

INFLUENCE ON THE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE DIACONAL PROGRAM OF THE CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

The theme of diaconal ministry in the Church and its influence in social transformation, as a response of Church of the Nazarene to the current reality is found within the second large theme in this Theological Conference called “The Present: An Attempt at Situational Analysis with Integrity.

It is necessary that the Church of the Lord, based and inspired in his Word, be capable, not only to understand the reality that we have to transmit; but also to encounter forms to minister in its context, to affirm the values of the kingdom; not only in the community of the believers, but in all of society.

In the first section, I will look at the history of the Church of the Nazarene in relation to the diaconal ministry of the church, that in our case as a denomination, we call Compassionate Ministries. This is very important for understanding of the process within our church. In the second section, I will comment in respect to what are considered some of the successes up to this moment. Finally, I will make some suggestions and challenges that I think will help us to improve our ministry as an integral part of the mission of the Church.

I. HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN RELATION TO COMPASSIONATE MINISTRIES

From its organization as a denomination in 1908, the Church of the Nazarene has lived different stages in relation to the so called ministries of compassion. I will present a panorama of the development of these ministries across time, and so to understand these stages better, they will be presented in three sections. Some external factors, removed from the history of the church, but that influenced why the church took the positions it did will be analyzed.

The Beginning Years: Commitment to the Poor: 1908-1925

“The Church of the Nazarene was born in the midst of a holiness tradition”, as its founder Dr. Phineas Bresee was accustomed to saying frequently¹ As an expression of this tradition; it was committed to minister to the poorest and neediest.

Parallel to the growth of the church, many programs were organized to take care of orphans and single mothers. There were two great pillars in Dr. Bresee’s ministry; one was holiness preaching, and the other, a passion for the physical needs of man.

¹ Timothy L. Smith, *Historia de los nazarenos* (Kansas City: Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones), 131.

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Almost all of the efforts of the church were saturated with the desire to serve the neighbor. Rev. Steve Weber, the first International Director of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, referring to this era expressed the following: “The commitment of the Church of the Nazarene to Compassionate Ministries reached its peak in the General Assembly of 1919. Five committees of the General Assembly were related to social work.”²

General Superintendent John Goodwin wrote in 1920: “Pure religion has, and will always have, two faces: purity and service. Holy people should be pertinent in social service. This is what characterized the early church, they worked to bless and take care of widows and orphans.”³

Looking back, one can affirm that during those first decades of our history there was strong social awareness in the Church of the Nazarene. The Nazarene Mission Program in those first years whenever possible included three ways to reach the poor with the Gospel: the spiritual, medical and educational; churches, hospitals, clinics and schools came to be part of the Nazarene missionary strategy around the world. However, after an auspicious beginning, ministries of compassion began to decline until they almost disappeared from the mission of the church.

Stage of Amnesia in Nazarene Social Awareness: 1926-1975

This is a long stage in which the church forgot the emphasis towards social ministries that had characterized its founders. Harold E. Raser has named this stage as the period of “amnesia” of the Nazarene social consciousness.⁴

The author considers that there were internal and external factors that influenced the church to adopt this attitude. Among the internal factors we have the following: the economic recession that produced a world war and the precarious financial situation of the church between 1925 and 1945. Steve Weber, referring to this phenomenon states: “The church could not continue developing hospitals, schools and orphanages. Inflation and other priorities started to influence these types of ministries to what seemed to be main mission of the church: salvation of souls.”⁵

Another factor that also affected the church was the diffusion of the pre-millennialist theory that many of our theologians embraced and that expanded within the Church of the Nazarene. This theory affirmed that this evil world would be deteriorating until Jesus came to establish his millennial reign, and that any effort to help the needy was in vain.

Another factor was the different visions among the leadership of the church. While the vision of Rev. Bresee was centered on building “centers of holy fire” in the great urban centers of the United States, Rev. Hiram F. Reynolds, who was General Superintendent for almost a

² Steve Weber, in a conference, “Historia de Ministerios de Compasión en la Iglesia del Nazareno” (Quito, Ecuador, First NCM Conference in the SAM Region, June 1992), 1.

³ Stan Ingersol, “Ministering to the Body and to the Spirit” (Colorado Springs: Theological Symposium of the Fourth Quadrennial Compassionate Ministries Conference, October 29, 1998).

⁴ Harold E. Raser, “Beating Back the Amnesia: Love for Neighbor in the Church” (Colorado Springs: Theological Symposium of the Fourth Quadrennial Compassionate Ministries Conference, October 29, 1998), 1.

⁵ Weber, 2.

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quarter of a century, introduced the Church of the Nazarene to the vision of evangelizing the world. Rev. Reynolds embraced the missionary push that there was in the 19th century and had the ability to articulate the concept of World Mission.

On the other hand, there were external factors that not only influenced the Church of the Nazarene, but the evangelical church in general. Among the most significant we have: The controversy between Fundamentalism and the so-called “Social Gospel”, that occurred during the first decades of the past century. Although this battle was basically fought in the United States, it was carried around the world by American missionaries.

The Church of the Nazarene was not immune to the influence of Fundamentalism. Regarding this aspect, Brother Raser makes the following statement: “The Church of the Nazarene never totally embraced the ideas of Fundamentalism; however, it felt more comfortable with them than with the Liberal or Modernist theologies.”⁶

Also the period between the two World Wars was lived in a climate of hopelessness and pessimism; this was a time when it was thought that the end of the world was close and as a result, the church put aside social ministries. It is also important to highlight that during this period Christianity expanded among those of the middle class who defended the “status quo”; the church had an indifferent attitude that didn’t take compassion on the situation of the poor and the blacks. Thank the Lord our history does not end here: a new day came for Compassionate Ministries.

Awakening of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries: 1976 until now

This stage began somewhat in the second half of the decade of the 1970s but consolidated in the decade of the 1980s. We will present some internal and external occurrences that allowed the arrival of a new day for these ministries.

Among the most significant internal factors we have the following: Harold Raser considers the Doctoral Thesis for the Doctor of Ministry that Rev. Thomas G. Nees wrote for the Wesleyan Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., entitled “The Social Ethic of Holiness and Nazarene Urban Ministry” an important milestone within the church.⁷ This was reinforced with the opening of the “Community of Hope” Project, founded in the same city by Rev. Nees as a viable model for a compassionate ministry within an urban context. This example was followed by others such as: The Lamb’s Club in New York City, Golden Gate Ministries in San Francisco, Liberation Community in Fort Worth and others that were opening throughout the country.

On the other hand, outside the borders of the United States the Nazarene Hunger and Disasters Fund was established, to assist with the famine that Haiti suffered in 1974 and the earthquake in Guatemala in 1976. These two events placed again Compassionate Ministries in the minds and hearts of Nazarenes around the world.

⁶ Raser, 5.

⁷ Raser, 10.

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In 1984, the Office of Nazarene International Compassionate Ministries and Nazarene Compassionate Ministries USA/Canada, with their respective directors, Dr. Steve Weber and Dr. Thomas Nees, were incorporated into the administrative structure of the church. From there, this ministry began to propagate within and outside of the United States. Regional Compassionate Ministries offices were opened on the different regions of the world.

Since then, the Board of General Superintendents designated the second Sunday of December as Compassion Sunday; to call attention to Nazarenes to be active in these ministries. In 1985 the first Compassionate Ministries Conference took place in the United States with 540 persons in attendance. Since this date, various congresses have taken place in different states in North America and in other parts of the world.

As for external factors, the author considers that a noticeable influence was the evolution of theological thinking since the decade of the fifties. This evolution was made evident through diverse works published by theologians, the celebration of Evangelism Congresses on the world level, and the organization of para-ecclesiastical institutions.

Another aspect that influenced this change was the discussion of civil rights in the decade of the seventies and the uneasiness that it was generating in some evangelical circles.

The author considers that, in addition to the factors already mentioned, there were in Latin America some important events that helped to awaken the social conscience of the church. For example, the increasing deterioration of the political, social and economic situation in the countries brought millions of people to live below the poverty line.

On the other hand, in the decade of the seventies, Liberation Theology came out of the Catholic Church, led by the priest Gustavo Gutiérrez. It arose as a protest against the wealth of the church and a comfortable religion. The positive aspect of this theology was that it went to the evangelical church to awaken consciousness about its mission and to question its role as salt to the earth and light to the world.

At the same time, a young generation of Latin American theologians was emerging, who began to develop a social theology, that basically questioned the sleepiness of the Christian church when facing the social problems and to have reduced the mission to only verbal proclamation of the gospel. There was a desire to rediscover the significance of the mission of the Church, as there was a consciousness that the mission was not only a synonym of the mere proclamation and that its significance went much beyond that. The first CLADE I (Congreso Latinoamericano de Evangelismo—Latin American Congress on Evangelism) in 1969 in Bogota, Colombia was very important. During this Congress Dr. Samuel Escobar shared the theme, “Social Responsibility of the Church”⁸ and this discussion was brought several years later to the World Evangelism Congress that took place in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974.

After CLADE I various Evangelism Congresses took place as did other encounters that due to space limitations I will not include here. These led the evangelical church in general and the Church of the Nazarene in particular, to get involved in beginning Compassionate Ministries.

⁸ Samuel Escobar, *Evangelio y realidad social* (El Paso, Texas: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1988), 9.

In February 1999 in Kansas City, the Church of the Nazarene celebrated various meetings which were called “A Millennial Celebration”. These meetings were done with the purpose of reflecting on our identity and rethinking the sense of mission as the Church of the Nazarene. A question that was brought up in this conference was: What is essential for this generation to retain and pass on to the next generation?

After listening to the presentations of the leaders of the denomination and other inter-denominational movements, a document was written that was called Declaration of the General Superintendents, entitled: “A Living Faith: What do Nazarenes Believe” One part of this declaration has the sub-title “Our Mission of Compassion and Evangelism” which says:

As a people consecrated to God, we share His love with the lost and His compassion with the poor and downcast. The Great Commandment and the Great Commission move us to become involved in the world with evangelism, compassion and justice. The Great Commission, as well as the Great Commandment, are central in the understanding of our mission.

These are two expressions of the same mission, two dimensions of one message of the gospel. God has created us as integral persons; our mission is to be ministers of the love of God to individuals as integral persons—body, soul and spirit. Our mission of evangelism, compassion and justice, is a holistic mission, only one, helping the people in their physical, emotional and spiritual need⁹.

A new day has started in the history of the Church of the Nazarene in Compassionate Ministries as an integral part of the fulfillment of the Mission.

II. CURRENT REALITY

The feeling that one has in arriving at this point in history is one of gratitude for the way the Lord has been guiding his people to return to their traditional roots of Christian holiness, that emerges from a clear understanding of the challenges that we find in the Word; the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

While trying to do a critical approach to this same history (in the terminology of the organizers of this event, “an attempt to make an integral situational analysis”), we can affirm what have been some of the significant accomplishments and that there are still many challenges to meet. Here are some accomplishments that have been obtained:

A broader comprehension of the significance of the Mission of the Church. There is a more faithful comprehension in accordance with the Word about the nature and significance of the Mission of the Church. There has been an evolution in theological thinking of the church and our leaders in regard to the diaconal ministry of the Church. The discussions that confronted the

⁹ *Una Fe Viviente: ¿Qué creen los Nazarenos?* Kansas City, MO: Congreso Una declaración Milenial, 1999, Declaración de los Superintendentes Generales.

proclamation of the Gospel with the church's social responsibility are in the past. How we can say that there is no discussion.

There is an initial organizational structure. The necessary spaces have been created within the structure of the church to give viability to what these ministries do. This has been evident since 1984 when offices of NCM for the United States/Canada and the rest of the world were opened; and also the incorporation of offices in every Region. In 1989, the *Manual* of the Church added the following paragraph: "Now, almost all of the districts of the Church of the Nazarene around the world has a type of structure of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries."¹⁰

Genuine efforts on the part of the church for holistic ministry. I consider that our church's missionary history in Ibero-America shows us numerous examples, well-known or anonymous, in large cities or in small communities, of the relationship between announcing the Gospel in its different forms, including service; changes in individuals and cases of social transformation. We can mention examples such as the Church of the Nazarene in Nilopolis, Brazil, when the governor of Rio de Janeiro while honoring the pastor, Rev. Pedro Paulo Mattos, said the following: "If every evangelical church gave the indigents something to eat as does this church, there would be no hungry people in Rio de Janeiro."

III. CHALLENGES

1. We need to develop a theology of Christian compassion.

Even when there have been significant advances in theological reflection in the past thirty years with regard to the social responsibility of the church, the current theological base is still restricted. I consider that it is necessary to develop a theology of Christian compassion, as it has been theological thinking that in some manner has guided the Church's way throughout history. At least to be able to reach a deeper and larger vision of the Biblical truth, there will always be the danger that we will fall into the errors of the past.

2. We need a broader concept of the significance and reach of the doctrine of holiness.

I consider that one of the most significant contributions of the Wesleyan movement has to do with the Doctrine of Holiness. Wesley conceived a holiness that was personal but at the same time social. Dr. McKenna says: "Every separation between personal holiness and social holiness is anti-Biblical. If personal holiness and social holiness are disconnected one from another, neither makes any sense. Personal holiness must be inseparably connected to compassion for the poor"¹¹ It is inconceivable to preach the message of holiness and at the same time be insensitive to the needs of your neighbor. "In the preface to the first Methodist Hymnal (1739), Wesley wrote: 'The Gospel of Christ knows no religion than that of social or other holiness than that of social holiness. This command we have from Christ, he who loves God, also loves his neighbor'"¹².

¹⁰ *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene* 1989, ¶904.1, p. 320.

¹¹ David L. McKenna, *Wesleyanos en el siglo XXI* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2000), 23. [Spanish translation of *What a Time to Be a Wesleyan!*].

¹² Baez Camargo, op. cit., 62.

3. We need better stewardship of the resources that we have.

The first two aspects have to do with what we believe and the next two points have to do with what we do or experience. How many church buildings does the Church of the Nazarene have in our countries? As a certain institution showed, that the least utilized places on planet earth are evangelical and Catholic church buildings, as they are used even less than Muslim mosques. It is possible that the least used places on planet earth are Christian churches? In reality, it would not take much to make them very useful, simply let the children come, we begin to teach them. It would not take a lot of investment; just a glass of warm milk with bread and a young person that knows a little more than them. In a short time we would see fantastic results.

Can we imagine what this means? Can you imagine what would happen if every church took care of one of the needs of the people? Can you imagine what would happen if the churches were opened? Social transformation would happen.

4. We need the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

We need to experience what happened when the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost: "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit..." (Acts 2:4). God through his Spirit prepares common men and women to say and do things that are far beyond what their natural capacities allow. They were invested with power in a supernatural way, that did not have a human explanation.

We need a spiritual renewal that becomes a revival and produces national awakening. Spiritual renewal is what occurs in the individual, revival is what happens in the church and the awakening is the result of this revival that impacts society. This is what occurred in the days of John Wesley, a renewal in man, which generated a revival in God's people and later came to awaken a nation, an awakening that transformed a nation.

CONCLUSION

We need to urgently return to practical holiness, when we live it, we can do the unimaginable; the way to the impossible begins with a life of holiness. We need to show the visible signs of the transforming power of the Gospel in society.

The transformation of our society is not going to happen with "what we can do", but it will happen when "we are" what God requires of us. History shows us that the church has always had hunger for holiness, naturally giving rise to genuine interest for our fellow man. As Henri Nouwen expresses in his book, *La compassion en la vida cotidiana* (*Compassion in Daily Life*), "Wherever there is a truly Christian community, compassion is given to the world."¹³ This is our doctrinal inheritance; this is the kind of revival we need.

As Nazarenes we have no excuse not to influence our society; we have the demand from the Word of God, we have a rich historical heritage of the Wesleyan movement, we have unlimited resources that God has placed at our disposition, trained persons, infrastructure and especially, the doctrine of holiness. My hope is that one day they will say of our generation:

¹³ Henri Nouwen, *La compassion en la vida cotidiana* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Lumen, 1996), 69.

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“These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also” (Acts 17:6 KJV). This is what will occur when the church makes a life of holiness its priority.