

Origin of ANSR

ANSR was founded by Dr. Bill Sullivan, who served as Director of Church Growth, (now USA/Canada Mission/Evangelism). He served as president of the American Society for Church Growth in 1991 and in 1994 was received the Donald A. McGavran Award for making a significant contribution to the Church Growth Movement in the United States. At the 2006 ANSR annual meeting, when we celebrated our 25th anniversary, Dr. Sullivan explained the origin of the organization as follows.

One of the evidences of Divine Providence is what appeared to be a chance meeting Thursday December 10, 1981 that resulted in the creation of ANSR. Jon Johnston had recently published his book, *Will Evangelicalism Survive its Own Popularity?* I do not know why Jon was in Kansas City but I know early that Thursday morning he met with the Book Club at Nazarene Theological Seminary.

I am not sure why I attended that Book Club meeting. It's the only one I remember attending in my 23 years at Nazarene Headquarters. To tell the truth, the only thing I recall about that meeting was learning that Jon Johnston was a sociologist.

I was in a Doctor of Ministry program at Fuller Theological Seminary. I was particularly taken with the concepts of Church Growth that were being taught by C. Peter Wagner, who was at that time completing a Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Southern California.

I was, to say the least, sociologically illiterate. But as Dr. Wagner applied sociological insights to church expansion and development my eyes were opened. I suddenly understood in a new way what I had been experiencing in the pastorate and district superintendency. I knew I had to find a way to use sociological insights in helping the denomination experience new growth vitality.

That Book Club meeting at NTS in 1981 was Divine Providence. It was not a chance meeting. Too much good has resulted from it to have been an accident of circumstances. I am firmly convinced that ANSR has both provided and legitimized research that has impacted the Board of General Superintendents and the denomination, particularly in the USA. Without the presence of ANSR the orientation of what is now the **USA/Canada Mission/Evangelism Department** would have been significantly different and resulted in a less effective approach to church development. Church Size Strategies, Thrust to the Cities, GROW Magazine, the Breckenridge Consultations, NewStart, and many other efforts found their genesis, in one way or another, in the sociological quest of the department.

When I asked Jon Johnston to help me that Thursday in 1981 it was if God had already prepared him for the opportunity. He responded positively and enthusiastically. Thirty-nine days later the first meeting of ANSR occurred; and the history is documented in the many writings of succeeding meetings.

Jon Johnston has been the leader of ANSR from that day forward. The department has provided funding and sponsorship. As we developed the Research Center, Dale Jones, Ken Crow and Rich

Houseal became the link from ANSR to the department. It has been a relationship that has endured for 25 years.

I think our approach is worthy of note. I had seen other associations at Nazarene Headquarters falter along under a policy of rotating leadership. We decided we had a good leader and we believed the future of the association was more important than passing the leadership around. We accept responsibility for insisting that we not get into a pattern of changing officers.

We also felt it was essential to provide funding for an annual meeting of the steering committee. Without that financial support the organization would soon succumb to a lack of critical participation and spasmodic meeting schedules.

It was our belief that the funding was more than justified because the association would provide research to enable denominational leaders to make informed decisions on critical issues. I firmly believe it has accomplished that objective.

I would like to personally express my appreciation to Jon and all of you in ANSR. I have especially appreciated the fact that you have been loyal to the faith and to the church. Instead of engaging in church-bashing, the favorite pastime of some Nazarenes, you have given your time to serious reflection about the church and its future. You are some of the finest church persons I have ever worked with and I salute you and ANSR for that spirit and attitude.

The church is both a divine community and a human organization. In recent months I have come to believe the church in our time does not sufficiently appreciate the human aspect of its nature. We seem to be caught up in magnifying spiritual pursuits and diminishing organizational performance.

One of the early heresies of Christianity was that Jesus was fully divine but not fully human. The church rejected that notion and affirmed that Jesus was both fully God and fully human.

The church today needs to recognize the importance of the human aspect of its nature. Only then can it learn the most effective methods of reaching people for Christ.

You see, I believe you sociologists should think of yourselves as “Good News Strategists.” Your discipline studies society and social organizations. You better than others understand the mechanisms by which the good news about Jesus Christ can be disseminated throughout the world. There may be many interesting subjects for you to explore, but how could you ever find a more fascinating topic than how to bring the world to Christ?

Well, that may be a little mind boggling, to say nothing of the threat it might pose to the clergy; but it is an idea worthy of some consideration.

Regardless, I hope it is some indication to you of the great esteem I have for you and for your commitment to ANSR, and the Church of the Nazarene.

May God continue to guide you personally and organizationally; and may you always serve the kingdom with the awareness so powerfully expressed by Anthropologist Margaret Mead,

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

—Bill M. Sullivan