other places.

The concept of growth emphasized "planting new churches" and little by little and then with acceleration a number of them multiplied. However, some were not able to be formally organized because they were not strong enough. It was the time of the Impacto Plan, in which the hero was the "church planter" and it led many to "sacrifice" good lay people in the "pastoral arena" which later resulted in an inactive church and a frustrated laity. The plan was to have a decentralized church with pastor and lay sharing responsibilities however, another profile emerged, one of small churches. As the emphasis was on "new churches" there was not time to think about big ones. The majority of the churches did not have more than 50 people and those that had more were the "mega churches".

Recently (2002) the church celebrated its 20th birthday (we are a young church). It served as a time to examine our history and to project into the future with good pace taking into account past experiences. For years we have been readers of God's work in other places, but the time is coming that others start to read what God is doing in and from Venezuela.

Currently we have five districts, one is almost ready to be classified as regular; two meet the requirements to be Phase II. All have a national superintendent who also pastors a church on his district. Several churches are experiencing growth and are focusing their ministry in a more holistic manner; they have schools, rehabilitation centers, resources to buy properties and build.

² Ibid, 101.

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The educational program ETED is active and has more than 300 students enrolled throughout the country. There is also an extension program for the *licenciatura* degree and every year students called into the ministry are sent to the Seminary in Quito, Ecuador for training. We have the personnel to cover the missions as we have young people, all less than 30 years old, from the MAC and SAM Regions doing a good job in these places. We believe we have commitment in Venezuela and also to the region and the world. We are satisfied but not complacent. We are grateful for the investment that others have had through education, evangelism, constructions, leadership and other areas. In midst of difficulties and faults, God's GRACE always abounds.

Not far in the future, the missionaries will leave the country. When this happens, it will be the Venezuelans' turn to assume leadership in all of the areas. I think they will be able to as there are available human resources but we have to "clean out" the concept of national "impossibility" for be in the lead with responsibility and efficiency. Our inheritance has several aspects that we have to overcome: We cannot lead if we cannot be led, we cannot do the work because we do not have the resources (because others have them) and thinking that the task is too great and that Goliath will defeat us.

We have received examples of good leadership and shades of inadequate situations, some of which we are responsible for, but we cannot spend life lamenting what others did not do well. This is our time now! God can work through our resources. Even if they are devalued bolivars he will provide what is necessary to DO his work and will use us with our particular capacities. We do not have to "put on someone else's suit" as Saul wanted David to do. He will use us with our own resources!

"...the Church of the Nazarene will reach the needy of Venezuela" and it is doing just that. In the midst of the grave social-political conflict that the country of Bolivar is living, I firmly believe that the Church of the Nazarene is an instrument of God to share and disseminate the good news of the Gospel in the midst of bad news. The best days to the Church of the Nazarene in Venezuela are yet to be written!