Case Study: Mission in the Church of the Nazarene

The Church of the Nazarene was born at the end of the great century of Protestant missions. That timing may have something to do with the missionary ethos that characterizes Nazarenes. It certainly seems more than a coincidence that a denomination born in an era of intense Protestant missionary activity is today a major missionary-sending denomination.

As several groups were coalescing into what would become the Church of the Nazarene, two global visionaries emerged to nurture and shape the missionary vision and strategy of the new denomination. Both of those people, H. F. Reynolds and Susan Fitkin, were part of the Association of Pentecostal Churches of America in the northeastern U.S., one of the three groups that merged in 1908 to form the Church of the Nazarene.

When those three Holiness groups united at Pilot Point, Texas, leaders did not need to figure out how they were going to start a global outreach program. They already had one going. Prior to the merger, all three of those groups had overseas missionary work with the Pentecostal Churches of America in the East and the Holiness Church of Christ in the South being the most active.

At the time of that 1908 union, the man who would become one of the most famous names in Nazarene missionary history was already on the field. The previous year, 1907, Harmon Schmelzenbach had left what would become Southern Nazarene University to go to Africa where he remained as a missionary without furlough until traveling back to the U.S. for the 1928 Nazarene General Assembly. After that assembly, though he was in frail health, Schmelzenbach insisted on returning to Africa
where he died the following year.

After the 1908 merger, H. F. Reynolds became the denomination’s mission administrator, taking on the task of integrating the separate missionary endeavors of the three groups into a unified enterprise. Reynolds was also elected as one of the three Nazarene general superintendents. The passion for world evangelism that Reynolds brought to the general superintendency may have been what assured that world mission would frequently occupy center stage in the Church of the Nazarene.

In 1913-14 H. F. Reynolds made an around-the-world trip. He spent an entire year away from the U.S., visiting every Nazarene mission field. That trip, which was financed by a denomination-wide offering, set a precedent. Today Nazarene church members would think it strange if general superintendents were not going on trips to visit mission fields and giving some direct supervision to world missionary work.

Susan Fitkin came from that same group in the northeastern U.S. Early in life she felt a burden for the unreached and assumed the Lord wanted her overseas. However, when she applied to a mission board, they turned her down for health reasons. Rather than becoming bitter, she turned her energy to missions promotion and mobilization. In 1899 Susan Fitkin organized the Women’s Foreign Missionary Auxiliary for her association of Holiness churches in the northeast. Ten years later the denomination that her own group helped form came into being without setting up a mission auxiliary. For the next seven years Susan Fitkin worked behind the scenes lobbying for official authorization of a world mission auxiliary. When the 1915 Nazarene General Assembly got around to setting up an auxiliary to promote awareness of its global mission outreach and raise financial and prayer support for it, church leaders turned to Susan Fitkin. For the next three decades she was that organization’s president. That particular position was not a paid one, but she threw herself into it as
though it were, using personal money to travel overseas as well as in the U.S. speaking in district missionary conventions and local churches.

In 1923 the denomination moved to a centralized budget system that for decades was called General Budget and now is known as the World Evangelism Fund. Using one cooperative fund curbed some administrative chaos and cut down on the number of fund-raising appeals being made to local churches by several “general boards.” That move would also keep the denomination stabilized through the economic duress of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Through those years, the world mission administrative leader (as distinct from the promotion and publicity role of what is now the NMI) was J. G. Morrison. During lean financial times, he helped Susan Fitkin’s auxiliary with fund-raising by repeatedly begging Nazarenes, “Can’t you do just a little bit more?”

Early on, Nazarenes fell in love with great slogans and challenging goals. During the war-torn 1940s, world mission administrator C. Warren Jones promoted the reach toward “a million for missions,” the giving of $1 million for missions in one year.

The 1944 General Assembly was what Franklin Cook has called “one of the most forward looking” ones for Nazarenes. That is because, even with a World War still going on, Nazarenes took three key actions at that quadrennial gathering: (1) startup of a Spanish department that led to global publishing in scores of languages, (2) startup of the Radio League, which led to the global communication program of the denomination, and (3) startup of a graduate seminary that would eventually have a School of World Mission as one of its key components. The end of World War II brought more firsts for Nazarene missions. One was having the first non-Anglophone speaker at a General Assembly. The year was 1948, the city was St. Louis, and the speaker was Alfredo Del Rosso, itinerant Holiness evangelist from Italy who was
merging his four independent congregations into the Church of the Nazarene. Del Rosso’s presence at the General Assembly podium signaled a giant step forward in the process in which Nazarene leaders in other countries would be recognized as equal partners with those from the U.S., Great Britain, and Canada. Another key visitor at the 1948 General Assembly was Samuel Bhujabal from India, who was the denomination’s first non-Anglo district superintendent. During a six-month tour of churches in the U.S., Bhujabal made quite a spectacular impression wearing his red turban.

During World War II some Nazarene missionaries were imprisoned by the Japanese in China. One of those prisoners, Mary Scott, came home after the war to become director of the promotional and fund-raising organization founded by Susan Fitkin (which would soon change its name to Nazarene World Missionary Society). At that point the organization was a somewhat independent though loyal auxiliary. Its focus was on mobilizing districts and local churches for the cause of global mission. It raised money, solicited prayer support, did mission education, and tried to make sure children and youth were involved in the local missions organization.

That movement of the Church of the Nazarene into new world areas accelerated through the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and it exploded in the 1990s. By 2006, the denomination was working in more than 150 world areas. One key element of this expansion was the widespread use of volunteers. The door to that was opened in the early 1960s when youth groups began going to mission fields on short-term mission trips. That began calling into question the idea that global mission was something that used only professionals. By the 1970s, the internationalization of Nazarene church government began taking on clear outlines. That process had its beginning, however, more than a half a century earlier. Back in the 1920s the decision was made that
general superintendents would preside at all district assemblies. The people who made that decision may not have realized what the outcome would eventually look like, but with that decision they put all districts worldwide on the same footing, a somewhat unusual decision in a time when people still divided the nations of the world into civilized and backward categories.

In 1972 a first-ever meeting of national superintendents was held without the presence of missionaries. While that meeting made some older missionaries uneasy, it emphatically showed that full responsibility was being put into the hands of world leaders.

Under Jerald Johnson’s leadership in the 1970s, the denomination adopted a four-step process by which districts could become *regular* and thus be considered on a par with districts in the U.S., Great Britain, and Canada. The first missions area district to achieve this regular label was in Guatemala. Japan probably should have been the first. They had applied to become a regular district in the 1930s, but the denomination’s General Board was caught off guard by their request and turned it down. At that point, American General Board members seemed not to know what to do with a mission field that wanted the right to send delegates to General Assemblies.

Now the process of becoming a regular district is well-defined, and regular districts have emerged all around the world. The strategy has been successful in places such as the island of La Gonave in Haiti. That island seemingly has few resources, but the church there is strong. A few years ago the Nazarene district of about 35 churches on that island went totally self-supporting. Since that time they have grown to more than 50 churches.

In 1974 the process of dividing the world into administrative regions began with the establishment of intercontinental zones. As regional leadership emerged, decision-
making began to be shifted away from denominational headquarters in Kansas City. Such decentralization has enabled the Church of the Nazarene to administratively deal with the rapid pace of entering new areas (and probably has even fostered that). Then, the mission promotion organization that became NMI was moved from its auxiliary status on the general level to an integrated component of the World Mission office. On the district and local levels, Nazarene Missions International structures remained much the same.

It is difficult to predict what the Church of the Nazarene will look like a few decades from now. As General Assembly delegates increasingly reflect the diversity of the worldwide church, will the denomination’s General Assembly remain the giant family gathering it has been? In trying to become a truly international church, Nazarenes have taken on an audacious undertaking. Only one or two other denominations have the goal of being an international church. Everyone else has opted for some variation of a loose federation of national churches rather than a unified global structure.

Denominational leadership has worked to move away from doing things that create financial dependency, and that has not been easy. Generally, funding from the World Evangelism Fund is now directed toward starting up things and one-time projects. In the last 30 years the denomination has moved completely away from subsidizing pastors’ salaries on mission fields. Through Alabaster offerings and Work and Witness teams, the denomination sometimes helps with land purchases and building construction. In countries where there has been a pastoral pension program established, the denomination has sought to provide matching startup funds. Pastoral training programs are available at extremely low cost in impoverished areas of the world. Sometimes the denomination helps district and local leaders with travel costs to
conferences of various kinds and responds to a few dire medical emergencies. Regional leadership facilitates evangelistic campaigns with the use of the *JESUS* film, one of the most fruitful partnerships of which the Church of the Nazarene has been a part. During less than a decade the *JESUS* film partnership teams showed the film to more than 40 million people, starting more than 10,000 new churches as a result.

All local Nazarene churches worldwide are now expected to contribute to the global World Evangelism Fund and other world mission offerings including Alabaster. A global mission giving goal for churches worldwide is set at about 10 percent of total local income. One purpose of having this goal in even the poorest countries of the world is to get local leaders’ eyes off of survival and on to the global harvest field to which God is calling everyone.

Churches around the world joyfully embracing being participants in mission giving reflects what has happened since Nazarene mission leaders moved away from subsidizing local churches. As those subsidies have been phased out, the denomination has seen more aggressive evangelism and much greater spiritual maturity. In some areas, the church has seen a speeding up of growth after external pastoral subsidies were ended.

Nazarene general and regional leaders have tried to find ways to give people an incentive to fund programs locally. One of those is by treating leaders everywhere as equal partners with a voice and opportunities for service in the governmental structure. As was noted, the denomination uses a four-stage process through which districts (geographical groupings of churches) pass as they move toward full self-support. At each new level the district receives increased authority and voice in the international structure.

Money is not all, of course. There is that fourth self--self-theologizing. That has
been slower to emerge and even more difficult to assess than the other three selves, but it is now coming. To encourage this fourth self, the denomination established the graduate-level Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in the Philippines and through Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City runs a doctoral degree program in Latin America. World Mission Literature also seeks to get into print material written by Nazarene writers around the world.

The Church of the Nazarene has also developed a multinational missionary force. Another thing that has contributed to the denomination’s internationalization has been the decentralizing of the organization. Almost all funding, missionary deployment, and other similar decisions are now made in regional offices located in Singapore, Guatemala, Ecuador, the Caribbean, Switzerland, and South Africa rather than in the U.S. Each of those regional offices has people responsible for various ministry arms like NMI, NYI, Sunday School, JESUS film teams, and evangelism. In earlier years each country had a missionary as mission director. Now, with missionaries having been shifted out of several countries where work has matured, the regions have been divided into fields that usually encompass several countries and in which the work is directed or facilitated by a field strategy coordinator.

In the 21st century the Church of the Nazarene faces the same challenges that other mission organizations are encountering. There is, however, great optimism that Spirit-filled creativity and dogged determination will enable the church to successfully meet those challenges.

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