GIVE US FRIENDS: MOVING BEYOND THE AMERICANISM OF NAZARENE MISSIOLOGY[1]

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Introduction

Nazarene missiology is complex and multilayered. For more than 100 years, and in over 170 countries, the Church of the Nazarene has crossed boundaries for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To capture that extraordinary history and diversity in a short paper is a fool's errand. Something will always be left out. Counterexamples can always be found. Therefore, this is not an attempt to be exhaustive but illustrative. What are the dominant themes that have surfaced in Nazarene missiology?

To be even more precise, this paper limits itself to Nazarene missiology as it has taken shape in the United States. The Church of the Nazarene was started in the United States, and it has played an outsized role in the denomination's development, so to understand *American* Nazarene missiology is, in good measure, to understand *Nazarene* missiology. However, it is important not to conflate the two entirely. Nazarene missiology will always be more than what was incubated and exported from the United States. However, as authors from North America, who are tasked with representing the region, it seemed best to limit ourselves to what we know best.[2] What are the features of American Nazarene missiology?

Framed this way, we are not offering a universal model of mission, but a historical and theological reflection on contextual missiology in and from the United States. American missiology, we argue, is shaped by the changing political and social realities of the country. As the nation changes, so do Nazarene missions. Political and social developments get intertwined with missiology. On the one hand, that means American Nazarenes have consistently expressed their missiology in ways that are meaningful in their context. On the other hand, it raises a question: Is American Nazarene missiology anything more than just Americanism? Distinguishing American missiology from Americanism can be difficult, but the work is critical. Nazarenes must not let the United States's economic, cultural, or political interests drain the gospel of its power.

After describing four historical phases of American Nazarene missiology, we conclude by reflecting on what it might need to become now. In a cultural moment marked by intense

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[1] "Give us friends," was the appeal of the Indian delegate, V. S. Azariah, to his Western colleagues at the World Missionary Conference in 1910. It remains a powerful cry from both senders and receivers alike, who are separated by differences.

[2] Both authors have been Nazarene missionaries for a combined 32 years and now teach missiology in seminaries in the United States. We approach this study not as detached critics, but as participants in and stewards of the tradition we cherish. Thus, we hope this paper will enhance the Church of the Nazarene's missionary witness by prompting it to live more fully into its Wesleyan-Holiness foundations and calling.

polarization and sharply increased ecclesial homogenization, practices of “othering” are shaping church life and mission. We seek to name the dangerous Americanism embedded in that kind of missiology which thrives by dividing “us” from “them,” and offer the outline of a constructive alternative. We propose a missiology of common mission, wherein mission is not an action done to others, but a transformation pursued with others under the lordship of Christ. This framework is offered as a contribution for communal discernment in the Church of the Nazarene, informed by global perspectives and accountable to local realities.

American Expansionism and a Nazarene Missiology of Liberation, 1898-1945

The people of the United States have always been restless, breaking out of their confines. The original 13 states along the Atlantic seaboard that declared independence from England in 1776 pushed inland and became 16 states by 1800. Fifty years later, that number had almost doubled to 31 states, and U.S. citizens had spread from Maine on the East coast to California on the West coast. In the subsequent decades, the territories in between would be incorporated into the country, and the enormous land mass of Alaska would be purchased. By the end of the nineteenth century, Americans could roam no farther westward, so they moved outward.

The precipitating event of outward expansion was a rebellion in 1895 against Spain’s colonial rule on the island of Cuba, just 90 miles south of the state of Florida. Cubans had tried to overthrow the Spanish before, but since American investment in the island’s sugar industry had increased, events this time were monitored closely by the U.S. government and the general populace. When the initial attempt to pacify the rebels failed, Spain sent in General Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau to quell the unrest in its colony. His concentration camps, in which he imprisoned huge parts of the population, ruined the economy and pushed the people of Cuba to the brink of starvation. His brutality, both real and exaggerated, won him the nickname “the Butcher,” and sensationalized news reports urged Americans to act.[3] Could the U.S. close its ears to the cries of women and children in desperate peril, the *New York Journal* asked?[4] An editorial in the *San Francisco Examiner* insisted, “No American can be true to the freedom of his own country without feeling such a sympathy for Cuba as will urge him to interfere for its liberation.”[5] The U.S. needed to rescue Cuba from Spain’s brutality and tyranny.

What followed was the Spanish-American War of 1898, by the end of which Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Guam, and the Philippines had become new territories of the Union. Very few Americans moved to those newly annexed islands; the war had not been a way to deal with land scarcity. Rather, it was a concrete expression of a new phase in American foreign policy. The U.S. was no longer content to stay in its hemisphere. “By abandoning the historic limits of American policy, [expansionists] opened the way for the nation’s transformation from a regional power to a world colossus.”[6] The isolationism of the past was shed. A new era began as

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[3] Adam Burns, *American Imperialism: The Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1783-2013* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2017), 77.

[4] George Eugene Bryson, “Spaniards Cruel to the Last,” *New York Journal*, March 8, 1897.

[5] Editorial, *San Francisco Examiner*, June 1, 1896.

[6] David Healy, *US Expansionism: The Imperialist urge in the 1890s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 254.

Americans entered the twentieth century, assertive and confident that they should move outward and play a dominant role on the global stage.

The Church of the Nazarene coalesced at Pilot Point, Texas, just ten years after the Spanish-American War, and reflected the expansionist spirit of the age. The missionaries associated with various American Holiness movements, who had already started work in India in 1898, Cape Verde in 1901, Cuba in 1902, Mexico in 1903, Guatemala in 1904, Japan in 1905, and Swaziland in 1907, were absorbed into the new denomination in 1908. Shortly thereafter, the church opened new outposts in Argentina, Peru, China, South Africa, Syria, Israel, Mozambique, Trinidad, and Barbados. The Great Depression temporarily slowed the sending of missionaries, but as soon as it was financially possible to expand into new areas, the Foreign Missions Board dispatched American men and women to open churches in the formal and informal protectorates of the United States in the Caribbean and Central America.[7] From its beginning, when its membership was still tiny, the Church of the Nazarene embraced the idea that it had a global responsibility.

Not surprisingly, the reasons for its Foreign Missions were expressed in the common tongue of American expansionism: freedom. Just as the U.S. had rescued Cubans from the greedy grasp of Spain, so Mr. and Mrs. I. B. Staples baptized "four more precious souls" in Japan to make sure they were "rescued from the Devil's hand."[8] Harmon Schmelzenbach and those with him in Swaziland "were like young war horses, anxious to get into battle" to deliver people from the bondage of sin.[9] And Mrs. Dixon in "Our Far Flung Battle Line" of China, praised God for liberating people from darkness.[10] Foreign missions replicated the language used to justify American colonialism.

Meanwhile, Nazarene Home Missions developed a similar rationale of liberation for their labors, as they, too, mirrored the American expansionist mentality of the time. According to Adam Burns, in the first half of the twentieth century, U.S. expansionism explained itself in the language of bringing "democracy and freedom" to those suffering in the world, but it was "coupled awkwardly with ideas of racial superiority."[11] Nazarene Home Missions embodied those twin concepts. They celebrated liberating people in the U.S. from their spiritual prisons, but the target of Nazarene Home Missions was not just any person in the country who was spiritually enslaved; Home Missions focused on the "foreigners in our midst," including the "more than 10,000,000 negroes and 350,000 American Indians" who were already citizens.[12] The foreigner, therefore, was not just someone who was not (yet) an American citizen, but also any person who was non-white. Like other Catholic and Protestant Home Missions of the time,

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[7] After the denominations initial and somewhat chaotic move outward to the world, the Church rather quickly narrowed its focus to nations within the United States' orbit. See Healy, 253.

[8] Mr. and Mrs. I. B. Staples, "The Gospel Preached in New Places," *The Other Sheep* 7, no. 8 (February 1920): 13.

[9] H. F. Schmelzenbach, "Advancing in the Bushveldt," *The Other Sheep* 7, no. 8 (February 1920): 10.

[10] Mrs. S. M. Dixon, "Every Field of Our Far Flung Battle Line," *The Other Sheep* 7, no. 8 (February 1920): 11.

[11] Burns, 78.

[12] N. B. Herrell, "Our Present Plan," *Herald of Holiness* 10, no. 38 (December 21, 1921): 3-4.

Nazarene missions were racially encoded.[13] White missionaries rescued Black and Brown people from spiritual tyranny.[14]

To summarize: early Nazarenes channeled their passion to take the gospel to all the world into the language and structures of American expansionism. Missions were primarily about sending Americans across the world as pioneers to liberate others—the Other being defined as a person of color who was dominated by demons, idols, superstition, or ignorance.

America Forward and the Nazarene Missiology of Self-Sufficiency, 1945-1989

Prior to the Second World War, roughly 750 million people—about one-third of the world's population—lived in colonized territories.[15] The United States was one of the last nations to create foreign colonies, and it was among the first to recognize that colonization was coming to an end. In 1941, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt met with Prime Minister Winston Churchill of the United Kingdom to imagine a better future for the world after the war. They announced that "their countries [sought] no aggrandizement, territorial or other," and that "they wish[ed] to see sovereign-rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them."[16] At the end of the war, Churchill's territorial acquisitiveness resurfaced when he mocked China's Chiang Kai-shek for being so naïve as to decline control over Indochina. Roosevelt reminded him, however, "a new period has opened in the world's history. You have to adjust yourself to it."[17] Annexation was at an end.

That did not mean that the U.S. withdrew from the world. On the contrary, the United States developed an aggressive America Forward strategy.[18] To stop communism, the U.S. moved to hem in the Soviet Union. During the Cold War (1945-1989), the U.S. operated up to 800 military bases in roughly 100 nations.[19] Sometimes that meant collaborating with oppressive regimes; unsavory alliances were seen as the necessary cost of containing communism.

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[13] Daryl R. Ireland and Francisca F. Ireland-Verwoerd, *New Wineskins: Forming and Reforming the American Society of Missiology, 1973-2023* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2025), 27-28.

[14] The one exception may be João José Dias, who opened the work in Cape Verde. He gets credit for starting the Church of the Nazarene on those islands, but it is unclear whether the denomination counted him as a foreign missionary or not. The language used is circumspect, giving him credit for pioneering the work, but not naming him as one of the people employed by the Foreign Missions Board. More work needs to be done to be definitive on this point. See: Paul S. Dayhuff, *Living Stones in Africa: Pioneers of the Church of the Nazarene* (n.p.: P. S. Dayhuff, 1999), 85-86.

[15] "Decolonization," United Nations, https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/decolonization, accessed December 29, 2025.

[16] Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, "Atlantic Charter," August 14, 1941, FDR Presidential Library and Museum, https://www.fdrlibrary.org/documents/356632/390886/atlantic_charter.pdf/30b3c906-e448-4192-8657-7bbb9e0fdd38, accessed December 29, 2025.

[17] Quoted in Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt's Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 360.

[18] David Vine, *The United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic* State (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 194.

[19] Burns, 174; David Vine, "Lists of U.S. Military Bases Abroad, 1776–2020," American University Digital Research Archive, April 27, 2020, https://doi.org/10.17606/bbxc-4368, accessed December 23, 2025.

Americans spread all over the world. Some carried guns, but many played a different role. At his inauguration in 1949, President Harry Truman set out the country's agenda. "The old imperialism—exploitation for foreign profit—has no place in our plans."[20] Instead, the U.S. would work to develop other nations. "The material resources which we can afford to use for assistance of other peoples is limited," he admitted,

> But our imponderable resources in technical knowledge are constantly growing and are inexhaustible. I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life…. Our main aim should be to help the free peoples of the world, through their own efforts, to produce more food, more clothing, more materials for housing, and more mechanical power to lighten their burdens.[21]

Americans had a mandate to train others, to make them self-sufficient. The goal was political and economic independence, but not in some isolated sense, as if every country should become a hermit kingdom. Rather, the hope was that nations would grow and be integrated into a global economic system that was independent of communism.

This may all sound irrelevant to missiology, but in fact, the way the U.S. changed how it acted in the world shaped how American Nazarenes conceived their tasks. First, like the United States, the Church of the Nazarene quickly expanded into new territories after World War II. The initial surge after the war settled into years of steady expansion, so that by 1989 the Church of the Nazarene was in 87 world areas. The countries were not identical to those with a U.S. military presence, but they were nonetheless a reflection of the Cold War. American missionaries were unable to enter countries aligned with the Soviet bloc, so they labored in places where the United States had influence. Nazarenes also turned a blind eye to oppressive regimes. Missionaries were told to be apolitical, which meant not to challenge the status quo. They could not risk getting the Church of the Nazarene kicked out of South Africa, Taiwan, or Chile, no matter how inhumane their dictators or policies became. The goal was to grow, so Nazarene expansionism continued apace U.S. expansionism, unchecked by conscience.[22]

Second, even as Nazarenes expanded into new countries, missionaries increasingly shifted from pioneering new fields to equipping new ministers. This was caused and amplified by the Church's "loss of China." In 1949, the Communists came to power and drove foreigners

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[20] Harry S. Truman, "Inaugural Address," January 20, 1949, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/19/inaugural-address, accessed December 29, 2025.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Significantly, in 2024 the Board of General Superintendents apologized for the Church of the Nazarene's silence and its decisions in South Africa that made the church complicit with country's racist policies and practices, stating: "On behalf of the leaders, the missionaries, and the policies of the Church of the Nazarene during the period of apartheid, we offer our deepest regret and we ask you [brothers and sisters of Africa] for forgiveness." Annual Report of the Board of General Superintendents to the 101st General Board Church of the Nazarene, February 23, 2025, https://resources.nazarene.org/index.php/s/saddBzKdsx38bgM?dir=/&editing=false&openfile=true, accessed January 17, 2026.

out of the country, including all missionaries. Americans lamented that they had not prepared the Chinese church for the abrupt transition. After more than 30 years of work in the country, the Church of the Nazarene had only three Chinese ordained pastors—two of whom were ordained under extraordinary circumstances by the Chinese church itself when missionaries had to flee.[23] News of the subsequent collapse of the church was attributed, in part, to a lack of national leaders who were adequately prepared.[24] Therefore, Nazarenes renewed their emphasis on creating a "three-self church:" self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating.[25] The Church of the Nazarene in Korea, for instance, threatened as it was by Communist North Korea and China, had to become self-sufficient as soon as possible. Who knew how long missionaries would be able to stay?

Foreign missionaries had to become experts who, as President Truman suggested, had "technical knowledge" that they could impart to people in other countries who lacked such knowledge or skills. Likewise, home missionaries—who were redefined as church planters—came to prize specialization.[26] Therefore, many American missionaries and church planters received the highest degree available from a Nazarene institution—a Master's degree from the denomination's first graduate school, Nazarene Theological Seminary (est. 1944)—and they were products of the newly professionalized discipline of missiology.[27] They held diplomas that certified their expertise, and the task of missions was now passing along that knowledge. "I am trying to work myself out of a job," Nazarene missionary Roy Copelin liked to quip.[28] He, and most other Nazarene missionaries and church planters at the time, focused on self-sufficiency. They became teachers, whether formally or informally, and trained laypeople, pastors, and district superintendents to build and operate the mechanisms of the church. The aim was to have churches, schools, and hospitals reach a point where they no longer needed outside assistance.

The denomination built this into its very structure. By 1985, it had quantified in the *Manual* the process of moving from a pioneering work that relied on missionaries, to becoming a Phase 3 District, independent of missionary control.[29] Nowhere was that transition better symbolized than in Papua New Guinea, where the national church celebrated becoming a Phase

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[23] Orval J. Nease, "FOREIGN VISITION, 1948," n.d. (file 784-61), in the Nazarene Archives, Lenexa, KS.

[24] With virtually no information escaping China until the end of the 1970s, Nazarenes assumed the church had been destroyed. Only after China opened up did they discover that those who had been part of the Church of the Nazarene did not disappear but had flourished and multiplied. See: Daryl R. Ireland, "A Protean Church: Nazarenes in China," M.A. thesis, (Nazarene Theological Seminary, 2008), 93-94.

[25] Three-Self missiology had been developed in the U.S. and England in the 19th century and was adopted immediately by the Church of the Nazarene in the early 20th century. See, for example: Ireland, "A Protean Church," 10-11.

[26]"The Young Preacher and Home Missions," *Herald of Holiness* 41, no. 49 (February 11, 1953): 3-4.

[27] Paul Orjala, the Professor of Missions at NTS, was a charter member of the American Society of Missiology, the organization that gained professional and academic recognition for the field of missiology in 1976. See: Ireland and Ireland-Verwoerd, *New Wineskins*.

[28] Roy E. Copelin in discussion with the author, November 1982.

[29] The *Manual 1985* actually created provisions for a district to move through four phases. That was later simplified and reduced to three—the number that is still in use today.

3 District by lowering a U.S. flag and raising the flag of Papua New Guinea.[30] It upset the American missionaries who witnessed it, but the action was a fulfillment of their own mandate. They had accomplished their mission.

That said, being independent of missionaries was not the same as being independent of the American-based denomination. At one point, that had been imagined. General Superintendent H. F. Reynolds, upon the inauguration of the work in China in 1914, hoped that the country (and every other country, presumably) would eventually have its own General Superintendents.[31] However, by 1945, that vision of separate national churches was gone. Just like the United States pursued global economic integration during the Cold War, so the Church of the Nazarene voted and vowed to build one, united "'international community' of faith."[32]

The missiology was consistent with the spirit of the era. Alongside American expansionism and its concomitant missiology of liberation, Nazarenes now also championed a missiology of self-sufficiency. Experts would train others to run the church—the Others, here, no longer referring to unbelievers, but to Christians who needed knowledge or skills to maintain and grow the church without external support.

American Globalization and a Nazarene Missiology of Universal Responsibility, 1989-2015

Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, President George H. W. Bush addressed a joint session of the Congress of the United States. He announced that the "end of the cold war was a victory for all humanity," and that the U.S. must now take the lead in creating "a new world order."[33] This included bringing trade barriers down so that a global market could flourish. Whereas political ideologies had divided the world, he envisioned a world where an integrated economy based on unencumbered competition could spread prosperity and bring stability.

Bush's economic outlook was a tightly compressed expression of neoliberalism, a capitalist economic theory that was no longer checked by a communist alternative. After the Cold War, neoliberalism not only drove policy decisions by both Republican and Democratic presidents in the U.S., but it was also exported globally through powerful institutions like the World Bank that required nations to deregulate their economies and allow foreigners easy access to their markets if they wanted aid or loans.[34]

Meanwhile, the infrastructure for a truly world wide web was constructed. Fiber optic cables crisscrossed oceans and continents. The Internet flourished as e-commerce blossomed. It was not just that a buyer could now purchase something online. The Internet made it feasible for American sellers to internationalize in ways previously unimaginable. The computer company

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[30] Neville Bartle, email message to the author, January 1, 2026.

[31] H. F. Reynolds, "C H I N A," (file 262-19) in the Nazarene Archives, Lenexa, Kansas.

[32] Church of the Nazarene, *Manual: 1989* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, 1989), Historical Statement.

[33] George H. W. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union," January 29, 1991, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2656, accessed December 30, 2025.

[34] John Mihevc, *The Market Tells Them So: The World Bank and Economic Fundamentalism in Africa* (London: Zed Books, 1995).

Dell outsourced customer service to call centers in India to save money; China, according to Apple CEO Steve Jobs, saved his company from bankruptcy by allowing him to assemble iPods in inexpensive factories with cheap labor; and Intel created an elaborate international supply chain that involved 11,000 suppliers in 90 countries that helped slice their price of computer chips.[35] Instant communication and the low cost of moving people and objects made new things possible.

It did not come without costs. To work in these new factories or to venture starting their own companies, people uprooted their agrarian lives and flocked to start-up cities. No time in history saw a larger percentage of the world's population rush into urban areas than the twenty-five years between 1990 and 2015.[36] The result was a net increase in global wealth, but it was unevenly distributed. In fact, a large portion of urban immigrants faced extreme poverty and had to survive dire ecological and living conditions. For instance, 62% of urban dwellers in Bangladesh ended up in slums, 41% in the Philippines, and 29% in both India and China.[37] Furthermore, families were reconfigured. Many children, for example, were placed with grandparents or extended family members in the countryside, because their parents left to find a job in the city, where they would be required to work 12-hour shifts six days a week and live on the factory grounds. The new economy introduced elements of chaos.

Yet when *The World is Flat*, as Thomas Friedman described the result of late twentieth-century globalization, it could hardly be anything else but disruptive. Suddenly, people, ideas, and capital moved almost instantly around the world, unencumbered by barriers.[38]

Nazarenes, like everyone else, adjusted and tried to capitalize on these changes. With the Iron and Bamboo Curtains down, or at least permeable, Nazarene missionaries burst into new spaces. They almost doubled the number of countries in which they operated between 1989 and 2015. Thus, the early missiology of expansionism persisted. So did the Church's push for self-sufficiency. In fact, the two became entangled. If the Church of the Nazarene was going to seize the opportunities presented to it, it would need more resources. One way to fund those was to cut

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[35] Elizabeth Cocoran, "Dell moves outsources jobs back to U.S. shores," NBC News, April 28, 2004, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna4853511, accessed December 30, 2025; Bobby Allyn, "Apple, revived years ago by doing business in China, may have to cut that dependence," *Morning Edition*, National Public Radio, March 7, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/02/23/1158935125/apple-revived-years-ago-by-doing-business-in-china-may-have-to-cut-that-dependen, accessed December 30, 2025; "Case Study, Intel," European Partnership for Responsible Minerals, January 31, 2020, https://europeanpartnership-responsibleminerals.eu/blog/view/cbad34e8-cfcb-4bc7-a166-b1829c717a36/case-study-intel, accessed December 30, 2025.

[36] United Nations, "Urban population (% of total population)," World Bank Group, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS, accessed January 9, 2026. It was also during this boom phase when, in 2009, a new urban threshold was crossed. More people now lived in cities than outside of them. See: "Sustainable Development: 70 years of urban growth in 1 infographic," World Economic Forum, September 3, 2019, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2019/09/mapped-the-dramatic-global-rise-of-urbanization-1950-2020/, accessed January 9, 2026.

[37] Kanskesu Jayanthakumaran, et al., *Internal Migration, Urbanization, and Poverty in Asia* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2019), 2.

[38] Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of The Twenty-First Century*, third edition (New York: Frarrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

costs. The Department of World Mission administered everything in the Church of the Nazarene outside of the U.S. and Canada until 2009. To save money, the Department outsourced some of its work to a Call Center in the Philippines and hired "Regional missionaries" for a fraction of the cost of their American counterparts. However, the primary emphasis was on making Districts self-sufficient, so the expenses of those operations could be transferred to new ventures. The missiological commitments of previous generations, therefore, did not disappear.

New mission possibilities, though, were added. In particular, the number of short-term volunteer missionaries multiplied. The Church of the Nazarene's Work & Witness program, for example, did not start in 1989, but it certainly benefited from the new world order. Costs of international travel dropped, communication with sites became fast and direct via the Internet, and individuals no longer had to rely on Headquarters to find partners.[39] Anyone with about $1,000 could become a missionary, at least for two weeks.

Whereas previously, the Church of the Nazarene had emphasized the need for professional missionaries to equip local leadership, now missions were democratized: they were for all. In fact, in 2001, the General Superintendents enshrined that idea in the denomination's three core values. Who are Nazarenes? "We are a sent people, responding to the call of Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to go into all the world, witnessing to the Lordship of Christ and participating with God in the building of the Church and the extension of His kingdom."[40] Every Nazarene was sent; they were all to be missionaries.

But what were they to do? For some, their secular professions were gateways to new possibilities in missions as videographers, accountants, and even ship captains. For the vast majority of American Nazarenes, though, missions no longer required specialized skills, but only the time and willingness to respond to tangible needs. The economic disruption of the era was not confined to places outside of the United States. As factories moved offshore, many communities in the U.S. saw populations drop, poverty spike, and drug abuse soar. Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, Inc. was established in 1990 and became the denomination's arm to respond to such crises. NCM Centers sprang up in churches to provide food, housing, or other necessities to vulnerable populations. Meanwhile, churches began to take youth groups or other teams to rural areas in the U.S. on Short-Term Missions trips to paint homes, rebuild porches, or help in other ways. Internationally, the situation was similar. Those who had, provided for those who had not. NCM made it possible to sponsor a child, fund a microenterprise, or purchase a goat for a poor family.[41] Anyone could join a Work & Witness team to build a seminary dorm or

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[39] As an example of falling travel prices, air travel was almost 10 times cheaper in 2015 than it was in 1941. Closer to the time under discussion, the domestic price of air travel dropped 40% between 1990 and 2015. As prices were cut, travelers multiplied. In 2000, planes carried 1.6 billion passengers; that grew to 2.1 billion in 2005, and by 2015 3.5 billion people flew in one year. See: Marisa Garcia, "Then vs. Now: The Evolution of Airfare Costs Over the Years," *Travel + Leisure*, https://www.travelandleisure.com/airlines-airports/history-of-flight-costs, updated November 6, 2025, accessed January 10, 2026.

[40] *Core Values: Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City, MO: Nazarene Publishing House, 2001).

[41] While the U.S. exported neoliberalism, NCM worked to bandage the harm done. In that sense, the Church of the Nazarene re-enacted what the Japanese missionary, Kosuke Koyama, had observed in modern mission history. Westerners hurt others with their guns and economics, but then they tried to heal

lead a children's outreach. None of these activities required mastery of specific skills, just an openness to give of one's time.

The result was a new layer of American Nazarene missiology. Everyone was to be involved in God's mission. They did that primarily through Short-Term Missions and Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, wherein they could meet the needs of others. The Other, in this case, is defined largely as someone who lacked something tangible: food, a building, or some other kind of material resource.

American Polarization and a Nazarene Missiology of Homogenization, 2015-Present

The presidential election of 2016 revealed that the United States was deeply divided. Hillary Clinton won the most votes, but her opponent, Donald Trump, won the Electoral College. The split was emblematic of what social scientists had been observing. The United States of America was increasingly the Divided States of America. It was not that voters had made the election so close—that was common enough, but they were now so polarized that they had virtually no interaction with the half of the population that thought differently than themselves. Social media posts and re-posts, for instance, demonstrated that liberals and conservatives lived in two radically different worlds that were almost perfectly isolated from one another.[42] The country had entered echo chambers, where people only heard from others who thought, acted, and lived like they did.

Polarization often sounds and acts belligerent. It denigrates the Other. As an expression of his America First policy, for example, President Trump described Haiti, El Salvador, and African countries as "sh***ole" nations.[43] He worked to block citizens of those countries from entering the U.S. during his first presidency and has sought to purge them from the U.S. during his second presidency. In the spirit of American polarization, Trump has intensified the sense of "us"—real Americans—versus "them"—the contaminating Other.

On the surface, it appears that the Church of the Nazarene has not been pulled into this same divisive vortex. General Superintendents have not mocked other nations or denominations. There is no equivalent to America First in Nazarene missiology. On the contrary, the Church of the Nazarene has continued to invest and spread into nine new countries in the last decade. Yet signs exist that the Church of the Nazarene is not immune to polarization.

Polarization is an example of extreme "othering." It is aggressive, but its ultimate goal is not to fight. The aim is to create purity: a group of people who are alike. In that sense, the Church of the Nazarene in the United States may not need to spend much time on the attack. If voter behavior has become, as Robert Putnam argues, not just a reflection of someone's politics

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those they wounded with the ointment of the gospel. See: Kosake Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Boos, 1974).

[42] Jay J. Van Bavel, et al, "How Social Media Shapes Polarization," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 21, No. 11 (November 2021): 915.

[43] Ali Vitali, Kasie Hunt, and Frank Thorp V, "Trump referred to Haiti and African nations as 'shithole' countries," January 11, 2018, NBC News, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-referred-haiti-african-countries-shithole-nations-n836946, accessed January 17, 2026. The word used by Trump was a profanity, a derogatory vulgarity.

but also one's spiritual and moral values, then the Church of the Nazarene is already remarkably homogenous.[44] According to the Pew Research Center, no Christian group in the United States is more likely to vote Republican than the Church of the Nazarene.[45] That does not mean the denomination has not been policing its boundaries or working to expunge contaminants. The recent effort to identify and expel clergy with different views on human sexuality suggests a desire to maintain a denominational echo chamber.

In missions, polarization has not translated into a missiology of militarization or attacks on the Other. Fighting, after all, is just the means of polarization; the end is homogenization. That is where Nazarene missiology has been inclined to go. A missiology of homogenization is witnessed wherever Nazarenes withdraw from "them"—the people unlike "us." Internationally, almost every paid Nazarene missionary sent from the United States now works in an administrative support role. What does that look like? Often, it means that American missionaries have worked in Regional Offices that are staffed almost exclusively by other Americans. Their task is to assist with one another. Crossing boundaries to reach the non-Americans is an add-on, something only to be done if a missionary has the time and interest. Their focus is administrative—to keep the denomination functional across Regions—and they can do that from within an American bubble. Domestically, a similar narrowing can be observed. Of course, multicultural ministries still exist, but the denomination has taken to promoting such things as Cowboy churches and Biker ministries as pathways to success. Narrower and narrower audiences are identified, because the missiological message has become: success comes through finding people who are alike, who enjoy the same activities, or share the same values as you do.[46] What is not said but implied is to avoid the Other—the Other being anyone with whom you do not have an affinity.

The Need for a Different Missiological Option

Over the last 125 years, it can be argued that American Nazarene missiology sometimes devolved into little more than Americanism. How often and to what extent is a question open for debate, but to pursue that would prevent us from exploring the more pressing issue. Right now, the urgent question is: How can our present practices reflect the gospel with greater clarity? To

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[44] Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

[45] Michael Lipka, "U.S. religious groups and their political leanings," Pew Research Center, February 23, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/02/23/u-s-religious-groups-and-their-political-leanings/, accessed January 17, 2026.

[46] In some ways, this is just another example of Donald McGavran's Homogenous Unit Principle, which he introduced in 1955 through his book *Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* and then popularized through the Church Growth Movement in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. However, what is happening now is different in two respects. First, the units of homogenization are narrower. This is no longer about people groups as defined by language or ethnicity, but slices of sub-groups of sub-groups. Second, the context has shifted. Polarization was not pushing people apart in the same way as in, say 1980, at the tail end of the Church Growth Movement. At that time, Evangelicalism was still as likely to speak to and for Democrats as it did Republicans. That is no longer the case. In the current context, to promote homogenization is to play into anxieties and demonization that accompanies polarization. See: Ryan P. Burge, *The Vanishing Church: How the Hollowing Out of Moderate Congregations is Hurting Democracy, Faith, and Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2025), 19.

that end, we urge Nazarenes to maintain a critical distance from the current pressures of polarization and the missiology of homogenization. Those impulses may be consistent with the cultural milieu, but they are at odds with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is not a moment for withdrawal, but new contact. The number of Americans who say that they never attend church services grew from forty-five million in 2008 to eighty-five million in 2022.[47] Data scientist Ryan Burge states that this is not simply a problem with the church or the people; it is a problem of American society. The U.S. is dividing, and differences are not tolerated.[48] Contact zones between believers and unbelievers are disappearing. But even among Christians, differences are pushing people apart. In a July 2023 interview with the author, the Director of the Rural Church Network observed that after the U.S. government temporarily suspended worship services due to COVID-19, many Christians never returned to their home churches. They re-sorted themselves not according to theology, polity, or tradition, but on a new basis: which churches required masks and which did not.[49] The result is that churches in which people of differing political perspectives can worship together are vanishing. Those on each side of the political divide are "convinced that anyone who votes for a Democrat is a baby killer, while [those on the other side believe] anyone who supports a Republican must be a racist."[50] Churches are becoming echo chambers in which members only worship with those who share their social values. The Lord's table, however, placed in the center of their sanctuaries, insists on something else. Jesus invites people from different religious, economic, ethnic, and political backgrounds to recognize their shared salvation, sanctification, and unity in Him.

A Missiology of Common Mission

What kind of missiology would lead Nazarenes in the United States beyond the patterns of othering that dominate at this present historical moment and toward a more faithful practice of mission? We propose a missiology of common mission. Common mission is the shared participation of all parties in God's redemptive work. Grounded in prevenient grace and oriented toward sanctification, common mission assumes that the Holy Spirit is already at work on every side of the encounter. Therefore, strategy, leadership, and discernment can be undertaken together rather than unilaterally. Mission is not something *done to* others, but something *lived with* others in response to God's prior and ongoing activity.

Common mission is the fruit of holy mutuality, relationships in which all parties are simultaneously recipients and witnesses of grace. It is always relational at its core, but it is also grounded in theological and structural convictions.

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[47] Jim Davis and Michael Graham, with Ryan P. Burge, *The Great Dechurching: Why are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* (Zondervan, 2023), xxii.

[48] Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

[49] Steve McVey in conversation with the author, July 2023.

[50] Ryan P. Burge, *The Vanishing Church: How the Hollowing Out of Moderate Congregations Is Hurting Democracy, Faith, and Us* (Brazos Press, January 13, 2026), 8.

Theological Roots

A missiology of common mission is rooted in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition. Its theological coherence emerges from three convictions: prevenient grace, social holiness, and shared dignity in the *Imago Dei*.

1. Prevenient Grace as the Ground of Common Mission

Common mission begins with the conviction that God's grace always precedes the church's mission. Prevenient grace unsettles any assumption that missionaries or sending churches carry God into otherwise godless spaces. Mission, therefore, is first an act of discernment—attending to, naming, and joining the work of the Holy Spirit who is already active within any community.

This posture reframes difference not as a deficiency but as a locus of divine activity. New communities are approached by Christians as neighbors who are already encountering grace, not as problems to be solved or corrected. Common mission thus resists othering because it refuses to define persons primarily by what they lack. Instead, it recognizes them as (perhaps surprising) co-participants in God's redemptive work.

In this way, the gospel is not given as "us" delivering it to "them." Instead, the gospel becomes shared good news, as all sides in the encounter are drawn more fully into the likeness of Christ through a common pilgrimage with Him.

2. Social Holiness as the Shape of Common Mission

Within the Wesleyan tradition, holiness is never merely personal or inward. It is expressed through restored relationships marked by love, justice, and shared accountability. John Wesley's insistence that there is "no holiness but social holiness" underscores that sanctification unfolds within communities of mutual influence.

Common mission extends this conviction to missiology. Growth in grace occurs on all sides of mission encounters. Missionaries, congregations, and partner communities alike are formed—and reformed—through their relationships with one another. Othering interrupts this process by freezing roles and foreclosing the possibility of reciprocal sanctification.

3. Shared Agency as the Practice of Common Mission

Common mission affirms the full dignity and agency of all persons as bearers of the image of God. This theological claim resists paternalistic or extractive forms of mission in which one group permanently acts while another always receives. Instead, agency is shared, discernment is communal, and leadership emerges contextually.

Such a framework does not deny differences in resources, training, or access to power. Rather, it insists that these differences must be held within relationships of accountability and humility, lest they calcify into structures of domination.

Structural Commitments

If common mission is more than aspirational, it must be embodied in structures. These structures will strengthen reciprocity, accountability, and what is measured as a sign of missional faithfulness.

1. Common Mission Requires Reciprocal Participation

Mission structures must be designed to enable mutual contribution and shared decision-making. This includes the collaborative discernment of mission goals, shared authority over resources and strategies, and long-term relationships that resist transactional engagement.

Short-term mission practices, especially, must be evaluated not by the activities or accomplishments of the sending group but by the depth of mutual relationship and the extent to which the host's agency is strengthened.

2. Common Mission Demands Accountable Power

Common mission requires an intentional reconfiguration of power. Authority is exercised for edification rather than control and is continually subjected to communal discernment. Leadership within mission is understood as formative and accountable, not unilateral.

Where othering births structural sin, common mission seeks structural repentance. It purposefully redesigns systems that normalize inequality or silence marginalized voices.

3. Common Mission Measures Faithfulness through Mutual Transformation

Success in mission is not measured simply by expansion, efficiency, or visibility but ultimately by evidence of shared transformation. The question is not only "What was accomplished?" but also, "Who was changed?" Holy mutuality expects that all participants—senders and receivers alike—will be reshaped in their understanding of God, neighbor, and self.

Common Mission as a Missiology of Holy Mutuality and a Resistance to Othering

In this particular moment, shaped by polarization and ecclesiastical homogenization, common mission functions as a theological counter-practice to othering. Where othering organizes mission around distance—carefully separating "us" from "them"—common mission reveals nearness by pointing out how all can participate in the work of God. Othering stabilizes roles: some of us send, they receive; some of us lead, they follow; some of us possess theological clarity, they await correction. Common mission, however, unsettles these fixed arrangements. Because prevenient grace precedes every missionary encounter, no party stands outside of grace, and no community can be the object of another's initiative. Common mission is not a site of asymmetrical action, but reciprocal transformation.

Structurally, common mission resists the consolidation of power. It calls the church to organize strategy, leadership, and discernment collaboratively, even when differences in resources or access to influence remain real. Authority is exercised under accountability, and

agency is shared in ways that reflect the dignity of the *Imago Dei*. Where othering legitimizes hierarchy, common mission insists on shared agency under grace.

Ecclesiologically, this vision challenges contemporary patterns of ideological sorting and cultural sameness. The church does not bear witness by retreating into homogeneity but by embodying disciplined togetherness across difference. At the Eucharistic table especially, believers enact the logic of common mission: all come as recipients of grace; all are sent as participants in Christ's reconciling work.

Common mission, therefore, does more than critique distortions in American Nazarene missiology. It offers a constructive path forward rooted in Wesleyan-Holiness theology. Mission is reclaimed as a shared pilgrimage in which holiness is not presumed to reside with "us" and not "them." Mission becomes, instead, a site where holiness is pursued together, so love is perfected not in separation from others but in communion with them.