

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SHARED LEADERSHIP  
IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE  
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*Introduction*

In 2014, Pastor Chris had had enough.<sup>1</sup> After years of preaching fifty sermons a year, running board and other committee meetings, caring for parishioners, and holding the weight of the congregation on his shoulders, he was done. He was not sure if his hiatus would be temporary or if he would never pastor again. But he knew one thing—he desperately needed a break. So, he resigned and found a secular job that came with much less stress. His congregation, Friendship Community Church, began seeking a new pastor who would practice leadership differently. When they interviewed Douglass, they were intrigued by his praxis of leadership as an associate pastor in his current congregation. He had a preaching team that rotated through the pulpit, worked closely with lay persons, and actively empowered others. Over the next few years, Douglass began sharing leadership widely at Friendship. Even though he was the only full-time pastor, he had a team of five lay persons who preached regularly, several committees led by others that shaped the direction of the church, and part-time and volunteer staff that led different ministries. Douglass practiced shared leadership with both lay persons and staff to help his congregation take the next faithful step.

Douglass saw his predecessor's fate and increasingly leaned into more shared forms of leadership. However, burnout is not the only reason to push toward more shared forms of leadership. Financial difficulties have plagued many congregations, making it difficult for many congregations to pay a full-time pastor. Another factor is the increasing complexity of congregations. In a rapidly shifting world, it is nearly impossible for one individual to keep pace with growing cultural pluralism, changing governmental laws, unstable economic landscapes, and frequent residential turnover. One response to these concerns has been for clergy to share authority with others so that they can face their challenges together.

Shared leadership—a dynamic process in which leadership roles and influence are distributed among team members in order to guide a congregation as they take the next faithful step—has become increasingly common over the past two decades in both the secular and religious sections. In the United States there are over 400 copastors in the Church of the Nazarene, a designation made possible by a 2005 insertion in its *Manual*. There are also countless pastoral teams and clergy-lay teams that intentionally share leadership in their congregations. Yet, there is still widespread skepticism and some outright resistance against shared leadership.

While shared leadership in its modern construction is a relatively new praxis, leaders have been sharing tasks and responsibilities for much longer. John Wesley shared leadership

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<sup>1</sup> This article is adapted from Zachariah C. Ellis, “Shared Leadership as Faithful Christian Praxis,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2020. I spoke with twenty pastors and one lay person that participated in shared leadership teams in their congregations and did in-depth case studies on six teams.

with many early Methodists, including his brother, Charles, and many laypersons. Mary Harris Cagle, Donie Mitchum, and E.J. Sheeks shared leadership of the New Testament Church of Christ. Phineas Bresee and J.P. Widney were copastors of the Church of the Nazarene at its founding. Bresee continued sharing leadership with Hiram F. Reynolds when holiness movements from the East and the West merged in 1907 to form the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene. Sharing leadership is a praxis in which many in the Nazarene and Wesleyan traditions have engaged over the past three centuries.

This essay will outline how leadership has been practiced in the Wesleyan tradition and into the Church of the Nazarene today. First, I will examine John Wesley's leadership praxis and show that while Wesley was the dominant voice in Methodism, he regularly shared power with those with different gifts. Then, I will trace how authority in Methodism shifted during the 1800s. Next, I will look at leadership in the Church of the Nazarene during its forming and describe how the founders relied upon shared leadership to unite the holiness movement. Finally, I will explore leadership and authority in the Nazarene *Manual*, illustrating how the *Manual* encourages pastors to collaborate with others. I will argue that sharing leadership with those with different gifts has been an important praxis of many important individuals and communities in the Wesleyan and Nazarene traditions. Almost a century later, this posture continues in the Church of the Nazarene and is drawn upon by shared leadership teams today.

### *John Wesley's Leadership Praxis*

#### *The Early Years*

In 1703, John Wesley was born to an Anglican priest and a devoutly Christian mother. John and his two brothers, Charles and Samuel Jr., all became Anglican priests like their father. While John and Charles were at Oxford, they regularly came together with a group of friends for prayer and accountability. Many of the methodical practices which characterized Methodism started in these gatherings. When John Wesley left Oxford to go to Georgia, he instituted strict rules for parishioners concerning the sacraments and Sunday services and started experimenting with society meetings.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, his rigidity was rejected by the colonists who chased him out of town after two years.<sup>3</sup> Wesley at this time mirrored "the stiff establishment clergyman typical of his era," as Adrian Burdon put it, and believed he had more authority than he actually did.<sup>4</sup> While Wesley loosened some of these rules over the years, the rigidity with which he expressed authority in Georgia continued with him throughout his years as the leader of Methodism.

In early 1738, John Wesley arrived back in England and, on May 24, encountered God in a special way, filling him with an unquenchable desire to see revival in England. He immediately began preaching holiness wherever he was invited to a pulpit. Soon he stopped receiving invitations to preach in churches because of his evangelistic focus. At the invitation of George

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<sup>2</sup> Geordan Hammond, *John Wesley in America: Restoring Primitive Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chapter four.

<sup>3</sup> Hammond, *John Wesley in America*, 173–74.

<sup>4</sup> Adrian Burdon, *Authority and Order: John Wesley and His Preachers* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 10.

Whitefield, he hesitatingly started experimenting with field preaching and found that this controversial practice produced a great deal of fruit.<sup>5</sup> Over the next three years, Wesley preached throughout England and began organizing societies to encourage the piety of those who encountered the Spirit as a result of his ministry.

At first, Wesley was able to personally lead Methodist societies. Eventually, he spent more and more time traveling and found it necessary to appoint assistants to lead class meetings. They provided spiritual oversight and helped expound the scriptures for those who attended Methodist meetings. In 1741, Thomas Maxfield, an assistant to Wesley in London, overreached his authority as a lay-person and as an assistant to Wesley by preaching.<sup>6</sup> Susanna Wesley encouraged her son to assess the fruit of Maxfield's preaching and consider whether he had an inward divine call.<sup>7</sup> After hearing Maxfield for himself, he was convinced that God was present in this non-traditional practice and began appointing lay preachers to further the Methodist cause. Their role was to proclaim the Word to those who were not hearing it from either their parish priest or Wesley. They were strictly forbidden to administer the sacraments and Wesley even avoided the word *minister* in referring to them. They were there to assist Wesley and were directly accountable to Wesley.

Despite increasing disenfranchisement of Wesley and his Methodists, the revival swept throughout the land. In 1741, there were only three or four lay-preachers; by the time of his death fifty years later, there were around two hundred in England.<sup>8</sup> While English Methodists were still technically a part of the Church of England, the movement had de facto become its own separate church. They met yearly to decide rules for the connection, had guidelines for authorizing preachers and other lay-leaders, and practiced well-established rites and rituals unique to Methodism. By 1795, four years after Wesley's death, Methodists had officially separated from the Church of England.

Over the course of his life, Wesley shifted from rigid obedience to ecclesial laws toward rigid obedience to his extraordinary call to proclaim holiness.<sup>9</sup> No longer could he draw upon his structural authority as a curate. In England, preaching in an Anglican parish without the invitation of the curate was illegal. Wesley knew this and was reluctant to engage in field preaching. He used a long-standing tradition to justify his actions—because he was ordained as a “Fellow of a College,” he was “not limited to any particular cure” and could “preach the Word of

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<sup>5</sup> Burdon, *Authority and Order*, 14–15.

<sup>6</sup> There is some debate about which of Wesley's assistants was the first to preach. However, Maxfield would have been the first who was converted under Wesley's ministry to preach. Burdon, *Authority and Order*, 22–23.

<sup>7</sup> A. B. Lawson, *John Wesley and The Christian Ministry: The Sources and Development of His Opinions and Practice* (London: SPCK, 1963), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 142–43.

<sup>9</sup> Burdon, *Authority and Order*, 16. E. Herbert Nygren, “John Wesley's Changing Concept of the Ministry,” *Religion in Life* 31 (Spring 1962): 269.

God in any part of the Church of England.”<sup>10</sup> While this may have satisfied his conscience, he had clearly stepped outside of the institutional norms of his day, as evidenced by his marginalization by the Church of England. This shift forced him to begin relying upon symbolic capital rather than structural authority to influence English men and women toward sanctification. What led the masses to submit themselves to Wesley’s authority were testimonies of the Spirit’s transformative work and Wesley’s ability to make spiritual sense out of their lives. Only later in the Methodist movement did he regain structural authority over those who submitted to his leadership.

### *Authority in John Wesley and the Methodist Movement*

Throughout the first fifty years of Methodism, Wesley was its indisputable leader, the “scriptural ἐπίσκοπος.” Authority flowed through him to lay preachers in much the same way that authority flowed through Anglican bishops to deacons and priests. At annual conferences of Methodist preachers, his voice was always the most influential one. While Wesley relied heavily upon others to form the movement’s theology and praxis and to advance the movement, he was also incredibly opinionated, often following his convictions despite what others said. Because he was called by God to an “extraordinary calling,” the “ordinary” ministerial roles did not constrain him.<sup>11</sup> He boldly followed the Spirit’s promptings and did not mind ruffling feathers if it meant being obedient to God.

Initially, Wesley relied upon symbolic authority to lead Methodism. People were captivated by Wesley’s message of holiness and the way he and other Methodists embodied the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Over time, those entrusted to Wesley’s care developed deep relational connections to him. He wrote back and forth constantly to Methodists, encouraging them to keep moving forward in proclaiming scriptural holiness. As Methodism spread, Wesley and other early Methodist leaders felt it necessary to begin an annual conference with lay preachers to clarify who Methodists were. As the need for institutional framework increased, Wesley’s symbolic and relational capital led to organizational authority to shape the movement.

It is remarkable that so many people chose to grant him such authority in order to participate in the Methodist movement. Wesley had little structural power over dissenting Methodists, other than expelling them from the society. Lay preachers and others were free to leave Methodism and remove themselves from any organizational restrictions if they desired. Yet, the desire to stay was enough to keep most clergy in line throughout Wesley’s lifetime. Those who dissented, such as when a lay preacher administered the sacraments, often fell back into line when Wesley reprimanded them.<sup>12</sup> Methodist leaders willingly conferred authority to

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<sup>10</sup> See Wesley’s conversation with Bishop Butler of Bristol, Aug. 16, 1739 in Albert Cook Outler, “Introduction,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert Cook Outler, vol. 1: Sermons 1:1–33 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Wesley expounds upon this distinction between ordinary and extraordinary ministerial calls most notably in Sermon 121, “Prophets and Priests,” in *Sermons IV:115-151*, ed. Albert Cook Outler, vol. 4, The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 72–84.

<sup>12</sup> Burdon, *Authority and Order*, 48.

Wesley because of their commitment to a shared goal—seeing holiness spread throughout England.

While Wesley viewed himself as a superintendent to the Methodist people, neither ecclesial law nor centuries of tradition gave him the right to use his authority to ordain. Wesley authorized Methodist leaders to help lead the movement out of his symbolic authority as the movement's founder and leader. Outside of Methodism, this authorization meant little. It was not ordination, and lay leaders had no authority to administer the sacraments. Nonetheless, in 1784, Wesley felt that circumstances were dire enough to break Anglican law in order to ordain Thomas Vasey and Richard Whatcoat as elders and Thomas Coke as a superintendent for ministry in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Over the next seven years until his death, he ordained over a dozen men.<sup>14</sup> Sensing that he was in his final years of life and that Methodism would inevitably become its own church shortly thereafter, he exercised the authority that he felt Methodists had given him in order to ensure the movement kept spreading. In this manner, Wesleyan succession replaced apostolic succession as the primary means of authorization in Methodism.<sup>15</sup>

Around the same time that Wesley was ordaining Vasey, Whatcoat, and Coke, he was also making plans to transfer his authority to others after his death. During the 1784 annual conference, Wesley introduced the Deed of Declaration that gave the “Conference of the People Called Methodists” legal existence and transferred his organizational power to unilaterally appoint and discipline lay preachers to the conference.<sup>16</sup> No longer was power vested in one individual but in a conference of one hundred authorized Methodist preachers. After Wesley's death, they owned property on behalf of Methodism, assigned preaching circuits, and made polity decisions. While Methodists in both Britain and the United States continued to work out forms of polity in the years to come, authority has resided in the annual conference and not in one bishop ever since.

### *John Wesley, Eighteenth Century Methodism, and Shared Leadership*

On the surface, John Wesley is hardly a model for shared leadership in the twenty-first century. He often acted authoritatively and unilaterally and required Methodist preachers to be closely in line with his theological convictions. Because Methodism was always in flux, Wesley felt it necessary to quickly respond to new situations. Moreover, many Methodist lay preachers

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<sup>13</sup> He also instructed Coke to ordain Francis Asbury as his co-superintendent for the Methodist church in the United States. When they returned to England, they no longer had the authority to act in their priestly capacities (other than Coke who was already an ordained priest in the Church of England). Their authority was revoked because their ordination only gave them authority to minister within the Methodist movement, as Wesley directed. Burdon, *Authority and Order*, 156–58.

<sup>14</sup> Burdon, *Authority and Order*, 59–70.

<sup>15</sup> Lawson, *John Wesley*, 148.

<sup>16</sup> George Smith, *History of Wesleyan Methodism*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longman, and Robergs, 1857), 709. See also, Samuel J. Rogal, “Legalizing Methodism: John Wesley's Deed of Declaration and the Language of the Law,” *Methodist History*, 105–14, 44, no. 2 (January 2006).

had little education and were unable to contribute significantly to the formation of Methodism's theology and praxis. Thus, it is natural that Wesley would often be at the center of authority. However, deeper examination suggests that Wesley's use of power provides ample instances of sharing leadership.

The most notable example of sharing Methodist leadership is John's relationship with his brother, Charles. John and Charles were both people of exceptional talents but had very different gifts. John once remarked that he was the "head" and Charles was the "heart," referring to Charles' ability to discern a much wider range of human emotion than John.<sup>17</sup> They complemented each other well and, despite their disagreements, remained close friends throughout their lives. Together, they co-published thousands of hymns that formed the liturgy and theology of the Methodist movement. Important theologies on baptism, the Eucharist, atonement, and holiness were all developed through this relationship. Additionally, Charles often advised John on important decisions and helped push the movement forward from its inception. He stood diligently by his brother throughout the movement and was one of the main voices that spoke against formal separation from the Church of England. At the same time, he regularly deferred to John and let John make final decisions.<sup>18</sup> This was evident when Charles stepped aside to let John lead the Holy Club in 1729 as well as when Charles remained within the Methodist movement despite his strong opposition to John's ordinations in the 1780s. Nonetheless, John and Charles shared symbolic and relational influence within Methodism and worked closely together to proclaim holiness.

John Wesley also shared some leadership with his assistants and lay preachers. They voted on important matters at the annual conference, implemented Wesley's ideas, and crafted Methodism's theology and praxis through their experiences. When Maxfield started preaching, Wesley followed advice from his mother and allowed Maxfield's overreach of authority to become a defining attribute of Methodism. He trusted their expertise enough that their actions influenced his beliefs and changed the trajectory of the movement. This exchange mirrors how he worked with Methodist lay leaders. He trusted them with considerable authority to further the Methodist cause, allowed them to speak into the movement, and cared deeply for them. Nonetheless, lay leaders were only authorized for their roles through Wesley, whose voice was always the final say.

With both Charles Wesley and with lay leaders, we see clear examples of John sharing the tasks and responsibilities of leadership. It was not shared leadership as conceived today, but there is a trajectory in Wesley's theology and praxis that lays important foundations for Wesleyans seeking to practice shared leadership. Everything Wesley did, including both collaborating with others and acting autocratically, was to promote the spread of holiness. Field preaching and lay preaching allowed more people to hear and receive the holiness message; society meetings provided mutual support and helped people find freedom from sin; annual conferences ensured that every lay preacher was proclaiming scriptural holiness. If shared

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<sup>17</sup> John Wesley, *The Letters of John Wesley*, ed. John Telford, 8 vols. (London: Epworth, 1931), IV: 322. Quoted in Charles Wesley, *Charles Wesley: A Reader*, ed. John R. Tyson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Wesley, *Charles Wesley*, 5.

leadership facilitates holiness in certain contexts more effectively than autocratic forms of leadership, then it aligns with the trajectory of the Wesleyan movement. While shared leadership as defined above was largely foreign to Wesley himself—indeed to the eighteenth century in general—it aligns with a movement whose focus is on holiness.

### *Leadership in Post-Wesley Methodism in the United States*

After Wesley ordained Thomas Coke as a superintendent, Coke immediately left to ordain Francis Asbury as a co-superintendent and start an official Methodist church in North America.<sup>19</sup> When Asbury heard of Wesley's intentions, he and a few other Methodist leaders decided to call a general conference of all Methodist preachers in the United States to discern how best to receive Wesley's message. The Christmas Conference of 1784 affirmed Wesley's actions, drew up a constitution for the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), and ordained Asbury as a superintendent (along with thirteen elders and three deacons).<sup>20</sup> Under Asbury's tenure, the MEC made several important organizational and theological decisions that set the trajectory for the MEC for many decades to come.

One of the earliest developments was the diminishment of Wesley's authority as the distance between Wesley's wishes in England and the realities in the United States grew. This was evident when Asbury and others thought it wise to convene a general council to discern the wisdom of Wesley's intentions in 1784 rather than accept them outright. The Christmas Conference effectively transferred power from John Wesley to the general conference of preachers. This was affirmed in 1787 when the general conference removed Wesley's name as a superintendent of the MEC due to resentment toward Wesley's command to ordain Whatcoat as a superintendent.<sup>21</sup> While Wesley's theological and organizational legacy continued to influence the MEC, he was effectively cut off as a primary influencer.

As the conference rejected Wesley's continued authority over their praxis, they continued to wrestle with the relationship between their duly elected bishop and the conference. Should the bishop be the sole decision-maker in appointing presiding elders? What about in assigning itinerancies? Can the bishop overrule a decision of the conference? Can the conference overrule a bishop? Throughout the church splits, political divisions (especially over slavery), and geographic particularities, authority was increasingly vested in the general conference. By the

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<sup>19</sup> It is interesting that Wesley chose two individuals—Coke and Asbury—to lead Methodism instead of just appointing a single person to represent him in the United States. James Kirby attributes this to Wesley's insight that the Americans would not have agreed to submit themselves to Coke's leadership alone. Asbury, on the other hand, was quite popular. This seems likely, considering Wesley's continued autocratic leadership despite the availability of Methodist leaders (ordained and lay) whom he could have appointed to lead with him in England. James E. Kirby, *The Episcopacy in American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 41.

<sup>20</sup> Kirby, *Episcopacy*, 44.

<sup>21</sup> Kirby, *Episcopacy*, 46. Whatcoat was ordained as a superintendent by the conference's own volition in 1789.

end of the nineteenth century, bishops still held the authority to appoint presiding elders and assign elders and deacons to their posts. Yet, bishops were stationed to one area instead of being itinerant and the conference decided who would be ordained or disciplined. They still held considerable relational and symbolic influence, but their organizational influence had decreased dramatically since the days of Asbury.

These trends in Methodism took place within a rapidly changing American religious context that was also having debates about where authority should reside. The ministry had been undergoing a process of professionalization for centuries before really taking off in the United States. During the nineteenth century, dozens of colleges were started by religious institutions or out of religious convictions. Seminaries, too, proliferated as the first institutions in the United States designed to provide a graduate education.<sup>22</sup> As more Americans began specializing in sub-disciplines and identifying with specific professions, ministers, including well-educated ones, began losing the authority gained by their learning.<sup>23</sup> Many denominations urged their pastors to become more educated to retain this authority. Other Christian groups, including many Methodists, reacted against this trend. For the first half of the century, Methodists were known for emphasizing one's divine calling and equipping over against formal education.<sup>24</sup> Authority was placed in divine action and evidenced in the fruit of one's ministry, not in one's own achievements or special knowledge. By the end of the century, Methodists had founded a number of colleges and seminaries and their clergy were much better educated. Holiness churches that arose at the turn of the twentieth century initially rebelled against this emphasis on education before ultimately moving toward a more educated clergy.<sup>25</sup>

Another trend during this time corresponded with increased urbanization and mechanization of society. Protestant congregations increasingly were expected to move beyond preaching and teaching by establishing other means of pastoral care such as Bible studies, Sunday schools, regular visitations.<sup>26</sup> Churches also engaged in a variety of "public labors" to spread Christianity and its morals.<sup>27</sup> All of these efforts led to a need for pastors to spend more and more time on administration.<sup>28</sup> Pastors now needed to become managers that kept the organization moving forward in order to keep with the community's expectations and needs. This was especially evident in cities where there were great social needs. Matching the culture at large at this time, clerical authority continued to move away from a sacramental conveyance that permeated the Anglican Church and toward that of pastor as a manager.

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<sup>22</sup> One hundred and nineteen seminaries were started between 1850 and 1900. E. Brooks Holifield, *God's Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 173.

<sup>23</sup> Holifield, *God's Ambassadors*, 178.

<sup>24</sup> Holifield, *God's Ambassadors*, 124.

<sup>25</sup> Jay P. Dolan, "Patterns of Leadership in the Congregation," in *American Congregations*, vol. 2: *New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 238.

<sup>26</sup> Holifield, *God's Ambassadors*, 106.

<sup>27</sup> Holifield, *God's Ambassadors*, 107.

<sup>28</sup> Holifield, *God's Ambassadors*, 159.



*Phineas Bresee and Leadership in the Early Years of the Church of the Nazarene*

One hundred years after John Wesley's death, holiness movements were emerging throughout the United States. Several of these movements came together at the turn of the twentieth century to form the Church of the Nazarene. The Eastern holiness strand that fed into the Church of the Nazarene can be traced to the work of Phoebe Palmer. Palmer, a New York native, began proclaiming the holiness message in the late 1830s and traveling throughout the United States and Canada. Her Tuesday meetings were imitated widely by those who responded to her message of holiness. Out of this movement, the People's Evangelical Church was started in 1887 after several holiness promoters were expelled from their local Methodist society.<sup>29</sup> Through a series of mergers with other like-minded holiness congregations, the Association of Pentecostal Churches of America (APCA) was formed in 1895. Hiram F. Reynold, an ordained Methodist who later became a general superintendent in the Church of the Nazarene, was an important leader in the APCA.

At the same time, holiness churches were being planted in the West. Methodism had been brought to California in the 1840s and, by the 1880s, had a strong holiness contingent.<sup>30</sup> In 1880, Hardin Wallace, a Methodist evangelist, organized the Southern California and Arizona holiness Association and started gathering like-minded Christians from various denominations together to promote holiness in the area. Eventually, some of these Christians left their churches and started forming independent congregations.<sup>31</sup> At first, many Methodists were sympathetic to the holiness cause. However, as more people left established denominations, especially Methodism, denominational leaders became more resistant to the holiness movement. By 1894, the tides had turned in the MEC. When Phineas Bresee, founding copastor of the Church of the Nazarene, asked for a special appointment to minister in a nondenominational holiness mission, the conference refused. This led to Bresee and J.P. Widney founding the Church of the Nazarene in October 1895. By 1907, when they merged with the APCA, there were Nazarene congregations in twelve states.<sup>32</sup>

Holiness movements were also developing in the southern United States. In 1844, the MEC followed a trend in many denominations by splitting into northern (MEC) and southern (MECS) bodies.<sup>33</sup> At first, holiness was rather suspect in the South because it was associated with the North. However, in the 1870s, holiness evangelists began preaching throughout the South, leading to the flourishing of numerous independent holiness churches. Robert and Mary

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<sup>29</sup> Stan Ingersol, Harold E. Raser, and David P. Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song: The Centennial History of the Church of the Nazarene*, ed. Floyd T. Cunningham (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2009), 57.

<sup>30</sup> Edward Drewry Jervy, "The History of Methodism in Southern California and Arizona, 1850–1939" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston University, 1958), 7, <https://open.bu.edu/ds2/stream/?#/documents/56654/page/186>.

<sup>31</sup> Ingersol, Raser, and Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song*, 92.

<sup>32</sup> Ingersol, Raser, and Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song*, 106–07.

<sup>33</sup> This paragraph draws from Ingersol, Raser, and Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song*, 112–138.

Harris, two traveling holiness evangelists, withdrew from the MECS in 1894 and started the New Testament Church of Christ. Shortly after, Robert died from tuberculosis and Mary Harris assumed the mantle of leadership along with two other women—Donie Mitchum and E.J. Sheeks. As these three women traveled throughout the South, they started NTCC congregations wherever there was interest. Seven years later, C.B. Jernigan, a once-licensed MECS preacher, felt that there was a need to organize holiness people into a separate organization rather than inter or nondenominational associations. He started the Independent Holiness Church and, like Harris, Mitchum, and Sheeks, started IHC congregations wherever he preached. Despite their strong commitment to congregationalism, both of these fledgling denominations sensed a need to continue uniting holiness peoples together whenever possible. In 1904, the IHC and the NTCC merged to become the Holiness Church of Christ.

When these three threads came together (East and West in 1907 with the south joining in 1908), they united around the concept of holiness, not polity. Many early Nazarenes were ex-Methodists, but not all. Quakers, Baptists, and others had left their denominations to join the holiness movement.<sup>34</sup> Even those who were Methodists had differences in polity—the MEC and the MECS varied in the amount of power in the episcopacy and involvement of laity. Some Nazarenes preferred a more episcopal polity while others preferred a more congregationalist polity. Consequently, numerous compromises were made in order to join together to promote Christian holiness.

Because of the constant flux in the holiness movement, establishing organizational structures took a back seat to fostering relationships and unifying around the holiness cause. Holiness evangelists were conferred authority not primarily through organizations but through their ability to captivate an audience and produce fruit. This is why Bresee was able to build up Los Angeles First Church of the Nazarene so quickly. While he was marginalized from the MEC and Peniel Mission, he had stored up enough relational and symbolic authority in the region that people quickly flocked to his side. Additionally, decisions to unify were not made based upon polity—they had large differences in this department. Rather, they were made based upon trust in key individuals and a shared goal of promoting holiness. Consequently, when negotiations became tense—such as in 1908 when the southerners wanted stronger language around clothing against the Westerner’s wishers—Bresee insisted that they could not “let them go” because “they are our own folks.”<sup>35</sup> Only after stability emerged could denominational leaders rely upon organizational authority to lead.<sup>36</sup>

This is evidenced in a controversy that occurred between Seth Rees, pastor of Pasadena University Church that met on Nazarene University’s campus, and the university and district leadership.<sup>37</sup> Rees, an ex-Quaker, believed strongly in congregational autonomy and was

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<sup>34</sup> This is further evidenced by the diverse backgrounds of the first general superintendents. Ingersol, Raser, and Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song*, 196–204.

<sup>35</sup> Bangs, *Bresee*, 188.

<sup>36</sup> As Ingersol, Raser, and Whitelaw put it, “The credibility of the general superintendents [during these early years] depended upon their judgment and counsel in ordinary matters.” *Our Watchword and Song*, 216.

<sup>37</sup> Ingersol, Raser, and Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song*, 213.

infuriated when the district and general assemblies both ruled against his decision to remove a member of his church for sinful behavior. Shortly after, Rees became concerned again when a pastor displayed “imprudent” conduct with a woman. Bresee felt that the actions were not “immoral” and only chastised the imprudent man for his foolishness. Rees felt that the Nazarenes had strayed from the holiness message and began a movement to undermine Nazarene University. The district superintendent, with the regional general superintendent’s blessing, formally dissolved the four-hundred-person church on a Sunday morning. The manual technically allowed for this; however, dissolution was primarily intended as a tool for dying or “hopelessly unorthodox” churches.<sup>38</sup> Controversy through the denomination erupted over the power of the superintendency versus that of the congregations. Rees brought many of his followers with him to start a new denomination. Many others, though, stayed with the Church of the Nazarene not because they agreed with the use of episcopal authority, but because they were committed to the Nazarene cause—the proclamation of holiness.

At the heart of the early CotN was Bresee. On December 31, 1838, Bresee was born in rural New York and was raised a Methodist.<sup>39</sup> As a young boy, he felt called into the ministry and was commissioned to his first circuit as an assistant itinerant preacher in 1857. For the next twenty-six years he saw great success through several appointments in Iowa. During his years in Iowa, a spirit of revivalism was sweeping the country and Bresee’s pastorates often included elements of revival culture. In 1883, he moved with his family to Los Angeles where he pastored congregations in Los Angeles and Pasadena. After being released from the MEC in 1894, he served at the nondenominational Peniel Mission before starting the Church of the Nazarene in 1895 with many friends he had developed in the area.

For three years, Bresee copastored with J.P. Widney, a wealthy businessman. One of Bresee’s first official acts as co-superintendent was to ordain Widney as his copastor and co-superintendent. Because there were so many denominational responsibilities—starting new congregations, traveling to preach, developing appropriate polity—Widney and Bresee shared the responsibilities necessary to allow their church to grow. Bresee was used to working with wealthy businessmen who often funded building projects in his pastorates. Bangs speculates that he likely had similar expectations with Widney. Yet, Widney became disillusioned with the Church of the Nazarene. He resented that the board wanted parishioners to band together to pay for necessary buildings rather than rely upon one wealthy individual (i.e., Widney). He also felt that they were too expressive and “that this thing of Sanctification must be touched on tenderly.”<sup>40</sup> In October 1898, both Bresee and Widney resigned. The board changed the term for Nazarene general superintendents from a lifetime to one year. They immediately called Bresee back as their pastor and superintendent. Widney left and rejoined the MEC again.

While copastoring was a short-lived phenomenon for the early Nazarene church, this was consistent with Bresee’s leadership style throughout his later years. He spent countless hours

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<sup>38</sup> Ingersol, Raser, and Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song*, 211.

<sup>39</sup> The next two paragraphs draw upon two notable biographies of Bresee: Bangs, *Bresee*, and E. A. Girvin, *Phineas F. Bresee: A Prince in Israel; A Biography* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1916).

<sup>40</sup> Bangs, *Bresee*, 150; Ingersol, Raser, and Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song*, 104.

networking and partnering with others to promote the holiness cause. As general superintendent, he empowered others to organize Nazarene congregations, faithfully share the Nazarene message, and make key decisions on behalf of the church. In his own congregation, he often shared preaching responsibilities with others and let the board make important decisions on behalf of the congregation. He was a gifted orator, yet his legacy primarily concerns his ability to bring people together around a cause. He was, as the official history of the Church of the Nazarene states, the “chief unifier of the denomination.”<sup>41</sup>

Bresee’s commitment to unity was evident when the East and West came together in 1907. The general assembly elected two general superintendents—Bresee and Hiram Reynolds. Separated by a continent, these two figures worked closely together to form the early Nazarene church and model unity.<sup>42</sup> Reynolds was sixteen years younger than Bresee and had no experience as a general superintendent. For a short while they traveled together. After this, they constantly wrote letters back and forth, sharing personal details and work updates. They asked for advice from each other and solved problems together. Reynolds brought years of missions experience that complemented Bresee’s travels in the United States. When Edgar Ellyson was elected as a third general superintendent in 1908, they opened up the circle to include him as well. They complemented each other and worked together for the good of the fledgling Church of the Nazarene. The ideal was always “to act as one man,” as Bresee put it.<sup>43</sup>

The founding of the Church of the Nazarene was much different than that of Methodism. From the start, they were their own denomination and had to work together to form structures and establish praxes that worked for them. While Bresee is often considered the primary founder of the Church of the Nazarene, he worked closely with many different individuals to unify the movement. For three years, Widney and Bresee labored as copastors and co-superintendents of the new denomination. Once Reynolds became a general superintendent, their different gifts complemented each other to help the denomination flourish. In the South, Robert and Mary Harris worked closely together to get the New Testament Church of Christ going. When Robert died, Mitchum and Sheeks came alongside Mary to promote Holiness in the NTCC. Sharing leadership is a well-established tradition in the Church of the Nazarene.

### *The Church of the Nazarene in the Twenty-First Century*

The Church of the Nazarene today strives to achieve the same balance between episcopacy and congregationalism as it did one hundred years ago. To this end, there are three legislative entities—the local, district, and general. The first of these, the local church, may call their pastor, elect lay leaders, manage their funds, choose topics on which to preach and teach, and discern where to invest in the community. This entity is the most important in the Nazarene Church’s mission to “make Christlike disciples in the nations” because this is where the “saving,

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<sup>41</sup> Ingersol, Raser, and Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song*, 141.

<sup>42</sup> This paragraph draws from Mary Lou Shea, “A Legacy of Letters: How H. F. Reynolds and Phineas Bresee Built a Denomination through Correspondence,” *Holiness Today*, October 2019, <http://www.holinesstoday.org/legacy-of-letters>; Bangs, *Bresee*.

<sup>43</sup> Ingersol, Raser, and Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song*, 216.

perfecting, teaching, and commissioning” of people takes place.<sup>44</sup> The district and general entities “complement and assist” local churches.<sup>45</sup> The second entity—the district assembly—comprises all assigned ministers and elected lay delegates from each church. Participants call a district superintendent to help congregations fulfill their mission and elect delegates to sit on committees that determine who will be licensed and ordained, what properties can be purchased, and how they might organize themselves in their collective ministry. The third entity—the general assembly—is a global meeting and consists of elected lay and ministerial delegates from every district assembly. This is the “supreme doctrine-formulating, lawmaking, and elective authority of the Church of the Nazarene.”<sup>46</sup> Its members craft doctrinal statements, update polity, elect lay and ministerial committee members, and call general superintendents who have the authority to ordain clergy, offer official interpretations of the manual, and articulate the mission and vision of the denomination.

The Church of the Nazarene prescribes both spiritual and administrative duties to lead pastors. The former includes praying, preaching, administering the sacraments, offering pastoral care, and evangelizing. The latter includes being the chair or a member of every standing board or committee of the church, supervisor of all church staff, and signatory on all legal documents. Some congregations have staff pastors who are hired at the recommendation of the lead pastor and approved by the church board. Their contract is year-to-year and they must resign when the lead pastor resigns. Various committees and boards work with the pastor to lead the church. The church board—with the lead pastor as its chair—approves budgets, calls a lead pastor, conducts periodic pastoral reviews with the district superintendent, and crafts an annual ministry plan. Missions, youth, children, evangelism, and Sunday school all have committees that provide direction for their respective ministry area.

Official polity thus confers much symbolic and organizational authority to lead pastors. Because lead pastors are the primary preachers and teachers in many congregations, they can choose what cultural tools from their tool kit to use as they help others make spiritual sense of their lives. When pastors can draw upon symbols, myths, narratives, and rituals that are already present in the community, they have greater opportunities to influence parishioners. Organizationally, pastors’ place on each committee, including nominating committees to decide who can be elected to committees and the church board, gives them considerable influence to place items on the agenda and direct conversations at meetings. As supervisors of staff, they can hire and guide paid staff as they see fit. Notably, relational authority is not (and could not be) ascribed in the manual. As relational capital is established, a pastor’s increased relational authority will supplement her or his organizational and symbolic authority.

The complexity of official polity, lack of oversight by district superintendents, differences in church cultures, and nuances in theology contribute to large differences in congregational structures. Because pastors are often the primary symbolic shapers in a congregation, they can emphasize different theologies to influence structures and culture.

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<sup>44</sup> Church of the Nazarene, *Church of the Nazarene Manual: 2017–2021* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 2017), 64.

<sup>45</sup> *Manual* 40.

<sup>46</sup> *Manual*, 152.

Likewise, as chair of the board and supervisors of staff, they can shape ecclesial structures to influence the congregation. Some structures and cultural schemas—such as having a church board with the pastor as its chair, or the ability of congregations to call their own pastor—are deeply rooted and present in every established congregation. Most structures and cultural schemas are more pliable. One copastorate in my research only allowed as many nominees for the church board to be on the ballot as there were openings. They expect little from their church board other than ratifying previously made staff decisions. On the other hand, a clergy-lay shared leadership team expected board members to lead breakout committees and bring important ministry suggestions to the church board for extensive discussion. Both fall within the parameters of official polity while also embodying different congregational cultures.

In 2005, a section on copastors was added to the *Manual* to reflect and guide the growing number of copastors in the Church of the Nazarene. Accordingly, pastors can now be assigned as copastors in official denominational documents. In the 2017–2021 *Manual*, copastors are advised to “develop a plan for shared responsibility and authority” as “equals in the pastoral office.” Both copastors are called by a congregational vote and participate in the formal pastoral review process. Notably, one individual has to be chair of the board “if required by law.”

Although this addition guides copastors, there are no guidelines for shared leadership teams that do not consist of copastors. It is largely contingent upon the lead pastor(s) to choose how to empower others. Some have one lead pastor who practices shared leadership with associate pastors. Others have only one paid pastor alongside volunteer or part time laypersons that share leadership. Both of these structures fall within denominational guidelines. While congregational culture interacts with pastoral authority in various ways, lead pastors retain the organizational authority to share leadership when and where they see fit.

Although official Nazarene polity ascribes considerable symbolic and organizational authority to lead pastors (including copastors), it also recognizes that pastors need others to lead the congregation. The church board and various committees make space for parishioners to contribute to different spheres. Staff pastors can be brought in to provide leadership over specific areas. Laypersons regularly lead small groups and Bible studies. While not all pastors recognize this posture, current Nazarene polity continues the trajectory from its early years by encouraging the sharing of important leadership tasks and responsibilities with both laity and other clergy that are in the congregation.

### *Conclusion*

The legacy left by the founders of Methodism and the Church of the Nazarene are complex and do not always provide a clear path to follow. At times, they could be autocratic, even bullheaded. Other times, they could be collaborative and open. Practitioners of shared leadership must recognize both of these tendencies when exploring the Wesleyan legacy. Yet the orienting concern of leaders in the Church of the Nazarene and the larger holiness movement was always the proclamation of holiness. John Wesley shared leadership with his brother Charles and numerous other Methodist leaders because he found it highly effective in spreading the holiness message. Harris Cagle, Bresee, Reynolds, and other Nazarene leaders banded together because they knew that their holiness message would be much stronger if they shared leadership

of a large movement instead of hoarding power over a small movement. All of these leaders relied upon others' gifts to advance the holiness cause.

In the Church of the Nazarene today, this same conviction still exists. Pastors are urged to share leadership with laypersons, board members, and church staff in order that the holiness message may be spread more effectively. Some Nazarene pastors take this bent toward collaboration quite seriously. They give associate pastors, lay persons, church boards, and committees tangible authority to help guide and influence the congregation. Practitioners of shared leadership might continue to encounter resistance around their leadership practices. However, embracing their Wesleyan roots will both offer a guide to practicing shared leadership, with proclaiming holiness as their orienting concern, and provide centuries of historical context to root their shared leadership practices.