

LESSONS FROM THE HISTORY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

Dr Rodney L Reed

Africa Nazarene University (ANU), Nairobi, Kenya

Introduction

As the Church of the Nazarene International approaches its centennial celebration it is appropriate—no, it is prudent—to reflect on our rich heritage to see what we can learn from it. As the saying goes, “If we do not learn from our past, we are doomed to repeat it.” And so, ironic as it may seem, I propose this paper, the subject of which is the past to be presented in the “Hope” section of this conference, for it is my conviction that we will only find direction for where we are going when we know where we have been. Thus, in the following pages, I want to examine briefly the history of higher education in the Church of the Nazarene in the United States and highlight four lessons we can learn by looking back at our history.

Early Expansion

Years before the union of the main parent bodies of the Church of the Nazarene in 1908 at Pilot Point, Texas, those parent bodies were already engaged in the process of educating their young and training persons for ministry. In 1899, the holiness people of the “old Southwestern” United States, pulled together some money, secured some land, and put up a few simple buildings in the holiness town of Peniel, Texas and Texas Holiness University opened for business that September with twenty seven students enrolled. The very next year, key leaders of the Association of Pentecostal Churches of America on the east coast of the United States founded the Pentecostal Collegiate Institute. Down in Nashville, Tennessee, under the leadership of J O McClurkan, the Literary and Bible Training Institute for Christian Workers was established in 1901. The following year, Phineas Bresee, after the determined perseverance of some key laywomen, consented to the establishment of the Pacific Bible College in Los Angeles, California. Thus, within the span of four years and completely independent of each other, each of the four main parent bodies of the Church of the Nazarene had felt the need to educate their young and to train people for ministry in an environment that reflected the values and teaching of the Holiness tradition.

Across the United States (US), holiness folk who would one day become or already were Nazarenes were establishing institutions for higher education.

- 1900 Arkansas Holiness University in Vilonia, Arkansas
- 1905 Kansas Holiness College in Hutchinson, Kansas
- 1905 Central Holiness University, originally located at Pilot Point, Texas
- 1907 Illinois Holiness University in Georgetown, Illinois
- 1909 Shingler Holiness College in Donaldson, Georgia
- 1909 Oklahoma Holiness College, in Bethany, Oklahoma
- 1913 Idaho-Oregon Holiness School in Nampa, Idaho

In just fourteen years at least twelve educational institutions were established that would eventually claim the allegiance of the Church of the Nazarene. The Nazarene predisposition toward education soon found its way here to Africa where we find Nazarenes launching a Bible school in the recently founded hospital at Piggs Peak, Swaziland in 1920 which would eventually move to Siteki and become Swaziland Nazarene Bible College (now Nazarene College of Theology).

All of these and others that were to follow indicate the strong commitment of the Church of the Nazarene to higher education. If we were to examine these schools more carefully, we would find stories of vision, sacrifice, and conviction. We would find people who were willing to sell or mortgage their own properties in order to establish or further the educational enterprise of the Church. All of this highlights the commitment of the Church to higher education. This leads us to our first lesson from the history of higher education in the Church of the Nazarene:

Lesson #1: From the very beginning, the Church of the Nazarene has believed that educational preparation is essential to effective ministry and to the Christian life.

Competition and Consolidation

However, it is perhaps the case that the young denomination's passion for education outpaced its ability to adequately support it. For we soon find these fledgling schools struggling financially (one actually declaring bankruptcy), with inadequate student enrolments, facilities and resources, and competing with one another for survival.

As early as its first General Assembly in Pilot Point, Texas the church recognized the need to coordinate and harmonize its educational endeavours. At that historic assembly, an education committee urged the establishment of a Board of Education, which would conduct that work. By 1911 we find E P Ellyson, the third General Superintendent of the Church of the Nazarene and president and faculty member of several of the church's schools, writing to his fellow General Superintendent, Hiram Reynolds, about "a detailed plan which he hoped would curb institutional rivalries, promote the wise investment of available resources, and encourage higher academic standards."¹

Eventually it was realized that the church could not adequately support all the institutions that claimed her allegiance and a policy was implemented in which the church would officially sponsor and seek to develop only six of those schools in the United States. Consequently, some schools merged, others were absorbed by larger ones, and others tried to maintain themselves on an independent basis. But eventually, only those that submitted themselves to the authority and direction of the church, and thereby found official support from the denomination, survived and even then often not without heroic struggles.² This brings us to the second and third lessons from our history:

Lesson #2: The Church of the Nazarene's educational aims will always be better served when a spirit of cooperation exists between its educational providers, rather than a spirit of competition.

Perhaps a certain amount of fair competition could be good even for educational providers, but we must always keep in mind that we are all on the same team, working together for a common goal: the fulfilment of the Great Commission mandate. Our real "competitor" is the Enemy of our souls. If we compete, rather than cooperate with each other, we play into his hands.

Even the solution that was eventually arrived at to curtail the "institutional rivalry" of which Ellyson spoke was only partially successful. That solution was for each school in the US to draw its support and recruit its students from a designated territory around that school and to avoid at all costs drawing support or recruiting students from another school's "turf". This carving up of the United States into educational zones or regions may have mitigated much of the direct competition, but it did little to promote cooperation. Only in recent years have our sister colleges and universities in the US begun to seriously work together to accomplish their common purposes.

We, in Africa, have a chance to do better. While several of our educational providers have been in existence for many years, the recent rapid growth of the church on our continent provides us with an excellent opportunity to begin building from the ground floor an educational delivery system for the whole of Africa that features a common vision and shared resources, rather than a "survival of fittest" mentality in which we are all fighting for a bigger piece of the "pie." In Africa, we say, "I am because we are." This community-based philosophy of life we must apply to our educational endeavours and shun the individualistic "private property" model that we have seen develop in America.

We have an opportunity for nothing short of an integrated, coordinated educational delivery system for the whole region in which each component fulfils its role with the support and aid of all the other components—a role which is part of an overall strategic plan to fulfil the Great Commission.

Where is that integration, coordination, and strategic planning to come from? This is our third lesson from our history:

Lesson #3: The Church of the Nazarene recognizes the need for a strong agency that will advocate, coordinate, and harmonize our educational endeavours and develop and strategically deploy our educational resources.

That was why the original General Board of Education of the Church of the Nazarene was established in 1911. It is why the present International Board of Education was established in 1989. And it is why the Office of the Regional Educational Coordinator was established in 1983. We give thanks to God for the direction and guidance given to us from the office of the International Board of Education and our Regional Education Coordinator. And we can envision in the future educational leaders across the region coming together under the auspices of these two offices to dream, plan and envision just what such an integrated, coordinated, educational delivery system might look like in our setting.

Conforming to such a model will involve change. Change is always difficult and at times painful. Fortunately, here in Africa, we are already well on the way toward this model. Furthermore, our final lesson from the history of our educational endeavours provides us with additional hope because...

Lesson #4: The Church of the Nazarene's educational providers have shown a consistent willingness to change with the times or to shift paradigms in order to meet new needs and challenges.

Several of the schools mentioned above began as secondary schools and then later added Bible school training. Some of these and others that began as Bible schools and colleges soon aspired to be degree granting liberal arts institutions because it was felt that the laity as well as the clergy deserved a full-orbed yet holiness education. A key moment in this particular paradigm shift came when James B Chapman, later destined to be a long-time General Superintendent, presented his 1920 address as president of the General Board of Education. Timothy L Smith summarizes Chapman's address:

Only an educated ministry could conserve and spread the Wesleyan gospel, Chapman declared. Holiness theological seminaries were not enough, however, for they got men too late to mold them. Nor would a strong Bible school and ministerial training institute provide future pastors and foreign missionaries with the solid preparation in arts and letters necessary for Christian leadership. The Nazarenes must concentrate instead on building substantial liberal arts colleges, he said, and be willing to spend money on the gymnasiums and laboratories which some thought quite unnecessary for the training of ministers.³

Ironically, decades after all the original Bible colleges had become liberal arts colleges, the church recognized the need for a Bible school in the US and established one in Colorado Springs, Colorado (1967). The establishment of a graduate-level theological seminary, the offering of theological education by extension, the programmes at our liberal arts universities for non-traditional students, and non-traditional programmes (i.e., night classes or non-residential degree programmes) and lately the introduction of internet-based "education online" are all examples of the willingness and creativity of our Nazarene educational providers around the world to "think outside the box" and try something new in order to meet the demands of new times and places.

As we, in Africa, look to the future, we, too, must be as willing and creative in our approach to meeting the educational needs of our people. We cannot afford to stagnate! We must adapt! Though the gospel never changes, the ways and means by which we communicate it and instill the knowledge of it in the minds and hearts of our people must forever be changing or we will fail in our mission.⁴

Conclusion

Paul Bassett, in his seminal work as part of the second volume of the *Exploring Christian Holiness* series, likens the manner in which we understand the significance of our Christian history to the manner in which the rower of a small rowboat who sits facing rearward, steers a straight course. The rower "chooses some landmark behind the boat and keeps aligned with it as he proceeds toward his destination."⁵ I believe that if we keep these four "landmarks" from our past in view, we will steer a straight course toward our God-intended destination.

Endnotes

1 Smith, p. 258.

2 This too finds demonstration in the history of Nazarene theological education in Africa with the merger of the three schools in Central Africa to form Nazarene Theological College of Central Africa.

3 Smith, p. 324.

4 Though I don't know personally, I suspect the merging of the three theological schools in South Africa into the one, Nazarene Theological College, is an example of what I am referring to here. For in the post-Apartheid era such a redundancy of schools was, I am guessing, not only seen as inefficient, but discriminatory. Thus, a new paradigm of integration was called for.

5 Paul Merritt Bassett and William D Greathouse, *Exploring Christian Holiness, Volume Two: The Historical Development* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1985), page 20.

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