

THE RENEWAL OF THE SENDING CHURCH

Grant Zweigle, Nazarene Global Missions

Introduction

These are exciting days for the global mission of the Church of the Nazarene. As of 2025, there were 467 Nazarene missionaries coming from 64 different countries of origin serving in 88 different countries. The global church stands in a moment of extraordinary opportunity to participate in the global mission of the denomination, which we trust is a participation in the *missio Dei*.

The Church of the Nazarene has historically understood missions as an outward movement, sending missionaries across oceans, borders, and cultures, to make Christlike disciples in the nations. That legacy remains vital, but the landscape of global missions has expanded. The recognition of vibrant Christian communities globally, the emergence of post-Christian societies in the West, and the increasing complexity of cultural identities in every nation have reframed the conversation. Mission is no longer a one-directional endeavor from the West to the rest of the world; it is now a polycentric reality, with churches from each of the 165 world areas where the Church of the Nazarene is present participating in God’s redemptive work at home and abroad. As Samuel Escobar reminds us, “Mission today is from everywhere to everywhere.”¹

The reorientation of the global mission presents unique challenges for those called to be missionaries with the Church of the Nazarene. A new Nazarene missionary shared with me the difficulty faced as the first missionary sent from a country that had only received missionaries in the past. The new missionary was asked by the District Superintendent to be the speaker at a missions service at a local church in their home country. When the missionary and District Superintendent arrived at the church, the pastor asked the District Superintendent, “Where is the missionary?” This pastor did not hide his disappointment that the missionary was not from the United States. Another new Nazarene missionary, the first from their country of origin, faced significant opposition when introduced at the district assembly. Pastors turned their backs on the missionary and refused to even acknowledge their presence.

The reasons for these responses are certainly varied and complex. But perhaps at the heart of the matter is a fundamental misunderstanding of the missionary nature of the church, whether that church is in the West, East, North, or South. This misunderstanding is described by Michael Goheen as the separation of church and mission in the modern missionary movement:

In the thinking of many Christians, the words “church” and “mission” designate two different bodies. A “mission” describes a society responsible for the propagation of the gospel [oversees]. The “church,” however, is a society devoted to worship and the nurture of its members [at home]. The church in the West supports mission as a good cause in

¹ Samuel Escobar, *A Time for Mission: The Challenge for Global Christianity* (Langham Global Library, 2013), 45.

other parts of the world. The church in the non-West is where converts of mission activity are passed on for safekeeping.²

How can this separation of church and missions be overcome? How can churches that have historically been missions receiving churches discover and embrace their unique participation in the *missio Dei* both at home and abroad? How can God-called people in every one of the 165 world areas where the Church of the Nazarene is located be identified, prepared, supported, and sent as Nazarene missionaries? Effective global missions engagement begins with the renewal of the sending church, which must reorient its ecclesial life around the *missio Dei*, learn and apply missiological principles and practices in the context of the local church, and form missionary disciples whose lives bear loving witness to God's reign in the places they live, work, play, and pray.

Participation in the Mission of God

At the heart of this renewal is a theological reorientation around the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. The Church does not possess mission as a program or strategy; it participates in mission as the very life of God extended into the world. As David Bosch wrote, "Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God."³ This reframing shifts the focus from institutional expansion or member conservation to faithful missional presence. The Church is not the originator of mission but its witness, servant, and local presence. This is not a diminishment of the Church's role, but a deepening of its vocation.

It is widely recognized that *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (1998) helped ignite the missional church conversation in the United States and Canada. *Missional Church* introduced a theological vision that invited ordinary pastors and laypeople to recover a central biblical truth: that God is a missionary God, and the church is a sent people. The contributors were shaped profoundly by the influence of British missionary and missiologist Lesslie Newbigin.

Newbigin, who served much of his ministry in India, returned to the United Kingdom to find that his homeland had become a mission field of its own. The society that once assumed a Christian identity had become, in his words, "post-Christian, and in many ways, anti-Christian."⁴ This realization compelled him to call the Western church to rediscover its missionary vocation, to see itself not as the center of mission but as a participant in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God.

He described the kind of community needed for this new era as a *missionary congregation*:

It will be a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood. It will be the church for the specific place where it lives, not the

² Michael W. Goheen, "'As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You': Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology," *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 362 (2002): 366.

³ David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991), 390.

⁴ Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 3.

church for those who wish to be members of it—or, rather, it will be for them insofar as they are willing to be *for* the wider community.⁵

Newbigin’s vision captured the imagination of pastors, theologians, and lay leaders who longed to join in with what God was already doing in their local contexts. As Guder summarized, “Newbigin and others have helped us to see that God’s mission is calling and sending us, the church of Jesus Christ, to be a missionary church in our own societies, in the cultures in which we find ourselves.”⁶

In the years since that publication, *missional* has become a familiar word, appearing in book titles, conference themes, and church strategies around the world. Yet in some uses, it has been reduced to a label attached to outreach programs, techniques for evangelism, congregational management practices, and church growth. When that happens, we risk losing sight of Newbigin’s deeper challenge: to rediscover the nature of the church as *God’s sent people*, called to embody and announce the gospel contextually in every culture.

The word *missional* is a summons to a new way of being in the world, one of humility, listening, service, and participation in the life of God already at work in the world. A missional church discerns what God is doing in the world and actively seeks to discover how they can participate. As Alan Roxburgh writes, “The most crucial missional practice is a recovery, confession, and praxis of God as the active agent in our world. Our focus must turn, again, to God’s agency.”⁷

This insight speaks not only to Western congregations but to the *global church*. Around the world today, God is raising up communities of believers in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Eurasia, and the Pacific who are sending cross-cultural missionaries, some for the first time, and discovering ways to participate in God’s mission where they are located. The *missio Dei* does not originate in any people, nation, or denomination. It begins in the heart of God, flows through the life of the Son, and is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Every church, regardless of geography or history, is both a *sent* and a *sending* community.

For the global church, this vision offers both a challenge and an invitation. The challenge is to resist the temptation to replicate Western models of mission or church administration that prioritize institutional preservation, cater to existing members, protect resources, and maintain the status quo, mistaking such practices for genuine missional faithfulness.

The invitation, wherever the Church of the Nazarene finds itself today, whether in Lagos or Lima, Manila or Manchester, or in Nairobi or Nashville, is to ask again and again, *What is God doing here?* And, *How may we join God’s mission at home and abroad?* Exploring and answering these questions, and mobilizing resources and people in response, is the faith venture that our missional God invites all Nazarenes everywhere to participate in.

⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 229.

⁶ Guder and Barrett, *Missional Church*, 5.

⁷ Alan Roxburgh, “Practices of a Missional People,” *Journal of Missional Practice*, August 2017, 3.

Missiological Principles and Practices

In order to answer these questions, churches must learn and apply missiological principles and practices in the context and cultures where congregations and congregants are geographically located. What is meant by *missiological* here? David Bosch argues that within the context of theological disciplines,

missiology acts as a gadfly in the house of theology, creating unrest and resisting complacency, opposing every ecclesiastical impulse to self-preservation, every desire to stay what we are, every inclination toward provincialism and parochialism, every fragmentation of humanity into regional or ideological blocs, every exploitation of some sectors of humanity by the powerful, every religious, ideological, or cultural imperialism, and every exaltation of the self-sufficiency of the individual over other people or over other parts of creation.⁸

This understanding of missiology provides an opportunity for global Churches of the Nazarene to question, and perhaps even free themselves, from the constraints of Western theological constructs, Western principles and practices of ministry, and Western methodologies and strategies that tend toward ecclesiocentrism, congregational management, attractional programming, and the conservation of resources. The racially and economically segregated, program-driven, drive-in, disincarnated churches of North America are to be resisted, not emulated, globally. Missiological principles and practices can aid in that resistance.

In his book *Recovering the Full Mission of God*, Dean Flemming suggests missiological practices for local churches patterned after the radical earthly mission of Jesus. Such a mission will be: Christ-centered; holistic; Kingdom-oriented; motivated by love and compassion; inclusive and boundary breaking; confrontational; context-specific and flexible; empowered by the Spirit, grounded in prayer; and transforming.⁹

The ensuing discussion will concentrate on three of these interrelated missiological practices that can help a church discern its participation in the mission of God in their community: *holistic*; *inclusive and boundary breaking*; and *context-specific and flexible*. Together, these practices demonstrate how the church can embody the life and mission of Jesus in ways that are faithful to the gospel, challenging to the status quo, and responsive to the realities of the context and culture.

Holistic

To embody a mission that is holistic, the church must recognize that the gospel addresses every dimension of human existence: spiritual, relational, cultural, social, economic, political, ecological, and religious. The Church of the Nazarene describes the holistic aspect of its global mission in its statement of method: “Global Missions centers around compassion, evangelism, and education. Nazarene missionaries partner with local ministers and lay leaders to bring

⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 496.

⁹ Dean Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God: A Biblical Perspective on Being, Doing and Telling* (IVP Academic, 2013), 83–84.

restoration, share the Gospel, and build sustainability within the community.”¹⁰ This statement points the mission of the church in a holistic direction. But these methods of mission are not just for Nazarene missionaries.

Holistic mission challenges the bifurcation of spiritual concerns from physical concerns, which is a common malfunction in Christian theology and practice. In his book *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation and Mission*, Michael Gorman describes what he calls “inappropriate binaries”, or “false either-or’s” that hinder the church’s participation in the mission of God. These include the following: “spirituality versus social justice; evangelism versus peacemaking; pastoral care versus mission work; worship (or Christian education) versus outreach; the ‘vertical’ dimension of salvation versus the ‘horizontal’ dimension of salvation; and so on.”¹¹

Holistic mission removes these “inappropriate binaries” and performs Jesus’ mission of being, doing, and telling “like instruments in a classical trio, playing together in perfect harmony.”¹² Embracing this missiological principle would help a church discover what God is doing in every aspect of life in their local community and develop practical responses that address the whole person, the whole community, the whole environment, and call forth the gifts and talents of the whole people in response.

Inclusive and Boundary Breaking

The story of the cultural and geographical expansion of the church in the book of Acts is a story of inclusivity and boundary breaking. From Philip befriending an Ethiopian eunuch, to Peter accepting an invitation to the home of a Roman centurion, to Paul joining a gathering of gentile women by the river outside the city gates of Philippi, the Spirit continually pushes the church to cross boundaries in order to draw people into the mission of God who were excluded and outside of the conventional religious boundaries of the early Jewish-Christian community.

The missiological challenge to the early church is expressed by Willie Jennings in his commentary on the book of Acts, where he writes:

The deepest reality of life in the Spirit depicted in the book of Acts is that the disciples of Jesus rarely, if ever, go where they want to go or to whom they would want to go. Indeed the Spirit seems to always be pressing the disciples to go to those to whom they would in fact strongly prefer never to share space, or a meal, and definitely not life together. Yet it is precisely this prodding to be boundary-crossing and border-transgressing that marks the presence of the Spirit of God.¹³

¹⁰ “Global Missions,” *Church of the Nazarene*, n.d., accessed November 13, 2025, <https://nazarene.org/global-missions/>.

¹¹ Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Eerdmans, 2015), 303.

¹² Flemming, *Recovering the Full Mission of God*, 83.

¹³ Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 11.

A church that asks, “What is God doing in our community?” commits to joining God there, refusing to set limits or place boundaries on where and to whom the Spirit sends them. Such a church discovers their participation in the mission of God in and among people who are likely to be resistant or uninterested in an invitation to a church program, church service, or religious activity. This practice is vital to the ongoing renewal of the mission of the church in post-Christian societies in the West.

I live in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, a city where less than 5% of residents are meaningfully connected to a local church. In their book *Blessed are the Undone: Testimonies of the Quiet Deconstruction of Faith in Canada*, authors Bick and Schuurman observe that, “the historic privilege and prestige of Christianity in English Canada is met with disdain, even hostility.”¹⁴ Between 1985 and 2019, the share of people who reported attending a group religious activity across Canada at least once a month fell by almost half, from 43% to 23%.¹⁵ Neil Elliot, the Anglican Church of Canada’s statistics and research officer, projects that the Anglican Church in Canada will run out of members completely by 2040.¹⁶

While it may not be possible to reverse these trends, the missiological questions for Canadian Nazarenes could be: *What is God doing here? What ecclesiastical impulses to self-preservation need to be named and repented of in the Church of the Nazarene in Canada? What cultural compulsions and preferences among Nazarene Christians are barriers to deep friendships with those outside the Christian community? Where is God at work outside of the Church of the Nazarene, and how could we join God there?* These questions can be asked in every Nazarene church and on every district, field, and region globally.

Context-Specific and Flexible

The ways a local church participates in the holistic, inclusive, and boundary breaking mission of God in their community will vary depending on the culture and context. The missiological principle of contextualization invites the church to ensure that the message and methods of Christian ministry are both faithful to Scripture and comprehensible within the cultural context. This calls the church to be incarnational, which includes a willingness “to work within whatever condition a culture is in, regardless of how unsophisticated or corrupt it may appear.”¹⁷

This is no easy task, as Darrell Whiteman explains:

¹⁴ Angela Reitsma Bick et al., *Blessed Are the Undone: Testimonies of the Quiet Deconstruction of Faith in Canada* (New Leaf Network Press, 2024), 21.

¹⁵ Statistics Canada Government of Canada, “The Daily — Study: Religiosity in Canada and Its Evolution from 1985 to 2019,” October 28, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/211028/dq211028b-eng.htm>.

¹⁶ “‘Gone by 2040’: Why Some Religions Are Declining in Canada Faster than Ever - National | Globalnews.ca,” Global News, accessed November 12, 2025, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8471086/religion-decline-canada/>.

¹⁷ Darrell Whiteman and Miriam Adeney, *Crossing Cultures with the Gospel: Anthropological Wisdom for Effective Christian Witness* (Baker Academic, 2024), 62.

The incarnation as a model for mission means we must give up our own cultural compulsions and preferences. We do not insist that the expression of the gospel in another culture must be the same as it is in our own. This is so hard to do because we truly believe we have the right interpretation of Scripture, the correct theology, and the best way of being church.¹⁸

What abilities would pastors and congregants need to gain in order to do this? Duane Elmer calls the church to cross-cultural servanthood in order to serve the world in Christlike humility. Elmer frames incarnational servanthood as a learned posture composed of relational capacities rather than merely a personality trait. He emphasizes a sequence of relational moves such as *openness*, welcoming and making others feel safe; *acceptance*, not forcing one's cultural norms or preferences on others; *trust*, earned over time through consistent behavior; *learning*, humble listening and cultural learning; and *understanding*, discerning the values behind behavior. Practically, he urges Christians to replace quick judgments and culturally-assumed ways of helping others or meeting needs with patient relationship-building and culturally appropriate service.¹⁹

With these abilities, churches could find new and creative ways to participate in the mission of God for the holistic healing of their communities in ways that are context-specific and flexible. The healing would be reciprocal, as practicing these abilities holds the potential for churches to receive healing from those among whom they love, live, and serve. This missiological practice paves the way for churches to turn away from maintenance toward participation in God's mission and discover what God is doing in their communities and among their diverse neighbors.

Forming Missionary Disciples

Churches that reorient ecclesial life around the *missio Dei* by learning and applying missiological principles and practices in their local context have the potential to become communities that form missionary disciples who are for the life of their community, bearing witness to God's reign in their everyday relationships, where they work, live, play, and pray. Missionary disciples who sense a call to go as cross-cultural missionaries will be well on their way in being prepared for missionary service, and such churches will readily support and send those who are called as part of their participation in the global mission of God.

We see this in the church in Antioch, a church planted by boundary crossing missionary disciples who lived among their Greek neighbors, incarnating and contextualizing the Gospel in ways that were relatable and comprehensible in that urban, multicultural city. It was in the context of the missionary congregation in Antioch that the Spirit said to the church in Acts 13:2: "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." This missionary congregation joyfully embraced their calling, sending Barnabas and Saul with their blessing and support.

¹⁸ Whiteman and Adeney, *Crossing Cultures with the Gospel*, 65.

¹⁹ Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility* (IVP, 2009).

At a basic level, a missionary disciple is someone who is able to build deep friendships across cultural boundaries as a witness to the loving friendship of God.²⁰ The church in Antioch was a multicultural, multilingual, and economically diverse congregation. It is easy to imagine that the ability to build deep friendships across cultural differences in the church in Antioch, as well as build friendships and bear witness to the loving friendship of God among their neighbors, prepared Barnabas and Saul for their cross-cultural missionary work abroad.

What are some characteristics of cross-cultural friendships that can be formed in missionary disciples? Cross-cultural friendships are: *intentional*, seeking people of other cultures as friends; *proximate*, living near and among people of other cultures; *celebratory*, looking for and celebrating common humanness; *cross economic classes*, closing the divide between rich and poor; *vulnerable*, willingness to expose needs and weaknesses, sharing joys and sorrows, giving and receiving from one another; *selective*, civil to all, friendly with many, and intimate with a few; *flexible*, forming friendships in different ways based on personality, lifestyle, and role in society.²¹

Cross-cultural friendships are reflective of the friendship that God seeks with all people everywhere. God's motivation for seeking friendship with us is love. The whole of the Christian life can be summed up as love for God and neighbor. "The reign of God—expressed both in the Old Testament with its emphasis on God's election of Israel and the New Testament's teaching on the coming of Christ—is best understood as an expression of God's love," writes Scott Jones.²² Jones goes on to ask:

Why does God care enough to reign? Why does God announce the coming of that reign in the person of Jesus? Why does Christ die for the redemption of the world? Why does God guarantee the fulfillment of all these promises in a new heaven and new earth? The answer to all these and other fundamental questions lies in God's essence, which is love. God creates, redeems, and saves the world because God is love. God loves the world.²³

The God of love is a missionary God. Missionary disciples are those who, in love, build cross-cultural friendships and, by doing so, participate in the loving mission of God. This, then, is the truest sense of what it means to be a Christlike disciple among the nations, a people who love as God loves.

This kind of love is not natural, but divine. This kind of love is wrought in the heart by the power and renewing presence of the Holy Spirit. One might say that the renewal of the heart in the image of God, so that all of our relationships are characterized by love, is therefore central to the mission of the church.²⁴ In the Church of the Nazarene, the Holy Spirit's work of heart

²⁰ See Whiteman and Adeney, *Crossing Cultures with the Gospel*, 210–25, for the importance of cross-cultural bonding, or friendship.

²¹ Whiteman and Adeney, *Crossing Cultures with the Gospel*, 223.

²² Scott J Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Witness and Discipleship* (Abingdon Press, 2003), 33.

²³ Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor*, 33.

²⁴ See Gregory S. Clapper, *The Renewal of the Heart Is the Mission of the Church: Wesley's Heart Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010); Gregory S. Clapper, *As If the Heart Mattered: A Wesleyan Spirituality* (Wipf & Stock, 2014).

renewal that empowers us to love God and others is one way of describing what it means to be entirely sanctified. It would seem appropriate, therefore, for Churches of the Nazarene all around the world to make Christlike or missionary disciples among the nations who are adept at building loving friendships with their neighbors in ways that are contextually appropriate, flexible, and attentive to the whole person and the whole community where they live as an outward expression of the inward work of entire sanctification.²⁵

Conclusion

The renewal of the global church for effective global mission engagement begins not at the borders of distant nations but within the very life of the local congregation. As this paper has argued, the Church of the Nazarene stands in a moment of profound opportunity. Yet seizing that opportunity requires rediscovering our identity as a people sent by a missionary God. Reorienting ecclesial life around the *missio Dei* calls churches everywhere to move beyond inherited assumptions that separate church from mission and to embrace their vocation as communities that participate in God's redemptive work locally and globally.

Such renewal requires more than theological affirmation; it demands the disciplined practice of missiology within the particularities of local culture. Holistic mission invites congregations to reject false binaries that separate spiritual and social concerns. Inclusive and boundary-breaking mission pushes believers across cultural, economic, and social divides toward unlikely friendships that witness to God's reconciling love. Context-specific and flexible mission calls the church to embody Christ incarnationally, setting aside cultural compulsions and learning to serve with humility. These practices cultivate congregations that not only discern what God is doing but also join God with creativity, courage, and sacrificial love.

When churches form disciples who live this way, missionary disciples shaped by cross-cultural friendship, attuned to God's activity, and grounded in the Spirit-filled love that reflects God's reign, they become communities capable of sending and supporting missionaries from every nation to every nation. Like the church in Antioch, they become places where the Spirit speaks clearly, where people are joyfully set apart for cross-cultural service, and where participation in global missions is not a program but a natural expression of congregational life.

The call before the global Church of the Nazarene, then, is both urgent and hopeful. In every congregation, district, field, and region, the invitation is the same: to rediscover who we are as God's sent people; to resist ecclesiastical self-preservation; to cross boundaries in love; and to commit ourselves to follow the Spirit's leading into the neighborhoods, workplaces, and nations to which we are sent.

²⁵ See Clapper, *As If the Heart Mattered*, 77–80, where he describes friendships that reaches out across our normal boundaries as a neglected expression of Christian holiness.

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