

LOOKING BACK ON LOOKING FORWARD
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In 1979 Dr. Ray Hurn, then Executive Director of the Department of Church Extension, commissioned four Nazarene scholars to look ahead to the year 2000 to project what society in the United States would be like and how the Church of the Nazarene might prepare to work in the projected society. The four individuals were: Drs. Joseph Nielson of Olivet, Ray Reglin of MidAmerica, Alex Deasley of Nazarene Theological Seminary, and Samuel Dunn of Seattle Pacific University. Discussions were held with Dr. Hurn in Denver, and eventually the findings were committed to a book published by the Nazarene Publishing House in 1981. The book carried the title: *Opportunities Unlimited: The Church of the Nazarene in the Year 2000*.

The book was organized as a typical futurism book. Chapters carried such titles as: The Church Looks at the Future; Life in Northern America in the Year 2000; Getting Ready for 2000; and The Church's Challenge. Woven through the book were recommendations for the Church as it looked ahead for the next 20 years.

The principal futurism philosophy used was a CWC philosophy, or Change Without Catastrophe. That approach assumed that society will change gradually in the years ahead. The countries targeted in the study were Northern America (United States and Canada), although most of the book focused on the United States.

Another futurism philosophy was used in three short chapters: Catastrophic Futures. The catastrophic futures philosophy assumed there may be a major catastrophe such as a world war, or a plague with 10% or more of the population dying, or a major natural catastrophe, such as the one talked about by many about the time of the book's publication, that there would be a major earthquake and California would drop into the ocean. Of the three catastrophic chapters, one dealt with an energy shortage scenario, one was a government takeover, and the third was an economic crunch scenario.

Now we are 15 years past the target date of the study, and 35 years past the study itself. What did those thinkers get right and where did they miss it in their projections? With this essay one of the authors looks back at that project and its work.

Projections

Demographic projections were spot on. The projected total population of Northern America was within one million of the 2000 actual. Populations were projected to be highly concentrated in 27 megalopolises, or tract cities. Birth rates in the year 2000 were projected to hover around population replacement rates.

Projections about computer based technologies were prescient. The individual telephone, the rise of computer usage in society, and movement toward artificial intelligence by machine were duly noted. Two projected technologies that did not materialize or were discarded were the supersonic plane for commercial use and the growth of nuclear produced electricity.

A national health care system was predicted to be in place by the year 2000, which did not occur until 2010. The taxation system was projected to move to a Value Added Tax system, which has not occurred. The GNP was projected to be 50% higher in 2000 than in 1975. Actually, the GNP in nominal terms doubled from \$4.3T to \$9.8T. The number of workers in agriculture was predicted to drop from 4% in 1975 to 1% in the year 2000. The number of workers in heavy industry was predicted to drop from 35+% in 1970 to 24% in 2000. Widespread use of credit cards was predicted, but the prediction that use of cash would be significantly reduced was not realized.

On the political front, it was predicted that the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, and the United States would be the big three powers in the world in the year 2000. It was further predicted that these countries would be controlled less by ideologies than by nationalism and economics. The collapse of the Soviet Union was not predicted, but the movement of Russia to a capitalist economy and of the People's Republic China to state capitalism was in line with the projections.

The writers were quite nationalistic in their projections. They viewed Washington, DC as the *de facto* capital of the world and New York City as the world's economic capital. These assumptions colored their recommendations about the Church of the Nazarene.

The writers made no numeric projections of the membership of the Church of the Nazarene in the year 2000. [674,621 in 1980; 1,390,306 in 2000, a 106% increase]. They did recognize the significant growth of the Church outside Northern America and recognized that the Church would be changing from a United States church with international interests to a true global enterprise.

Recommendations

The writers made over 20 recommendations for the Church to consider. Among them were several related to the local church.

It was recommended that every megapolis have a megachurch that would be the service center for the Nazarene churches in the region. In keeping with its view that interaction with the Federal government was extremely important, it was viewed that there should be a megachurch in Washington, DC that would particularly serve individuals who worked in the Federal government. That church has not been realized, nor does every megapolis have a megachurch. It was further recommended that the Church should place special emphasis on the Northeast of the United States, a region in which the Church was weak.

The writers opined that the Church should carry more weight in social matters. The Church should be speaking about and lobbying on social issues that were of importance to Christians. To that end the writers proposed a branch headquarters in Washington DC with one General Superintendent assigned there. This General Superintendent would manage the work of representing the Church before Congress and Federal agencies and would help obtain Federal funding for compassionate ministry activities and educational programs. That recommendation was not implemented.

With respect to the colleges, the writers wanted those institutions to participate more fully in the life of the Church. The colleges were not be part of the loyal opposition, but should be fully engaged in evangelism and scholarship in support of the Church. The colleges were to emphasize leadership in society and the church, and should graduate people who would move into influential positions in society. To that end, the recommendation was made that the colleges would emphasize programs in occupations that were influential in society, such as business, law, and public entertainment.

By 2000 each college and university had started programs in business and/or economics, and some had started MBA programs. Also, several of the schools had undergraduate majors in political science and were advising a few students to move on to law school. No school had significant programs, such as cinematography, in public entertainment. The base recommendation that the schools would focus on leadership in society was not realized.

Other recommendations concerning the colleges were not realized. Due to economic pressures and alterations in mission, the colleges gradually reduced the percentage of Nazarene students. Each college was an independent corporation not significantly cooperating with other Nazarene institutions and determined not to come under the control of Kansas City. The percentage of graduates moving into the Church of the Nazarene gradually reduced between 1980 and 2000.

One of the writers, Dunn, spent the summer of 1980 at Brigham Young University (Provo) on an administrative internship, partly to learn as much as possible about the Church of the Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the LDS programs that might be imitated by the Church of the Nazarene. Coming from that study the writers were impressed by the LDS program of every adult male being a priest and having official recognition by the LDS Church. From that thinking came a recommendation that was labeled in the *Opportunities Unlimited* book as “the most important recommendation in this book.” (p. 78). It was recommended that the Church of the Nazarene reconceptualize the diaconate program so that every adult male and female would have a significant course of study that would lead to formal recognition through the deaconate. This was viewed as a way to improve the knowledge levels of church members and a way of increasing their effectiveness in church work and evangelism. The Church of the Nazarene did indeed reorganize the diaconate program soon after, but it has not been widely used; it is more considered a special order similar to that of elder and is for just a few people.

Several pages were devoted to a four-part discussion of categories of church organizations: cult, sect, denomination, and ecclesia. The authors concluded that the Church of the Nazarene should not be a cult or ecclesia, but was recommended to live on the boundary between a sect and a denomination. The connectional aspects of the Church of the Nazarene were to be prized and continued.

Theology and Life

The book described several challenges to life and living in the year 2000, challenges that would condition a Christian approach. One challenge would be the “concern on the part of the individual regarding *personal worth, identity, and purpose*” (p. 94). A second major challenge would be the “*concern for the security of the family unit*” (p. 95) A third concern was the

“*challenge of the underprivileged*” (p. 95). A fourth concern was a general *anxiety* (p. 96) about life in general, with much of the anxiety brought about by future shock.

The writers viewed that the message of the Church of the Nazarene provided a foundation for meeting these challenges. Focus on the sovereignty and providence of God, the church as the community of God, and the dynamic of personal and social renewal through the Gospel of Jesus Christ would set the basis for life and work in a dynamic society. Because of its salvation message, the Church was urged to place a new emphasis on evangelism. Further, “the biblical message of being holy should be a renewed theme within the church” (p. 139).

In preparation for writing the book, the authors interviewed pastors around the United States about the doctrine of entire sanctification and how those pastors were preaching the doctrine. The writers found that the doctrine was being interpreted in many ways. There seemed to be confusion about the meaning of the doctrine and how it applied to everyday life. Some pastors were not preaching it at all. Given this background non-scientific survey, the writers wrote about their findings in their draft of the book. That section was excluded from the book’s printing by the editorial committee, the only significant change made from the draft to the final printing. Apparently the committee thought it was too controversial to include in the book.

Three Catastrophic Scenarios

Three catastrophic scenarios were presented by the authors. The first was the Energy Shortage Scenario. The assumption of this scenario was:

In 1990, petroleum supplies available to N.A. are cut back by 50 percent. The cutback is announced and is in full effect within one month. Petroleum supplies are expected to be maintained at the reduced level for 10 to 20 years (p. 154).

The second scenario was the Government Takeover Scenario. The base of this future was:

In 1995, Dobavia achieved unquestioned military superiority over the United States and Canada. The government of Dobavia delivered an ultimatum to Ottawa and Washington: Surrender in one week or the peoples of Northern America will be annihilated. After consultation among the military and political leaders, governmental control was turned over to Dobavia. The countries were occupied overnight by Dobavian troops, and the announcement of the takeover was made to the public (pp. 166-167). A further detail of this scenario was that the government closed all churches.

The third scenario was an Economic Crunch Scenario. The basis of this scenario was:

...in the year 2000 the church will be experiencing financial pressure unlike any in its history (p. 174). In this scenario a combination of recession, inflation, energy costs, tight money, and taxation were combined in such a way that citizens’ and church incomes dropped dramatically.

The writers considered each of these scenarios in succession and developed several pages of actions for churches to take in each case.

Concluding Chapter

The book concluded with a chapter titled “The Church’s Challenge.” Bemoaned was the loss of Christian influence and creeping secularism in our society. The final challenge was for Christians to again be spiritual revolutionaries, patterned after Christians in the book of Acts.

Was it Worth It?

Overall, the hopes of Dr. Hurn in commissioning the study were satisfied. The study and consequent book were productive in that they caused many leaders of the Church to think in longer terms and to consider how their actions and decisions would impact the future of the denomination and the society. Even though many of the recommendations were not implemented, the study generated discussion about the direction of the denomination and its fit in the broader society. Also, growing from the study were other futurism studies commissioned by the Church which generated policy development and denominational thrust. One such study was the Commission on the Nazarene Future: Ecclesiology, Polity and Missional Strategy (2010).

John Oster’s Foreword to the book summarized the intent and spirit of the book. He wrote: “The best of futurists can only look through the glass darkly at what is yet to be...Christian responsibility demands that we leave no effort undone to make the Church of the Nazarene the most effective instrument possible for God’s service in the time that remains” (p. 6). May it be so.