

Characteristics of the Early Church of the Nazarene: 1908-1915

Clair MacMillan

Pastor, Church of the Nazarene, Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada

While researching my master's thesis (1998), I did a content analysis of the *Nazarene Messenger* 1895-1911, and the *Herald of Holiness* 1912-1919. Several trends surfaced as characteristic of the emerging denomination as it was portrayed in its official publication. Other characteristics might be discovered by looking at other information sources and by looking at different time periods.

1. **The overwhelming majority of the church's ministers were at a stage in their career where they were professionally mature.**

The church was not a youth movement, though many young people were involved in it. The young people were spiritually active but guided by professionally mature clergy. The members of the clergy had learned and refined the skills of ministry in their earlier assignments, and were working in their most productive years when they brought their congregations into the Church of the Nazarene.

2. **The church's ministers and lay people were so confident of their relationship with God that they were actively engaged in making moral decisions for themselves, remarkably independent of the church.**

The nature and quality of the encounter with God, which was normative for early Nazarenes, was so compelling that they were willing to claim the freedom to define their morality individually rather than collectively. Many opted for stricter mores than had been expected in their former denominational connections, but just as many opted for relaxed demands. Their point of agreement was that every person, after a "sanctifying experience," had the right and the responsibility to make their own moral choices in negotiation with God.

3. **The church was theologically creative, yet religiously united.**

Large numbers of people were involved in testing their religious experience against a variety of theological models. Coming, as they did, from a wide variety of denominational traditions, early Nazarenes shared relatively few theological assumptions. Our early publications were rife with testimony to the reality of the "sanctifying experience" and with attempts to fit that singular experience into a suitable theological context. This theological creativity was practiced not only in the schools or pulpits: it was practiced by hundreds of lay people, both educated and uneducated. It was much later in our history that the "Wesley Model" emerged as the quasi-official theological model to explain the experience of entire sanctification.

4. **The church was “apolitical.”**

Many individual members took serious positions in the political issues of the time (on poverty, education, immigration, prohibition, war, conscription, crime, etc.) but the church organization itself remained politically aloof. The church tended to see these, and other such issues, as the consequence of personal immorality and thus not susceptible to correction by political means.

5. **The church was relatively non-judgmental in its attitude toward other Christians. It gained adherents, not by criticizing other religions and denominations, but by offering a quality of religious fellowship and freedom other groups did not.**

Nazarene churches readily conceded that visitors were already Christians, so the invitation was usually to entire sanctification, not to repentance. Interestingly, it was often mentioned in the *Messenger* and the *Herald* that preaching entire sanctification often brings people to salvation. The message was addressed, not to the so-called “pagan pool” but to the enslaved Christian.

6. **The church was an outgrowth of revival, but was counter-revivalist in its organization and priorities.**

It was readily conceded that the Church of the Nazarene was born in revival, using revivalist methodology. But, it was, in fact, a denominational movement. John S. Moir (*Sectarian Tradition in Canada*) has observed that revival is the ecclesiastical equivalent of political revolution, seemingly bent on destroying existing conventions. The Church of the Nazarene set out, from the beginning, to design and promote a denomination that was an institution, but an institution capable of self-correction. It encouraged protracted meetings within churches, calling them revivals, as an aid to institutional self-correction.

7. **The church was predominantly urban in its location and influence.**

Timothy Smith (*Called Unto Holiness*) confirmed this observation, noting that much of the church membership was “ex-rural,” made up of new residents of the cities. Much of the evangelistic energy of the church was expended, not within the church services, but on the street and in homes. “Personal work” (as it was called) was the preferred method of recruiting non-believers; the public services of the church promoted the holiness message.

8. **The church didn’t try to be everything to everyone, but recognized its scope and its limitations.**

The vast majority of church members during the period in question were members of the Church of the Nazarene by conscious, adult choice. Virtually all of the uniting congregations were virtually unanimous in their choice to unite

with the Church of the Nazarene. They voted to leave “full service” denominations because of their conviction that Nazarenes were uniquely called to promote holiness, as understood and taught by Nazarenes.

9. The church was happy!

The message the church communicated was one of overwhelming joy and celebration. There was none of the chest-beating, self-deprecating, introspective, soul-searching agony that later came to be associated with much of the holiness movement. This was a church, composed of people who perhaps had earlier faced those struggles, but had moved beyond them as a consequence of a particular kind of encounter with God. They called the consequence of that encounter “entire sanctification;” they called the spiritual healthiness that followed it “holiness.” They were in a peaceful relationship with God and willing to do or be anything necessary to maintain that relationship. They were happy!