

## RESPONSE TO KATHY MOWRY'S "ONLY ONE FOOT IN EXILE"

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No one ever wants to experience exile. I don't know of any child who enjoys a "time out". Yet, whenever disobedience occurs in our lives, we WILL experience moments of exile... even years. As Kathy Mowry made clear, *"In Babylon, the people of God were carried into exile only to learn that the One who did the carrying was not the enemy they thought, but the very God on whom they staked their lives... and exile is a means of grace to allow this combination to come into existence."*

In the city of Los Angeles, not only is the culture within the communities surrounding the county of L.A. changing, but the culture within the church and congregations, is changing rapidly. As described in the article, so often congregations feel trapped within a community they live in because of the rapid changes that take place on an annual basis.

Fifty years ago it would have been possible for a person to be blindfolded and taken to any Church of the Nazarene in Southern California... and they would have known they were in a Nazarene Church. The hymns were the same, as was the order of service, and the style... everything was nearly alike from church to church. And the Holy Spirit of God was moving... His methods were constantly changing, BUT change is difficult for us to handle. And we wanted to do "church" the same as we've always done. We were comfortable. We were happy. We were experiencing good days. And, slowly the communities surrounding us began to change. Our response was, *"This way of ministry has worked for a number of years so we will keep on doing it this way."* So the tithers and givers of the church continued to support, though the attendance began to dwindle.

There was a shift in the mid 1980's to plant ethnic congregations... ministries where we already had existing buildings. Spanish speaking churches were planted where we had decreasing English speaking congregations. The same for our Korean speaking brothers and sisters, and then came the ministry to the Armenians, Chinese, Filipinos and more. The overall attendance remained the same, but the district began to "look" and sound differently. As more and more people continued migrating to the city, the need for further planting of new congregations increased.

So... we fast forward to 2016... and very few ministries or congregations were planted at the turn of the century. Many of the "ethnic churches" peaked and some even began to decrease in "size". As Kathy mentioned, "What is size?" "How do we measure success?" Ever since the shift of measuring the "size of the church" from numbers in Sunday School to Morning Worship, people only seemed to care about Morning Worship attendance. Thus, the question, "How big is your church?" We always knew they were speaking on Sunday Morning Worship.

Therefore, since we are creatures of habit, not realizing that the Holy Spirit is constantly moving, our ethnic pastors, boards, and congregations learned to "keep doing ministry in the same way as we've always done." When I reflect on the writer's words in Hebrews 10:24-25 *"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day is approaching,"* (NIV) I am more and more convinced that we need to keep in tune with the Holy Spirit, and understand just how He is moving, so that we may be equipped to minister to our communities during changing times.

Thirty years later... the goal we have today is returning to these communities where we have had Spanish, Armenian, Korean and other language groups ministering to these changing communities. As we journey along the sidewalks, observe the billboards, and read the signs out front... there is so much more than just Spanish. We need to learn whether that sign is a representation of Mexico or El Salvador. Are they Central Americans or South Americans? All too often, we have lumped all groups into one. The same can be said for Chinese as we journey to learn the differences among the Cantonese speaking and the Mandarin... and even then, there are huge differences from within the same language group. We've also discovered that the Korean's are not the same as the North Korean's where we have the only Christian Church in America ministering to the North Korean refugees today here on the L.A. District.

The second element observed today is that the culture may remain the same within some of our "ethnic communities" but the sounds are changing... yet again. The challenge is now out to all of our Spanish speaking congregations, as well as our Chinese and Korean, to plant English speaking ministries. A statement I have heard over and over again as we take a look at our children and youth, "*They are the future of the church.*" I could not disagree more! They are here... and now. They are the PRESENT of the church. And we must devote ourselves to them today. Many of our second and third generation Latinos enjoy their rich heritage... their parents and grand-parents' cultures, but they are choosing to experience these blessings in the English language.

The third element... and one of the most challenging for churches in the city of Los Angeles is the difficulty of maintaining a church building, just as pointed out in the article. Property taxes, insurance, utilities and deferred maintenance are all costing the local congregation many dollars just to keep the facility going. When a congregation decrease in numbers while tithes and offerings drop, and the facility may have an appraised value of \$16+ million, the question becomes: "How do we raise the funds to keep the building?" The answer is complicated, yet needed. We must find creative ways of fund-raising for the church to continue ministering to the community the Lord has called them.

These are exciting days for the Church of the Nazarene. I thank the Lord that we have not left the city. I praise the Lord that He has answers for His church in reaching our communities for Him. We must find creative ways and means to continue on ministering to those in our communities. They are not responding to the Gospel like they once did, 50 years ago, but they all have needs and we have the answer as we direct them to the Lord Jesus Christ, who cares for all of our needs.