

Denominational Self Analysis

The Nazarene Listening Post

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Early in the development of the Association of Nazarene Sociologists of Religion we adopted the idea of establishing representative panels for research among the various constituencies of the Church of the Nazarene. The goal was to assist denominational leaders, when requested, by making insights, preferences and characteristics of local church leaders ore immediately and reliably available to the decision making process. That is, ANSR could serve the denomination by providing a mechanism for periodic examination of the nature and insights of the local congregations: the denominational identity as it is manifested at the local level.

1983 through 1985 General Assemblies were years of planning and creation of the panel. It is unlikely that our association would have established the Listening Post without the support of the Church Growth Division. The efforts of Dr. Bill M. Sullivan, the Church Growth Division, and the Church Growth Research Center should be recognized with gratitude. With their help by the end of 1985 denominational approval had been secured and samples had been selected. In the 1986 ANSR meeting one of the committees drafted the first questionnaire.

From one viewpoint the Listening Post may be seen as a mechanism for denominational self analysis. Agencies of the church have used this vehicle to determine more accurately what the Spirit is saying to the churches. General Assembly Commissions have been able to examine the nature and needs of a part of the denominational identity. Members of a small, close-knit religious group know what other areas of their church are experiencing because they are able to talk to each other face to face. Leaders can sit down to talk with every segment of the group. As the group had become larger to maintain easy communication between grass roots and leaders. Within this context, the Listening Post may influence the denominational identity by reducing typical large, formal group problems like the tendency to lost responsiveness.

From either perspective a review of the first quadrennium of the Listening Post seems to fit within the theme of our meeting. Furthermore, the approach of another General Assembly suggests that it is time for ANSR to conduct a thorough review of the panel in order to answer necessary questions regarding its continuation in the next quadrennium. The most vital question is, of course: should this tool continue? However, it may be helpful to answer several smaller questions in order to build a background for deciding the large one. How were samples selected? How many surveys were conducted? What topics were examined? You have, I believe, a notebook with summary tables covering most of the topics addressed. Who, or which groups, used the service? What have been the significant contributions of this activity of ANSR? Where is it meeting our expectations? What reactions have we experienced from users? What policy questions have emerged as important?

Samples

Two representative samples were drawn: one ministerial, the other laity. The ministerial sample was actually a systematic sample of Nazarene congregations in the United States. The sampling frame was the complete list of U.S. churches. The frame was stratified by region,

district, and congregation size to ensure proportional representation among those characteristics. Two size categories, over and under 100 members, were used for the stratification. Within these strata, every Nth congregation was selected. Using this procedure, approximately six hundred churches were selected. As pastoral changes have taken place throughout the quadrennium, the current pastors of the churches making up this panel have been asked to respond to the Listening Post surveys.

The sample of laity was designed to be representative of membership distribution. The sampling frame was the list of all local church Board Secretaries, Treasurers, and Christian Life Directors included in the 1984 collection of Minutes of the Districts in the United States. This sampling frame was also stratified by region and district. For every Nth member reported in the *Minutes*, one of the local lay officers was selected. A maximum of three officers were chosen from any one congregation. Approximately twelve hundred lay officers were selected through this process. Letters asking these leaders to participate throughout the quadrennium resulted in a panel of about six hundred who agreed to serve the church in this way.

Surveys During the Quadrennium

The first Listening Post survey was mailed in May of 1986. Approximately six hundred pastor and six hundred laity questionnaires have been prepared in booklet form and mailed in the envelope of the Church Growth Division stationery for each of the five surveys conducted. Mailing labels and metered postage have been used. The questionnaire booklets have included a postage paid, Business Reply Mail imprint on the back for the return of the responses. Most of the time no follow-up mailings have been used to improve response. In spite of this, response rates have generally been about 50%.

The Nazarene Listening Post I – Spring 1986

The first Listening Post Survey examined personal characteristics of panel members. Several items were included at the request of the General Assembly Commission on the Calling of the Pastors. The General Assembly Bioethics Commission also used it. Headquarters ministries using the survey included Chaplaincy Ministries, Church Extension Ministries, Pastoral Ministries, the Nazarene World Missionary Society and the Division of Christian Life and Sunday School. In addition, this general survey addressed some market research questions of interest to the Nazarene Publishing House.

The Nazarene Listening Post II – Fall 1986

The second Listening Post Survey was used by the General Assembly Education Commission as their primary research instrument. In addition to the Listening Post samples of U.S. pastors and local lay officers, the commission surveyed Canadian pastors, pastors in other world areas, lay officers in other world areas, Seminary professors, Seminary students, professors in Nazarene colleges, and students in Nazarene colleges.

The Nazarene Listening Post III – Spring 1987

The third Listening Post Survey examined programs and church growth in local churches. Both pastors and local lay officers were asked to indicate whether, to what extent their congregation had utilized each of many ministry programs over the previous three years. Various community characteristics were also requested. Membership and attendance statistics for the congregations represented were combined with these responses to permit analysis of relationships between program patterns and church growth. Twenty-one program indices were constructed based on a factor analysis of pastor's responses. When correlations between these indices and indicators of church growth or decline among congregations within different sized groups, it appeared that factors influencing growth differ from one size to another.

The Nazarene Listening Post IV – Fall 1987

The fourth Listening Post Survey was used by the Christian Action Committee to obtain information from leaders at the local church level regarding the General and Special Rules of the *Manual*. Tables and a summary of volunteered comments were prepared for the committee to use as a background research in their role as the General Assembly Commission appointed to review and recommend wording for the Special Rules, paragraph 33.1.

The Nazarene Listening Post V – Summer 1988

The fifth Listening Post Survey asked both pastors and lay officers to respond in four general areas: factors which influence pastors' and officers' conviction of a call to ministry or lay vocation, local congregations' needs for programming assistance from the headquarters organization, pastors and lay officers reading preferences among sixty-eight popular periodicals, current use of the altar in local Nazarene churches. In addition, the ministry satisfaction and denominational relationship items from the PALCON III evaluation instrument were replicated to permit examination of such issues as differences between PALCON participants and those who did not attend.

Denominational Use and Response

An administrator of an academic institution recently characterized users of institutional research as falling into three categories. There are, he said, those with a philosophical orientation who in their rejection of positivism distrust all empirical research and information it generates. A second group are essentially manipulators who reject data which challenges their positions but readily accept empirical findings which support decisions they have already made. His third category was those leaders who see data as an important resource as they seek to know the facts as accurately and completely as possible in order to improve the organization.

User of Listening Post findings might be characterized in a similar way. Perhaps especially within a religious organization like ours, some leaders generally distrust empirical research. This distrust no doubt includes a philosophical rejection of positivism, but there are other factors as well. Part of the distrust seems to be a skepticism of what might lead to, or to be misunderstood as, decision-making by opinion poll. Another part is probably a fear of negative results and the damage to the church which might result if negative information became

widely known. For these reasons, and others which seem related to these perspective, some leaders have been very reluctant to use the Listening Post surveys.

The second characteristic is the least flattering of the three. Few would easily accept the label of manipulator. However, enough of this attitude exists that one Nazarene leader casually dismissed the usefulness of all research with the comment that findings are only be heeded when they can be used to persuade someone of the validity of a position or program.

Fortunately, however, during this first quadrennium of the Listening Post it has been seen as a helpful resource by several leaders and groups. Various ministries in the Christian Life and Sunday School Division, the Nazarene World Missionary Society, and the Nazarene Publishing House have all examined aspects of their ministry to the local churches through the vehicle of the Listening Post. Dr. Sullivan's support for research, the general approach of the church growth, and the closer connection of ANSR to the Church Growth Division seem to have contributed to a more extensive use of this tool by the ministries of the Church Growth Division. Chaplaincy Ministries, Church Extension Ministries, Evangelism Ministries, and Pastoral Ministries have responded positively to this service.

The other groups which have use the Listening Post most extensively have been the General Assembly commissions. This may be explained by the fact that there is often an explicit or implicit requirement to conduct research in the mandates which establish the commissions. In any case, most of the commissions which will report to the 1989 General Assembly will have Listening Post research as part of their background work they have done.

Not all of the responses to the Listening Post have been positive. Several denominational leaders have raised the important issue of the validity of responses from a random sample. They question whether it is ever valid to generalize from a random sample to a population? This question persists as an important reaction to the Listening Post in spite of the widespread use of random samples in most areas of American society. This objection, and others, suggest that it is important for us to review the purpose, policies, and procedures of the Nazarene panel as we consider whether to promote the continuation of this service.

Purpose

The consideration of the issue of Denomination Identity and of the future role of the ANSR Research Panel, the question of whether the relatively uninformed opinions of local church leaders should be a part of the denominational decision-making process seems important. Should a denomination like ours periodically listen to representatives of the various constituencies of the church? Should the Listening Post now be discontinued or improved and continued?

There are several factors which would, I believe, favor continuation of a systemic mechanism for listening to the grass roots. Each seems to include a corresponding objection to such a tool. The strongest objection may be that the viewpoint of the local church on issues facing the church is too limited to be useful. It is probably not possible from this viewpoint to see all of the complexities which should be taken into consideration as denominational leaders guide the church. However, this limited viewpoint is one valid, important viewpoint. If it is not heard,

understood, and considered, then the people who are in a position to obtain enough data to address the complex questions have not obtained enough of the data important to the issue.

A second objection might be that the great questions of identity, vision, and mission, need the spiritual depth, the clear insight, and the broad experience of general leaders. It is not wise to govern by opinion poll. Still leaders of local churches, both pastors and laity, are a vital link in the implementation of denominational policies and programs. They raise the funds for the missions of the church. They communicate and interpret the vision of the denominational leaders to the members in the pews. While their opinions and needs may usually not be the overriding factors in denominational decision-making, implementation will probably be more efficient if they are consulted. Great visions and noble missions will fail unless lay members and local pastors accept and implement them.

Another major purpose for such a mechanism as the Nazarene panel may be the raising of institutional morale. Within the theme of Denominational Identity lies the issue of maintaining morale within a mature religious organization. In that connection it is interesting to observe that the Nazarene denomination has many characteristics which fit most readily into the fourth stage of David O. Moberg's theory of the life cycle of the church — the institutional stage. According to Moberg, this is the first stage of decline. In it the organization tends to become an end in itself which is not responsive to the needs and opinions of its members.

In a similar analysis, Carl F. George draws on Phillip Kotler's *Marketing for Non-Profit Organizations* to point out the dangers of "The Unresponsive Organization," He observes that the unresponsive organization "does not encourage inquiries, complaints, suggestions, or opinions from its customers. It does not measure the current customer satisfaction or needs. It does not train its staff to be customer-minded." Therefore, according to George, the unresponsive organization tends to suffer decline caused by members' frustration, rebellion, apathy, or withdrawal. Of course, the problem as the potential situation these descriptions suggest. However, we are an institution with some of the typical characteristics of other institutions. Therefore, perceptions of responsiveness are a factor worthy of careful consideration.

If we decide that we should know the satisfaction, needs, and preferences of pastors and laity, the question of how to listen, and convince them we are listening, remains. We use several means. The annual reports of the pastors provide considerable information. These reports have the advantage that they obtain information from every church. They have the disadvantage that they do not always obtain the information we need to know. Another means is direct contact. As denominational leaders are in the field, they listen. This is probably the best information. However, it has the disadvantage that leaders cannot spend enough time in the field to talk to everyone, or even enough to interview a representative sample of pastors and lay leaders.

Surveys, such as the Listening Post, provide another means. Surveys of satisfaction, needs, preferences, and perhaps even complaints provide an effective method for demonstrating the responsiveness of the denomination to pastors and churches. Since morale tends to be affected by perceptions of organizational responsiveness, the Listening Post may serve a worth purpose if it convincingly communicates that our denomination is responsive.

Policies

Perhaps the most significant policy question to be considered is that of whether research findings should be communicated, and to whom? The issue of dissemination of information is an important one. It seems evident that some balance between too much and too little reporting is needed. Research will not inform decision-making unless findings are communicated. One criticism of headquarters from research has been that studies are conducted by the reports are not circulated widely enough that all areas of the church can take them into account in their planning. However, some information is obviously sensitive and should be seen only by a few people directly affected. Widespread knowledge and censorship remain, I suppose, in a necessary tension. Too much of either may be destructive. Unless information is shared, we are unnecessarily ignorant. However, if too much is shared, we are unnecessarily harmed.

The need for balance is, of course, easier to recognize than to achieve. Spiritually strong, wise, loyal, committed, sincere leaders will not always agree regarding the beneficial vs. the provocative or damaging nature of the finding which might be reported.

On the one hand, the rights of respondents must be protected, the confidentiality of their responses preserved. Agencies using the Listening Post who need a proprietary interest in the data generated for their use must be able to decide when and how to release the information.

On the other hand, as noted earlier, morale benefits are created by the responsiveness of organizations. Unless the grass roots hear that we have listened, the net effect may be the same as if we had not listened. And, unless there are compelling reasons for limiting access integrity would seem to dictate that findings should be routinely reported in order that conclusions may be scrutinized, tested, and supported or corrected. To accomplish this other researchers should be granted access to the data and prevent us from providing reports or summaries of responses to respondents in order to reward their participation, it is more difficult to maintain participation by panel members for the first four years of a quadrennium. During this quadrennium several panel members have asked for such summaries.

Proposals for the 1989–1993 Quadrennium

I am not convinced that my viewpoint should prevail on questions of purpose, policy, or practice. However, it does not seem to me that it would be helpful to raise some of the issues which might be addressed by presenting some tangible proposals. So, with this brief review of the first quadrennium of the Nazarene panel, the Listening Post, as a background I would like to offer a few proposals. I understand that this is rather presumptuous. Some of the proposals would commit money from budgets for which I do not have to answer and which are already strained. Some would require time and energy from busy churchmen whose schedules are already too full. Still, the great potential of the project helps me overcome my modesty and reluctance.

Continuation

First, I would propose that Listening Post be continued for another quadrennium. I believe, the contribution of this instrument to the denomination has been significant enough to justify renewal and continuation.

Samples

Second, I believe that two basic samples, one laity and the other ministerial, should again be selected. The panel of ministers/congregations seems to have been adequate for the interests of the users of the Listening Post. It might be useful this quadrennium to follow the pastors as well as the congregations as the normal pastoral moves take place, at least for a final survey of change in 1993.

Third, I propose that a change be made in the nature of the laity panel. Several of the users of the Listening Post would really have preferred a representative sample of lay members rather than lay leaders or local lay officers. Therefore, I would propose that we use a multi-stage sampling process in which we first draw a random sample of congregations, perhaps those selected for the minister's sample, and then randomly select the panel from the lists of members supplied by pastors. This method will obviously be more difficult to implement. We will have to convince pastors to cooperate with us. However, other denominations and organizations have successfully implemented similar designs. The initial challenge should be worth the effort as the panel permits users to examine the wide range of lay members. These panels should be in place for the fall of the first year of the quadrennium: 1989. Therefore, the sampling process should begin immediately.

Fourth, I propose that we during this quadrennium we design methods for extending the Listening Post into the international areas of the denomination. When General Assembly Commissions make use of the panel, their mandate usually includes a responsibility to research the needs of the church beyond the borders of the United States. Language, geographic, cultural, and other barriers make cross-cultural research more difficult. However, I am convinced we should enlarge the vision on ANSR to the challenge of serving the International church.

Instrument Construction

Fifth, I propose that ANSR take a more active role in the implementation of Listening Post surveys. Personnel changes and restriction in the Church Growth Division make it difficult to design mail, enter, analyze, and report findings from two questionnaires each year. Therefore, I propose that ANSR members volunteer their time, on a rotating basis, to write the instruments and draft reports from the analyses. Dr. Sullivan and I have discussed this possibility. Our idea is that for each Listening Post survey a team of two ANSR members would meet in for a couple of days, expenses paid by the Church Growth Division, to put the questionnaire together and would return several weeks later to draft report from the analysis. I am willing to work with each team to make the time together as productive as possible by facilitating preparation for team meetings and completing final drafts. If this proposal is

acceptable, we will probably need to establish the first three teams at this meeting to cover the spring 1989, fall 1989, and spring 1990 surveys.

Sixth, I propose that the first and last surveys of the quadrennium be designed to use the sample as panels. In addition to the benefit of having samples in place whenever pressing questions need a rapid response, there is the potential in a panel to examine change over time. Since our panels are designed to serve throughout a quadrennium, we have the potential to examine trends in the denominational identity. Therefore, I believe it is important for us to design the first instrument to address important issues of denominational change or stability.

Seventh, I propose that a conscious effort be made to balance confidential topics and information, over which some agency of the church must and should maintain proprietary control, with topics and information of general interest which may be freely reported to respondents, to the church, and to the larger community. Our policy might be to devote part of each survey to matters of general interest and part to matters which must remain confidential might be followed by a questionnaire from which the data and findings could be widely shared for the good of the church.

Administration

Eighth, I propose that some adjustment be made in the administration of the surveys. I believe we should move to the use of machine readable response sheets to facilitate more rapid processing of information. The effect this might have on response rates should be offset by efforts to convince respondents of the advantages of timely reporting and financial efficiency. As time has passed, panel participation has declined. This was not, of course, a surprise. However, I believe we can improve in this area. The budget for mailings should probably include at least one follow-up mailing for each survey. Finally, respondents should periodically receive something for their effort. This might take such forms as a letter of praise from a respected leader or a summary of their responses to the issues covered in a previous survey.

Ninth, I propose that questionnaires, data on magnetic media, computer printouts, and reports of findings from the Listening Post be preserved by the Archives of the Church of the Nazarene according to the procedures and policies the director of the Archives recommends provided that the confidentiality of the respondents be strictly preserved forever.

Conclusion

If each Nazarene could sit down for a discussion with the leaders of our denomination, it would be enlightening. We could be challenged first hand with their vision of the church. We could spend some time in prayer with them over the burdens they carry. They could add our needs to their prayer lists. We could bring them up to date on God's blessing and leadership in our lives and churches. We would no doubt go from the encounter with a clearer understanding of their demanding task and a deeper commitment to the Lord and His church. They would have a more complete understanding of our needs and the work of the church in our situation.

Denominational leaders do, of course, draw on many resources as they make the decisions which shape the future of the church. Their greatest resource is prayer and Divine guidance. Their rich experience has prepared them for their task. But, knowing the viewpoints and needs of pastors and laymembers is also important for the leaders who are forming denominational strategies and policies. As they travel throughout the church carrying out their responsibilities, they make it a point to listen, to know us and our needs. Inevitably, however, some needs and viewpoints are missed. The demands are too many and the time too limited to hear all sides of the issues.

The Nazarene Listening Post has been established to help make all viewpoints available to the decision-makers. Of course, we cannot all sit down with our leaders to share burdens and communicate our viewpoints. However, through the Listening Post another channel of communication has been opened up.