

HIGHER EDUCATION: **OUR CALL TO SERVE EN THE CHURCH AND IN THE WORLD**

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...In our seminaries, Bible colleges, colleges and universities, we are committed to the search for knowledge, the development of Christian character, and the preparation of leaders to achieve our divine call to serve in the church and in the world.¹

I am interested in a particular way in this brief paper, to make a comment under the heading of “Our mission of higher Christian education” which is a part of the document “A Christian, Holiness and Missional people”² and that contains an exposition of the “essential or core values” of the Church of the Nazarene. It, in great measure, because we have not taken the time to read the aforementioned document that has been amply distributed (at least in the case of the MAC Region), and that in my opinion, is illuminating in terms of considering higher education in the missionological perspective and experience of the denomination. At the end, I will make some reflections about the situation with respect to Latin America, and some paths to take to make them real among us.

1. Commenting on the text of our declaration.

It begins with affirming that **higher education is a part of our historical experience as a denomination**. That is to say, it is not an alien question that has occurred to us in the current body of General Superintendents, or of any particular interest of someone or others that could have been promoted among our denomination higher education projects, understood as tertiary or post-secondary educational level. I want to say that during our history as a denomination we have invested in this and we have dedicated our strength, human resources and capital. The separate paragraph states (emphasis added):

Christian higher education occupies a central place in the mission of the Church of the Nazarene. In the initial years of the Church of the Nazarene, institutions of Christian higher education were organized with the purpose of preparing men and women of God for leadership and Christian service in the global advance of holiness movement. **Our continual commitment to Christian higher education throughout the years has produced a world wide network of seminaries, Bible colleges, colleges and universities.³**

¹ Church of the Nazarene, *Christian, Holiness, Missional* (Kansas City, n.d.), 14.

² Ibid. Given out by the Board of General Superintendents, in February of 1999. In itself, the document as a whole gives orientation about other apparently controversial aspects that have affected the action, not only of Nazarenes, but a wider spectrum in evangelical circles. I am referring to, for example, that aspect of unity among Christians, of the content and reach of the mission in its integral perspective. In spite of the progress we observe, it is necessary to recognize there are still areas that in thought and practice, have pre-Laussane 1974 postures.

³ Ibid., 14.

It continues by identifying **the place of higher education in the integral development of the human being and culture**. Characteristic of the educational environment in general, is the dedication to the formation and transformation of the human being, where learning with creativity and criticalness should be natural processes. That is to say, one can not understand education as oriented to “banked” information, repetitive and dogmatic, to mention just some of the pejorative traits signaled by diverse studies of the Latin American educational process. With greater reason, we can not even imagine situations of this type in the third level.⁴ However, the document we are quoting continues saying:

Our mission of Christian higher education derives itself directly from what it means to be the people of God. We must love God with all of our “heart, soul and **mind**”. Therefore, we must be **good stewards in the development of our minds, our academic resources, and in the application of our knowledge**. In this light we are committing ourselves to **an open and honest search of knowledge and the united truth with the integrity of our Christian faith**. Christian higher education is an essential arena for the development of the stewardship of our minds. It has as its intention to be **an arena characterized for discussion and the discovery of truth, and the knowledge of God and all of creation**.⁵

As part of our intellectual development and from a Christian perspective, holiness (“integrity of our Christian faith”) has to deal with being honest in our search for the truth and knowledge to enlighten in all of the fields, including the religious, putting even the fabric of ancient judgment of “theological traditions” or ecclesiastical practices which in no way affirm the gospel and advance the Kingdom of God. Because of this, discussion should not bother us—fundamentally understood as a serious and rational analysis—to diverge in some uses or customs even if they are of old lineage, or no matter how “sacred” they appear to be, if they oppose the truth and authenticity of the conscience.

However, the distinctive intention about this sphere of higher education, referring to the university environment, is to say, that type of **superior education that has to do with all the areas or disciplines of knowledge**, which is what we continue to analyze. From the Biblical anthropological point of view, and taking into account the creationist narrative, it signifies that we must connect with the “Great Cultural Mandate” that assumes that the creation, which preceeds and in no way is excluded for those greatly discussed “Great Commandment” and “Great Commission”, more importantly, they are all interrelated. It is to also acknowledge the nature of the people (*laos*) of God, essentially lay and not clergy, steward-ministers in all the spheres of the human task and of creation, glorifying God in the intraworldliness of daily tasks. I will finish this section by repeating our cited text (once again, emphasis added):

In Christian higher education,... **the entire person is cultivated, and every area of thought and life is understood in relation to the desire and design of God...to learn about God, humanity and the world**. This commitment of

⁴ Something that has been mentioned in introductory documents in this Theological Conference, what needs to be characterized as its nature, to be promoted from our church’s educational circuit.

⁵ Church of the Nazarene, op. cit., 14-15.

Christian higher education with **the formation of the complete person is critical in the development of Christian men and women for the missional leadership in the church and the world.**

...Christian higher education contributes, in a significant manner, that we become such a missional people—**offering a wide panorama of knowledge—and that it is necessary for the effective service to God in our different vocations...**

The world in which we are called to serve is becoming more and more unified and profoundly complicated... **our faithful testimony to the lordship of Christ and the effective participation with God in the edification of the church will continue to require a vital commitment for higher education.**⁶

There is then, a natural bridge between the nature and the mission of the church and the nature and mission of a Christian university, understanding the latter as a projection of the former. Thinking of the diaconal nature in the church based on the charismatic structure itself of the *laos* of God—thinking of its integral mission, its educative essence, its responsibility toward the whole *oikoumene*—humanity and creation—makes us form this natural connection between the church and the task itself of the human being relating to knowledge and its applications, developing primarily in the university setting. As Dr. Van der Stelt, former president of the International Association for the Promotion of Higher Christian Education (IAPHCE), has aptly affirmed:

To proclaim the new life in Christ without applying its mandates to the society and the culture creates a culturally irrelevant Christianity and historically similar to an artifact in the museum... Proclaiming and implementing Kingdom principles without relating them to institutions of higher education results in an inevitable spiritual overestimation of what Christians can accomplish as individuals and an underestimation of what they must confront in the modern world....⁷

Evangelization with a perspective towards an integral development will necessarily need to be concerned with promoting a society in which the values of the Gospel are incarnated. But a society like the current one, highly differentiated, with problems each time more complicated and with growing challenges, necessarily requires an interdisciplinary work. The proclamation of God's Kingdom principles by the churches requires the support of Christian higher educational institutions that can collaborate in the articulation of these principles that is extremely important to implement in the society and the culture. From this perspective, the result is insufficient of the current model of "exclusive theological education: as the main

⁶ Ibid., 15-16.

⁷ John Van der Stelt, "Breve historia y visión de la AIPESC" in *Educando como cristianos en el siglo XXI*, Memoria del Primer Encuentro Latinoamericano de la Asociación Internacional para la Promoción de la Educación Superior Cristiana (San José, Costa Rica, 1999), 183.

institution for the formation of leaders for the church. In contrast, the formation of leaders should be diversified to reach an effective transcendence in the society.⁸

2. Final reflections in relation to our situation in Latin America

In light of the affirmations of the document already commented on that has to do with part of the essential or core values of our church, and whose relevance we must maintain, we ask ourselves, How are doing with regard to this here in Latin America? How do we compare to other regions? What experience have we had here? What can we do so that these values do not become a fallacy in our continent and in every country?⁹

1. On a world level, the denomination has universities, the majority in the United States and, from the point of view of the central administration of the denomination, also in some or the regions of the mission: Asia and Africa, all of these include disciplines and majors besides theology. In the case of Europe, there is solid tie with Nazarene Theological College in Manchester, with one of the universities with a great reputation in Great Britain, the University of Manchester. In the case of Latin America, SENDAS has an affiliation with the Evangelical University of the Americas—UNELA (although in these last two cases it only includes the theological aspect). Just recently I found about the establishment of a new Nazarene university in Brazil, sponsored by the Central Church of the Nazarene in Campinas and approved by the denomination's International Board of Education, awaiting final approval of the our church's General Assembly. In light of this, there are two questions to consider:
 - a. How can we entirely adopt this part of the core values as Latin Americans? How can the Board of Regents of our current educative institutions become aware of them so that they can take the necessary steps to establish universities with secular majors? Is it possible that we ourselves as leaders, district superintendents, pastors and laypersons, do not know the instances that we should go to advance these propositions? I believe we should and could advance in this respect.
 - b. How is that in Latin America, from the secular point of view in the educational field, was in the vanguard in respect to Africa and many places in Asia,¹⁰ and from the point of view in missions as part of our church started earlier (at least in various countries)¹¹, have we been left behind? It would be worth the effort to investigate the matter and the reasons for it more in depth than this brief paper.

⁸ See H. Fernando Bullón, "Iglesia, Universidad cristiana y mundo globalizado" en C. Mondragón, ed., *Los Retos del Conocimiento: La Educación Cristiana en un Mundo Globalizado* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Kairós, 2004), 53-84, esp. 75.

⁹ The following commentaries take into account the access that Nazarenes have to diverse secular or Christian universities that may exist in different countries in Latin America; what is in discussion is the denomination's own course in the development of institutions of higher education, mainly universities.

¹⁰ Due to previous contacts with Europe.

¹¹ In various Latin American countries the work of the Nazarenes is very old: Mexico, Guatemala or Peru; or is very large, Brazil; or with great flexibility and state support of higher education as in Costa Rica.

2. In mentioning the previous, we must once again review our history here in Latin America, and the experience that everyone knows regarding the Nazarene University, precisely here in Costa Rica. I do not know all that was in play to give the accreditation to another institution, today the Evangelical University of the Americas (UNELA). We trust in the wisdom from on high guiding our leaders. That is, we should learn from the past, assuring ourselves that our institutions are in agreement with the laws of the government and the denomination so that advances such as the Nazarene University are not lost. Some of our university level seminaries could serve us as a platform for the creation of universities. For their impulse and support, the local churches that have become aware of their importance could give support, as can be seen in the case of the Nazarene universities in the United States, Africa and Asia, where the support and help of the university programs comes directly from the local church, government funds, tuitions and individual donors. On the other side, new majors or disciplines that would be started could very well support themselves, even helping the theological area; a very valid alternative from the point of view of the educational nature itself of the institution, without discounting other alternatives now in use.
3. Now dealing with the future: Do we need to continue affirming something that does not correspond to our experience here in Latin America? We should not accept the lack of interest in this emphasis in higher education in its fullness, erring in using the inappropriate declaration, slanting the purity of its content. We should make an effort to raise the awareness of local and district leadership. I think that we should objectively begin to put into practice said values, making concrete plans, and dedicating the necessary resources; making special emphasis on local resources.¹² And not in ten years or in another administration different than ours or in another generation. But also, beginning with these university projects, as I have mentioned in other writings, the evangelical universities in the continent in their initial stages still need to demonstrate their service and commitment to the countries in which they originate, contributing with serious investigations and providing capable professionals committed to the transformations that Latin America needs.¹³ In other cases, like SENDAS now with its affiliation with UNELA, it would be good to begin with some specialized area besides theology, possibly on the postgraduate level¹⁴, and that it have stronger ties with the tasks of the programs of the church itself, like education, administration or social involvement. In other countries, where the church has been established for a long time, the particular conditions to advance the vision need to be studied. I believe there is no lack of ideas and human resources. What may be missing is clear purpose, convictions and executive will.

¹² An in-depth study of how our districts in Latin America have contributed to higher education and support of the seminaries showed the lack of commitment on the part of the local church to this very important church ministry.

¹³ H. Fernando Bullón, op. cit., 78-82; also see H.F. Bullón "El docente cristiano y las ciencias económicas y sociales en el proceso de transformación latinoamericana" en Sidney Rooy, comp., *Presencia Cristiana en el Mundo Académico*, Consulta CLADE IV (Buenos Aires: Kairos, 2001), 196-197.

¹⁴ It is less complicated and less costly to organize a post-graduate level than an entire major, also there would be more laypersons at this level wanting this type of formation.