

MISSION: A LARGER DIMENSION FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

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Discussing the mission of the church can be a complex task, particularly given that it is a subject on which a great deal has been written across various contexts and eras of the church. In each of these instances, the primary objective has been to attain a proper understanding of the church's role in this world. This is entirely understandable, given that the Christian faith is considered missionary by nature; it regards all of humanity as the object of God's plan of salvation, and, furthermore, holds that the Kingdom of God is available to anyone who wishes to receive it (Bosch 2000).

Nevertheless, despite being a subject of great antiquity, it remains relevant, pertinent, and important—especially when we consider that, in practice, it is not yet fully understood, and when we take into account the limited vision and meager results seen in some local churches, where only a few carry out the work of mission.

The truth is that the church has a purpose to fulfill in whatever context it finds itself; otherwise, it would be an alien entity within its own community. It is therefore essential to adopt a broader perspective on the matter and to reflect upon key aspects that will undoubtedly foster a deeper understanding of the subject and lead to a more effective practice of mission.

Quite frequently, when a local church leader is asked whether they are fulfilling the church's mission, the response is: "We are preaching, evangelizing, and reaching souls." While this is indeed important, the answer remains incomplete. One approach that draws particular attention is the way René Padilla defines it:

The mission of the church is an extension of Jesus' mission. It is the manifestation, albeit incomplete, of the Kingdom of God, expressed through both proclamation and through action and social service.... As a community of the Kingdom, the church confesses and proclaims the Lord Jesus Christ. It also performs the good works that God has prepared in advance for it to do—works for which God created it in Christ Jesus. (Grellert, Myers, & Alpine, 1992, 23)

The church has the mission of proclaiming a message of hope and good news; this message also implicitly entails denouncing sin and wickedness. At the same time, it announces "that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:19–20).

The people of God are called to come out of the corruption that exists in the world and are simultaneously sent forth to proclaim the message of reconciliation. Thus, they live within the reality of this world, with its difficulties, problems, tensions, and challenges, yet they do not belong to this world; nevertheless, they are called to identify with the suffering, tribulations, and problems of its inhabitants, of whom we ourselves are a part. At the same time, they must not lose their identity as the people of God.

Thus, my proposal is to consider a broader dimension of the church's mission, specifically by taking into account the following perspectives: mission and identity, the fundamental emphasis of which is who we are as a church; mission and hope, the emphasis of

which is the proclamation of a message of hope in any context; and mission and service, the emphasis of which is what we do as the people of God.

Mission and Identification

“Church” is the term used to refer to the gathering of the saints or the assembly; however, the Apostle Paul employs various images to describe the church—among them, the family of God, the Bride, and the Body of Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, in addition to these images, which aptly describe what it means to be the church, the Apostle Peter uses the term “people of God.” First Peter 2:9–10 serves well as a guiding thread for reflecting upon the identity of the church and its mission:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may proclaim the virtues of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; you who once were not a people, but now are the people of God; who once had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.

The first thing one encounters here is that the church is the people of God—a people acquired or purchased by God himself. Meditating on this assertion brings to mind the nation of Israel when it was liberated from slavery in Egypt to march toward the Promised Land and fulfill God’s purpose as a nation. This narrative of Israel’s exodus from Egypt reminds us that the church is a people on the move, walking the path, and still in the process of formation, growing both in number and in character. It is a community of faith composed of men, women, children, and the elderly, a community from which no one should be excluded. It is scattered throughout this world, amidst diverse cultures and communities, yet simultaneously possesses its own distinct identity.

These very same people of God comprise various members, and the best way to describe this unique characteristic is through the imagery of a body, a powerful metaphor for unity and its vital importance to the mission. Viewing the church from this perspective reveals that each of its members possesses distinct functions and capabilities, bestowed upon them by the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit not only bestows gifts and capabilities but also dwells within this community, which God himself formed. The Holy Spirit is actively at work within the church, equipping its members and incorporating new believers; indeed, it is impossible to carry out the mission without his ministry.

When the church is united, it can make an impact in every sphere, both within its own ranks and in the world outside. This was, in fact, the very subject of Jesus’ prayer: he prayed that his disciples would be one, just as he and the Father are one, perfect in their unity, so that the world might recognize them as his true disciples and, in doing so, they might serve as a testimony to non-believers.

It is a “holy nation.” In this specific context, we must refer to the holiness of each individual believer, the work of sanctification taking place in their lives, but also to the holiness of the church as a collective body. It is highly significant that Ephesians 4:17–32 speaks of a “new life in Christ”; yet, it also serves as a resounding call to holiness for the people of God. All of this means that the entire congregation can be affected—positively or negatively—by the conduct of a particular member: the way they live, what they say, and how they relate to others. Furthermore, it implies that personal or individual holiness is also an expression of the community of believers—a holy people.

Our core values as Nazarenes summarize this aspect as follows:

God, who is holy, calls us to a life of holiness. We believe that the Holy Spirit desires to effect in us a second work of grace—known by various terms, including “entire sanctification” and “baptism with the Holy Spirit”—cleansing us from all sin; renewing us in the image of God; empowering us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves; and producing in us the character of Christ. Holiness in the lives of believers is most clearly understood as Christlikeness. (Church of the Nazarene, “Nazarene Essentials”)

Sanctification, as Article X of the *Manual of the Church of the Nazarene* aptly expresses, is distinct from mature character; that is to say, it does not affect our maturity of Christian character, though it certainly serves as an impetus for it. All of this contributes to our becoming Christlike disciples (Church of the Nazarene, *Manual* 2023).

How important is it to be Christlike in our Christian character?

A brief look at the history of the church around 300 AD helps answer that question. It is said that, by that date, approximately half of the urban population in certain Roman provinces had embraced the Christian faith. What influenced this growth? Historians suggest that it was not the miracles performed by itinerant evangelists, events that were common during that era. What drew the most attention at that time and in that context were the high ethical standards and the holiness inherent in the Christian faith; indeed, even their enemies remarked upon the extraordinary behavior of Christians, their exemplary conduct standing in stark contrast to the other religions of the time (Bosch 2000, 243).

To be Christ-like is to follow his example; he serves as the paradigm of character and holiness in daily life, and he is also the paradigm for the church’s mission. He fulfilled his mission of saving humanity through the mystery of his incarnation. This entailed becoming like humanity by identifying himself with humanity, beginning with his humble birth. Most Christians are aware of this truth; nevertheless, it is essential to reflect upon the context of political, economic, and social crisis into which Jesus was born. It was a time when the Jewish people were subject to the Roman Empire. Furthermore, we are told that he lived in Galilee, a region the Bible describes as a place of darkness, the shadow of death, and the lowest depths of social decay, inhabited by the most despised and lowly members of society. Yet, Jesus identified himself with these very people (Steuernagel 1992, 74).

What does “mission-identification” mean for the church in Cuba?

Our Cuban context is one of extreme poverty and hopelessness; literally, one might say, a place of shadows and death. People are emigrating in search of better life opportunities; we suffer from food and medicine shortages, and we face a political climate that is not entirely favorable. Added to this is a high degree of family disintegration and a high divorce rate.

For the Church of the Nazarene in Cuba to be a missionary church, one that truly identifies with its context, means that it welcomes everyone on equal terms. The Cuban church becomes the great family home that many lack, a place where the church offers compassion and affection to families in need.

In the face of the extreme poverty afflicting my country, and that of so many others, a mere mission statement is not enough; a multiplication of *diakonia* has become essential. There is a need for more disciples willing to place their talents and service at the disposal of others.

As previously noted, the church is a body into which the Holy Spirit has poured out gifts, and many laborers have been called to ministry. Although this is indeed a reality within the Cuban church, we still face a shortage of laborers, for “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” It therefore falls to us to pray to the Lord of the harvest that he may send forth laborers. We need pastors who can guide God’s people and provide them with a vision for the future. We need teachers and communicators of biblical truth capable of fulfilling their ministry both within and outside the church, within the wider community.

Mission and Hope

The purpose of this subtitle is to emphasize the mission of the church from the perspective of the message it proclaims—specifically, that its central message is: “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). This is a message of hope; yet, in reality, this very message is found throughout all of Scripture, which God inspires.

The Book of Genesis describes the creation of all things (Gen 1:1–2), and, within that context, the creation of humans as its crowning glory. This book also contains the narrative of the Fall, along with the consequences that stemmed from this terrible act of disobedience (Gen 3:9, 19). Despite this great evil, God’s response to the Fall serves as a message of hope for the entire human race; he would not abandon humanity in this plight, but would instead redeem it, promising a Redeemer (Gen 3:15). Scripture anticipates a new creation (Isa 65:17–25). Subsequently, in the New Testament, writers inspired by the Holy Spirit offer a Christological reinterpretation of creation (Col 1:15–23; 2 Pet 3:13; Rom 8:19–21; Eph 1:9–10; Rev 21:1–22). One of their fundamental emphases is that hope exists because, in Christ, the redeemed human being is a new creation (2 Cor 5:17)—a new humanity that is continually being renewed until it attains full knowledge (Col 3:10–11). Thus, through faith, one not only receives the forgiveness of sins and redemption, but, in Christ Jesus, believers actually become a new creation. The proclamation of the gospel implies not merely being saved but also becoming participants in the divine nature manifested in the Kingdom of God.

The church is entrusted with the mission of being a bearer of hope; indeed, dating back to the Old Covenant, even before the term “church” existed, God promised that his people would fulfill this marvelous purpose. This theme undergirds the majority of the biblical narrative; specifically, in the book of Genesis, God makes a promise to Abraham: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:4). The Apostle Paul’s reinterpretation of this promise is noteworthy; he states that it is a promise that extends to the church of Jesus Christ, to those who confess Jesus Christ as their sole and sufficient Savior: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole,’ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might reach the Gentiles, in order that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:13–14). In this way, Christians become a blessing to all nations; we are the bearers of that very blessing (Steuernagel 1992, 25).

Another recurring theme throughout the Bible is the care shown to captives and the poor; within its pages lies a message of hope specifically for them. For instance, the Book of Exodus recounts the story of the Israelites’ liberation from oppression in Egypt (Exod 17:10, 17). The Book of Leviticus (Lev 25:8–7) establishes a special provision for the oppressed and for slaves. This provision took the form of the Jubilee, a celebration observed every fifty years with the specific purpose of liberating Hebrew slaves and restoring land to its original owners.

In light of the foregoing, it is noteworthy that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when he entered the synagogue, he read from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, making a clear reference to the messianic fulfillment of the Jubilee, or "the year of the Lord's favor" (Isa 61:1–3). In this passage, the emphasis lies on proclaiming liberty to captives and the opening of prison doors to those who are bound. In this context, Jesus' words took on heightened significance by virtue of the One who uttered them: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21; Steuernagel 1992, 19–43).

The church is, in essence, a bearer of hope; this is due in large measure to the message entrusted to it, namely, "that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them" (2 Cor 5:19). Consequently, the message of salvation must neither be confused nor adulterated; it is, fundamentally, the message of the miracle of transformative grace.

Jesus Christ is our Savior; God manifested his righteousness and salvation in him (Rom 3:21), and we can draw near to God through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 3:22). Abundant are the riches of his grace, manifested in the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, justification, adoption, and regeneration.

When all that has been described above takes place in the life of a person who repents and receives salvation through Jesus Christ, it follows naturally that changes will occur in that person's life, often extending to his or her health. Emotional tensions may be alleviated, and healing—both mental and physical—may take place. On a social level, changes will occur in interpersonal relationships, as salvation liberates from sin and its consequences.

Of course, all of this brings hope; however, the Church must not misconstrue the preaching of the message of salvation. One must not confuse social liberation, or physical and emotional health, with the central message of the Gospel of Grace; it is incorrect to present evangelization as a political endeavor. The salvation that brings liberation is liberation from the yoke of sin's bondage within individuals, not from structures of oppression. This does not mean that God does not desire to bring about social justice or liberation from oppressive structures—indeed, this is certainly God's will—but this is not the message of salvation contained within the Bible.

As has been stated previously and will be expounded upon later, we are called to serve the poor and the needy with compassion, such that the love of God compels us to perform acts of mercy that are truly significant (Stott 1975, 109–130).

Certainly, the church is a bearer of hope; yet it also bears the responsibility of exposing the condition of the human race, estranged from God. What, then, is this condition? I propose citing several passages from Article X of the *Manual* of the Church of the Nazarene to shed some light on this subject.

We believe that sin entered the world through the disobedience of our first parents, and death through sin. We believe that sin is of two kinds: original sin, or depravity, and actual, or personal, sin.

We believe that original sin, or depravity, is that corruption of the nature of all the offspring of Adam, by reason of which every human being is very far gone from original righteousness, or the state of purity of our first parents at the time of their creation, is averse to God, has no spiritual life, and is inclined to evil, and that continually.

We believe that actual, or personal, sin is the voluntary violation of a known law of God committed by a morally responsible person (Church of the Nazarene, *Manual 2023*, 24).

With these definitions, how can we have and be a bearer of hope?

The Church of the Nazarene believes in the atonement—that is, through Christ’s sufferings, the shedding of his precious blood, and his death on the cross, he made full atonement for the sin of all humanity. This atonement serves as the basis for salvation and is sufficient for every person descended from Adam. The Church of the Nazarene also believes in God’s prevenient grace: although human beings became depraved and incapable of turning back to God on their own, God’s grace—provided freely to all people through Jesus Christ—empowers those who desire to turn from sin to righteousness to place their faith in Jesus Christ.

When people repent and turn to God, they are justified, regenerated, and adopted. Yet, it does not end there; the believer can enjoy a victorious life. In this life, one may receive entire sanctification—being set free from original sin or depravity—and be brought into a state of complete devotion to God and love made perfect (Church of the Nazarene, *Manual 2023*, 22–23).

The church cannot carry out a meaningful and hope-filled mission to humanity unless it lives and acts in accordance with all those doctrinal elements that affirm the security and confidence found in the work of Jesus Christ when individuals repent. In this way, the local congregation is empowered to carry out its work of hope.

How is the mission of love and hope manifested in Cuba?

The message of the gospel arrived in Cuba to awaken us from our slumber, just as it is written: “Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light” (Eph 5:14). In this regard, I must share—by way of testimony—that I am a fruit of a spiritual awakening that took place in my country during the 1990s. My generation was inspired by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives; we began to dream of a better future, all thanks to the message of the gospel, which transformed our perspective on reality and instilled in us confidence in God’s work. Moreover, while many of our longings and dreams remain unfulfilled, we live in the present moment, filled with hope, trusting in the promise of a better future.

Even though we are currently living through difficult times, brought about by human disobedience and its consequences, we endure hardships of every kind. Nevertheless, biblical history—and the ultimate conclusion found in the Book of Revelation—points to hope in Christ Jesus, our Lord. It reveals an outcome of peace, rejoicing, and fullness, in which God has the final word (Rev 21:1–8; 22:1–5).

Mission & Service

It is crucial to understand that effective service within the Kingdom of God can only be carried out along the path of salvation. The Wesleyan understanding of salvation asserts that we are being saved. At the moment of conversion, one receives initial holiness; this continues through progressive holiness and sanctification, ultimately culminating in glorification.

This theological understanding of the path of salvation is essential; within this process, we are progressively liberated from bondage so that we may serve in freedom. Liberation from self-centeredness takes place; within the context of service, we become capable of orienting our lives toward serving our neighbors.

Throughout its history, the church's approach to its mission has taken on various nuances and emphases. However, it is worth emphasizing that one of the most controversial issues in this regard has been—and, to varying degrees, remains—the divergence of opinions and visions regarding the relationship between evangelism and social action. By general consensus, most Christians agree that Christ must be brought to our world. Yet, the primary point of disagreement is that many believe the only way to achieve this is through evangelism alone, without giving due consideration to community service. And while it is true that it pleased God to save the world through the “foolishness of preaching,” social work must nonetheless be accorded its proper place.

John R. W. Stott suggests that there are three ways in which evangelism and social action relate to one another. According to this author, the first is when social action is viewed as a means to evangelism; in this scenario, the fundamental objective is the conversion of individuals, and social action serves as an effective instrument for achieving that end. However, this approach risks the ultimate outcome that people attend church primarily out of interest in the material benefits offered to them.

The second approach is when social action is regarded not merely as a means to evangelism, but rather as a manifestation of it—as a natural expression of the latter; in this view, it is perceived as the visible embodiment of evangelism. The third way in which the relationship between these aforementioned aspects is established is when one is regarded as the companion of the other. Evangelization and social action belong together, and neither serves as a means to achieve the other; rather, each constitutes an end in itself. Moreover, the fact that they are companions does not imply that, under certain contextual circumstances, one might take precedence over the other. All of the foregoing is determined by a sense of urgency (Stott 1975, 31–34).

Another, no less important, aspect influencing this relationship is the eschatological understanding of the end times, a period in which the imminent destruction of this world is perceived as very near. Naturally, the sense of urgency here lies in saving as many people as possible. It is not the purpose of this article to expound at length upon a specific eschatological viewpoint. However, it is highly appropriate to state that our perception of the end times must not overshadow or diminish our vision of service. Jesus spoke more than anyone else—and with authority—regarding the final times; yet he also declared: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 17:8). It is clear that being sent as Jesus was does not imply we must die for the sins of others, but it certainly does imply serving others just as Jesus did. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, comforted the afflicted, and liberated the oppressed (Stott 1975, 19).

In his Epistle to the Philippians (2:5–8), the Apostle Paul teaches his readers to have the same mindset that was in Christ Jesus. This biblical passage serves as a perfect example of the balance that must exist within the church between evangelism and service to one's neighbor. No positive outcome in evangelism is possible when the church is unable to identify with the problems of its community or to share in its struggles and sufferings.

In keeping with this theme of mission and service, it is pertinent to emphasize the profound significance of the Holy Spirit's presence in the church. The Holy Spirit represents a promise about the Kingdom of God, both in its present and future manifestations. This promise is vital not only for the work of evangelism but also for the service the church renders. The Apostles held this great truth in high regard, applying it not only to the preaching of the Word

but also to the ministry of service. A prime example of this is found in the selection of the seven deacons: while their role was to serve at tables, a fundamental prerequisite for their appointment was that they be filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:1–5).

How has the mission and service in Cuba been manifested, taking into account what has been said above in relation to this aspect?

To answer this question, I will cite several aspects of this topic that I presented at the First Congress on Theological Education held in Cuba in July 2025. These points primarily relate to the methods and strategies used to carry out evangelism and compassionate ministry in our country.

National evangelism efforts in Cuba have involved working alongside leaders and pastors of local churches, who, in turn, have trained, empowered, and commissioned their congregations. The evangelism ministry utilizes every tool God has provided to extend his Kingdom. Currently, this ministry comprises 32 church planters equipped with various ministry tools, including the *Jesus Film*. Additionally, this section encompasses over 40 organized churches that engage in church planting as a natural extension of their own growth and development. Furthermore, a group of 50 students has been trained through a Bachelor's program in Evangelism and Church Planting; these individuals are now driving evangelistic work across the entire country.

The Nazarene Compassionate Ministries (known by its Spanish acronym, MNC) is actively engaged within local churches through various projects. These initiatives range from delivering cooked meals to the needy—either once a week or once a month—to other projects designed to foster physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being; notable among the latter are programs involving physical exercises and interactive activities specifically tailored for the elderly.

Projects are underway to assist children in the community with their educational needs and to provide food for the most destitute. A disaster response initiative collects non-perishable food items and clothing to aid those in need. Additionally, an inter-church caravan of compassion delivers supplies to care homes for children lacking family support.

The chaplaincy ministry in Cuba also performs wonderful work in this regard; it operates within prisons, providing individual counseling three times a month to inmates who gather for services, as well as collective spiritual support once a month through worship services. Telephone communication is also utilized to provide care and support to these individuals.

Regarding hospital outreach by this chaplaincy ministry, initial steps to organize this effort are underway; nevertheless, sick patients and their family members are already being attended to and visited (Urgellés 2025).

Conclusions

The conclusion to be drawn from all that has been stated above is quite obvious. The mission of the church is not a narrow concept; rather, it is extremely broad. It draws on elements from practical theology and is essential to the ministry and development of the church. It is a concept that implicates the church's identity in every respect—that of a people whose identity is rooted in Christ, yet who simultaneously possess the capacity to identify with the very community that is the object of their mission. Furthermore, it takes into account hope in all its dimensions: hope in this life—empowered by the grace of God—and hope for a future of glory.

Finally, the concept of mission incorporates a perspective of service; it serves as a constant reminder that Jesus is our preeminent model in every way—including our life of service—thereby enabling us to make a positive impact on the community in which we serve.

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