

PAST: HERITAGE AND INDIGENOUS PROCESS IN PANAMA

By Nilda Calvo de Saez

Country of Origin: Argentina

Serving in: Panama

Panama—Bridge of the World and Heart of the Universe.

This is a well-know advertising slogan for the beautiful country of Panama.

The beautiful scenery, the friendly inhabitants and mixture of indigenous people, Afro-Caribbean peoples, Europeans and Asians dazzled the North American members of the Nazarene church that were working the Canal Zone.

Our church was established in our country via two different routes. The first one was, of course, the Panama Canal Zone, and the other was later, in the center of the Panamanian Republic. Let's take an overview of how this took place, which will help us understand many things relating to fulfilling the mission that the Lord has given.

The Church of the Nazarene started its activities on August 22, 1953 by invitation of the authorities who were working in the Canal Zone. The Department of Home Missions started the work in the port city of Ancón in a school gym. A little bit later, they acquired their own building. The church was organized with 15 members. On May 29, 1955, Elmer and Dorothy Nelson came to take charge of the work. In 1959, another congregation was organized near the city of Colón.

It is important to point out that there were always people attending both churches in spite of the difficulties encountered with frequent transfers of the canal workers.

In Panama itself, the Nelsons started travel throughout the country discovering a wide-open field for service. They were able to begin the negotiations to get governmental recognition and in 1957 the Church of the Nazarene was officially registered. In October 1961, the first Spanish language service took place with 16 people present. In January 1962, the church was organized. In the city the church grew rapidly and new works were started around Panama City.

On August 14, 1969 the Panama district celebrated their first district conventions and their second assembly. By that time there were eight missionaries working in Panama. All the councils were led by North Americans with Panamanians alongside them. The Panamanians very soon started Biblical and theological training in Costa Rica and there were some who went to the United States to study.

More missionaries came to help, including Robert and Elsie Pittam, Samuel and Gwladys Heap, John and Naomi Lewis, Mark and Vangie Rudeen, and Tom and Linda Spalding. However, the political situation in Panama changed between 1976-1980 due to political agitation and anti-American sentiments throughout the country.

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The missionaries continued to be district superintendents until 1981, when José Gordón became the first national superintendent and stayed in the position for the next 14 years. In 1986, the church had 12 licensed ministers to carry out the work. By 1989 there were 8 ordained ministers, 11 licensed ministers and 3 lay leaders working actively. In 1990, there were 20 students in CENETA. In 1995, Emeldo Quintanar became district superintendent and was in the position until November 2000. In 1995, Panama was divided into two districts, Panama Central and Bocas del Toro.

The following statistics include both districts [combined through 1990], except in 2003 when they were taken from only the Central district (C). [B = Bocas del Toro].

<i>Year</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Churches</i>	<i>Missions</i>	<i>SS avg.</i>	<i>SS enrollment</i>	<i>WM offerings</i>	<i>Income</i>
1962	11	1					
1969	185	5	8	466		\$ 536	
1970	269	7	7	523	1061	995	\$ 13,215
1972	413	11	4	804	1670	3920	24,124
1974	349	11	4	631	1059	2402	26,960
1975	419	12	4	750	1505	3446	34,604
1977	391	11		701	1180	3134	29,929
1978	425	12	2	583	1214	2271	27,315
1980	301	13	2	650	1025	2242	29,896
1986		17	4		1779		
1988	989	17	3	1273	2556	1122	53,828
1989	928	16	3	1448	2522	1155	51,190
1990	1011	21	4	1243	1243	2016	55,252
1999 C	671	18		668	3164	1376	76,667
1999 B	747	11		653	1326	383	33,014
2000 C	762	22		681	2579	1228	80,898
2000 B	799	18		894	940	453	35,985
2001 C	792	21		866	3547	743	72,218
2001 B	829	13		1045	1858	310	36,539
2002 C	816	23	23	860	2532	699	56,403
2002 B	217	5		197	336	107	11,836
2003 C	758	23	16	1131	2355	904	73,434

Source: Assembly and District Superintendents' reports

These numbers show sustained growth throughout the years. When members were lost, or even some churches were lost, it was due to the fact that the pastors changed quickly and had not developed a good program. There were some other factors; for instance, we could mention that some leaders fell into adultery, and also some introduced practices in the church such as “speaking angelic languages”, being slain in the Spirit, prophecies and all the new fads which arrived in those places.

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The answers to the following questions will show what has happened to the church in the Panamanian Republic in the past nearly 50 years. The longest serving Panamanian pastors shared the following observations:

What did we receive?

1. Help to build our churches through special donations and the collaboration of Work and Witness teams. We also received vehicles.
2. Up until 1985, we received subsidies for the pastors, including a retirement fund.
3. We became a member of the Social Security system due to World Mission funds.
4. Helping pastors to become self-sufficient and giving assessment to distinct projects
5. Special help for the Ngobe-Buglé indigenous group.
6. Leadership training on the Bible, theology and the Manual.
7. Spontaneous growth due to evangelism.
8. Pastors meetings with fellowship and unity.
9. A vision to grow.

What have we started?

1. A style of evangelism in accordance with Panamanian culture that has in much growth whenever it was carried out.
2. United celebrations of the Lord's Supper monthly in different churches.
3. The development of training through CENETA.

What have we done well?

1. We have tried to correct errors made by those in leadership on all levels.
2. Maintained the faithfulness of the church through a group of believers who have tried to conserve Nazarene identity.
3. Maintain vision for growth.
4. Progress in the training of leaders.
5. Tried to become aware of the need to become authentic Christians.
6. Tried to improve the administration and organization of all aspects of the church.
7. The use of some of the churches to develop Compassionate ministries. The feeding center, the Good Samaritan, has started with great promise.
8. Used the Panalfalit literacy plan to reach the Kuna Indians and rural areas.
9. Taken the message of salvation to marginalized groups such as the Kuna Indians located near Lake Bayano and the people who live in the garbage dumps in the Chorrera zone.

What have we done wrong?

1. We have given the local congregations too much freedom to visit other groups or denominations without the appropriate doctrinal guidance.
2. A lack of unified doctrinal criteria in what the pastors teach. The national leaders have neglected this issue. Preaching without a doctrinal issue.
3. Permitting distinct doctrinal currents (for instance, prophecies, speaking in tongues, being slain in the Spirit). By the end of 1981, there were already problems with these practices.

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4. Not requiring the leaders to be accountable for unacceptable behavior (selling properties and the material goods disappearing).
5. Disregarding establishing the norms in the Manual.
6. Too much tolerance of sins that church leaders recognized. In some cases, some pastor's adultery affected the church in general.
7. Not working as a team and as a result, affecting relationships between the pastors.
8. Not having a centralized district office caused administrative and organizational difficulties. Weak administration at both district and local levels.
9. The thought that everything had to come from the district.
10. Poor maintenance of properties.
11. Even though some good plans were made for evangelism, they were not effectively carried out.

What have we stopped doing?

1. Developing fruitful evangelistic plans and making new strategies.
2. Little by little the practice of the altar call has been abandoned. There are no longer any holiness campaigns.
3. The Christian Lay Training (CLT) for local leaders.
4. Using Nazarene Sunday School materials because of their high costs.
5. Using the Nazarene hymnal.
6. Celebrating the Lord's Supper in a highly spiritual way.
7. Stopped visiting the hospitals and prisons as a common practice.
8. During the past 10 years the local pastors have not received the District Assembly minutes.
9. Slowly, the "family" environment within the churches is diminishing, locally and on the district level.

Taking into account this panorama, the Panamanian Nazarenes, and those of us who work with these dear people, need to assume genuine commitment that does not allow compromises, abandonment or laziness. More than ever we need to realize that we have authorities that represent us and to whom we owe respect and submission. We need to recuperate the solemn festivities, the times of jubilee and worship. Every leader needs to remember that his work is to serve. We are all to be servant-leaders whose actions are completely transparent. We should leave on the altar of consecration all bitterness and resentment that impede fellowship with God and our brothers and sisters in Christ. What I am trying to say is that we need to have deeply consecrated lives which give authentic testimony to the divine love of God. We also need to get rid of all the weights that unnecessarily weigh us down. Finally, but not exclusively, we should value our Nazarene identity and never put aside the principles of the particular mission that God has entrusted to us.

REFERENCES

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District Assembly Minutes; District Superintendent Reports.

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Interviews of Elders: Rafael Lezcano, Ana A. de Lezcano, Edelmira Marciaga de Rodríguez,
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