

Cultivating Community Through Core Values and Commitment:

A Reflective Essay

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As I reflect on the themes and issues with which we have wrestled in ANSR over the past 19 years (19 years... incredible, isn't it?), the recurrent theme of the nature and necessity of the core values of the church has, in my mind, been one of the most important. I do believe we have made progress in our understanding of the matter over the years.

Essentially we have agreed that it is important for us to have core values and that perhaps it would be nice if we could agree on just what those core values are. Given the tendency among sociologists to describe problems without offering suggestions toward remedies, we have often adjourned feeling gratified in having further explained the unexplained variance, but leaving Bill Sullivan and company with something less than an action plan.

Core Values and Community

It seems to me that as we tackle the critical theme of cultivating community in the church, core theological and missional values is once again not only relevant, but central to the issue. It is apparent that the people of any religious or spiritual community, by definition, must hold in common certain shared ideas, values and norms in order to be a community. And further, the internal solidarity or intensity of their sense of community is dependent upon the degree to which these shared ideas, values and norms are compelling and effective in calling people to commitment—commitment to the values themselves and to one another around those values.

Christian community, then, is more or less built around a common theological world view and way of life that is effective in calling people to being committed to one another in a common life and shared mission. Conversely, without commonly held core values that effectively call people to commitment, Christian community at any level (local or denominational) cannot easily be sustained. So, as usual, that brings us back to the question, what are our core values? What is our core theological identity and essential mission? Praxis at last!

One of the great things about ANSR, is its close inter-relatedness with the Department of Church Growth. What this symbiotic relationship has produced, in my opinion, is not only some good sociological analysis, but also some useful tools and programmatic ideas. Included in this list is the ANSRPoll, a book on ministry in the smaller church, and an index of denominational strength and health. Perhaps there is another item that should be added to the list.

Two years ago at our annual conference (I think it must have been in the midst of one of those we need a core values statement in the Church discussions), Bill Sullivan decided it

was time to go into action. I think I must have been standing close by when the moment of inspiration came because I soon found myself recruited to assist with the task.

So it was that together we embarked on the project of discussing and writing down what we believed the core values of the Church of the Nazarene to be. As you might imagine, a great deal of thinking, writing, brainstorming, poking, prodding, cajoling and lobbying occurred along the way. In the meantime, Bill took the conversation about the need for defining our core values to the Board of General Superintendents. They responded by asking for a more detailed statement and accompanying essays. Dr. Jim Bond assumed responsibility for overseeing the effort. With the help of several additional pastors and theologians, and with the active and capable direction and watchful care of Dr. Bond, an expanded statement was sent to the Board of General Superintendents who then individually and corporately edited and rewrote it. Ultimately, our discussions led us to the shared conclusion that the core values in the Church of the Nazarene could be organized around three basic ideas:

- We are a Christian people;
- We are a Holiness people; and
- We are a Missional people.

The end product was published and released at the Centennial Conference last year. Additional copies were mailed to pastors and included in the October issue of Holiness Today. And just to think, the initial ideas were spawned, at least in part, out of the ANSR dialogue! So, we now have a core values statement for the Church of the Nazarene! And, naturally, I think it is a very good one. I am hopeful that the core values document will be a step toward clarifying and uniting us around a common identity and mission. At the very least, perhaps it will contribute to meaningful discussions around the Church as to who we are and what we are about.

Embracing the Core

Having a core values statement is, of course, no guarantee at all that the stated core values will generally be embraced as core, or even at all. It seems to me that the critical questions at this point are not whether there are identifiable core values in the Church of the Nazarene, or even whether those core values are in themselves compelling enough to call us to commitment. Working on the core values project has given me a reasonable degree of confidence that each of these questions can be answered generally in the affirmative. But the critical questions at this point are:

To what degree are core values generally held?

Are Nazarenes, especially North American Nazarenes, able and willing to fully embrace the commitments to which our core values call us?

The answer to each of these questions is, of course, influenced by a number of variables, including the degree to which large organizations and their authority structures have become suspect in this country and the corresponding post-denominational mood and localism generally evident in the United States. However, the variable that probably deserves the greatest consideration is the changing socio-economic status of the membership of the church.

The Effects of Changing Socio-economic Status

Please allow a quick sociological review of the effects of upward socio-economic mobility on a religious movement. According to sect-church theory, a sect group is a protest group or a reform group that is somewhat isolated from the mainstream. Members tend to come from the margins. With many members from the less-educated working class, simple and dichotomous world views prevail. Since prestige and esteem are less available from the society at large, internal measures of esteem and prestige are granted and valued. Theological beliefs are reinforced by distinctive norms and beliefs. The distinctive nature of the norms and beliefs elicit prejudice and discrimination from the broader society which, in turn, reinforce the internal solidarity of the membership. The result is a very strong and uniform adherence to core values, including beliefs, norms, and corporate mission.

As people are converted and come into the fellowship of the church, they become better citizens and better stewards of their money and time. In turn, they become better employees and, over time, are promoted in their jobs more frequently. With more money, they are less marginalized and more able to access prestige, position and power in the dominant society. Social standing and esteem are now available not from the group alone, but increasingly from the external social world. In the meantime, if education is valued by the group, it is also more accessible with upward mobility. An emphasis on education within a sect group early on will speed its upward mobility. With increased education comes increased questioning of authority and rationalization of absolutes. Theological beliefs are looked at in more complex terms. Greater appreciation and tolerance toward other groups grows. Shared norms diminish as prescriptions give way to principles which are more diverse in their application. The end result is a lack of uniformity of normative behavior and theological doctrine. Further, increased questioning of authority makes it more difficult for leadership to call the membership to common commitments.

Does this theoretical model fit the Church of the Nazarene? Perhaps all too well. As to the degree to which we hold in common shared values and are able to commit to those values, suffice it to say that our uneven but generally increased socio-economic standing has increased our ability to mainstream. And the more we have mainstreamed into the dominant cultural and evangelical sub-cultural worlds around us, the more we have apparently borrowed and assimilated the values of those worlds. The result is an apparent practical diversification of core ideas, beliefs, norms and perspectives on identity and

mission. If there is a core Nazarene identity and mission, it is overlaid with a wide variety of imported theologies, regional interpretations and missional perspectives.

I wouldn't be a self-respecting sociologist (is that an oxymoron?) if I did not also acknowledge that commitment levels in a given denomination are correlated with socio-cultural variables, especially education and income. The higher the socio-economic status, the lower the general level of commitment among the membership. (Enter Kelley and Iannoccone). All of this doesn't sound like good news when it comes to calling Nazarenes to commitment around core theological and missional values, does it? But are these socio-economic realities within the Church so powerful and our theological diversity so thorough that our core values and identity are too tattered to recover? Or do we merely need to dig deeply enough into the recesses to uncover and rediscover our somewhat dormant common calling? Is there a distinct calling given to the Church of the Nazarene for the 21st Century, or is it time to assume our place within generic evangelicalism?

Revival and Renewal

One of the things most of us would agree on is that there is nothing wrong with the Church that a great Holy Ghost revival couldn't fix. The spontaneous moving of the Spirit across a people through which lives are changed and movements birthed or resurrected. God give us such a revival! I think there is another side of revival to mention here as well, the revival which is the renewal of vision; the rediscovery and restoration of message and mission.

Please forgive my presumption here, but I believe I have had the great honor of experiencing a taste of that kind of renewal in my last two pastorates. One pastorate was with one of the oldest congregations in the denomination. The other was a new church start. But the two congregations had a great deal in common. Both were urban, socio-economically and racially diverse, multi-congregational, and accompanied by compassionate ministries. In each, the renewal came when we looked deeply into our historical Wesleyan and Nazarene roots and found relevance of mission and message that gave us not only an appreciation for our heritage, but a clearer understanding of our calling and reason for being. In each situation, community was experienced around a mission that included expressions of evangelism, compassion and justice. In both situations, other Nazarene congregations joined in and began to embrace our mission as part of their own. In each church larger than expected numbers of college students and young adults gravitated toward the ministry.

I understand that my experience is extremely limited and that there are, of course, many examples of renewal occurring in many different forms across the church. But I do come away from these two pastorates with this belief— deep within us—deep within our Wesleyan theology, our Nazarene history, our traditions, our culture, and our corporate memory—there resides a core. And at that core is the calling to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. It is the call to be a holy

people with a Kingdom mission. It is the call to Christlikeness. I believe Nazarenes everywhere can hear and will respond to such a call.