

Nazarene Myth–Conceptions

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Each year, the Association of Nazarene Sociologists of Religion (ANSR) has invited Dale Jones, Administrative Director of the Church Growth Research Center, to sit in on its meetings and contribute to its discussions. In ANSR's 1996 session, Dale mentioned the results of several studies that seemed to contradict conventional wisdom—about merging churches, about neighboring churches, and about Florida Space Coast. When preparing for its 1997 meeting, the ANSR session planners asked Dale to prepare a paper documenting these and other topics. This is that documentation.

Merging churches

Why does this town need two Churches of the Nazarene? Let's put them together and have one really effective church.

There may be some valid reasons for combining Churches of the Nazarene in some locations. High expenses, population decline, limited facilities—any of these may be factors in the decision to merge existing congregations into one. But evangelistic effectiveness is not a likely result from a merge.

When Churches of the Nazarene are officially merged, a notation is made in the General Secretary's records that the defunct congregation was not officially disorganized, but instead transferred its members into another congregation virtually *en masse*. Such mergers happen rather infrequently in the Church of the Nazarene—perhaps six or seven each year—but over time enough occur that results can be analyzed.

What would make a merger “evangelistically successful”? Essentially, the Church Growth Research Center considers the merge to be productive if, after four years, the resulting congregation is at least as large as the combined separate congregations were four years prior to the merger. Some time lapse before and after the merger was indicated by the merger process itself: while discussions are proceeding and while ministry adjustments are being made, attendance and membership may be affected by the concentration on buildings and organization. The four-year period was selected based on studies of newly started churches.

Since worship attendance figures are especially incomplete prior to 1976, 1980 is the first merger year to be studied. Likewise, since 1996 figures are just now available, 1992 is the last merger year in this report.

Between 1980 and 1992, 84 Churches of the Nazarene in the United States were officially reported as merged with other congregations. Of the 84, 5 have not been identified with new congregations. Another 18 were technically merged, but contributed no members to other congregations. In two cases, a merged congregation merged again within four years; the statistics for the three congregations were taken four years before the first merger and four years after the final merger. This leaves 59 mergers whose effects can be measured.

A "successful" merger would result in a congregation with attendance larger than the combined attendance of the previous congregations. A "single church decline" merger would result in at least 10% attendance growth for the larger of the merging congregations, but less people than the combined churches had. A less than 10% growth for the larger congregation would be classified as a "single church elimination" merger. An actual drop in attendance from the larger congregation's average would be an "unsuccessful" merger.

Results are also shown by metropolitan status and congregational size. The metropolitan status is "Major Metro" for churches in metropolitan areas of 750,000 or more; "Other Metro" for churches in smaller metropolitan areas; and "Non Metro" for churches outside currently defined MSAs. The congregational size is the average worship attendance of the larger (largest) merging congregation four years before the merger.

	Successful	Single Church Decline	Single Church Elimination	Unsuccessful
Total	14	20	5	20
Percentage	24%	34%	8%	34%
community				
Major Metro	8	11	0	12
Other Metro	3	6	4	6
Non Metro	3	3	1	2
size of larger				
under 50	3			2
50-99	7	5	1	8
100 or more	4	15	4	10

To help an existing congregation grow larger, merging with a smaller congregation may be effective about half the time, especially in small towns and rural areas. However, to actually impact a community more effectively, mergers are not effective. The resulting congregation is more likely to hurt the larger group than to reach more people than the combined churches did.

There are other factors that influence the decision to merge; financial considerations are often important. However, the deliberate creation of one unit when there were two with the express purpose of creating a more evangelistic church has not proven effective in the Church of the Nazarene in recent years.

Near Neighbors

If we start another congregation too close to our church's location, it will hurt our outreach possibilities.

One model of evangelism posits a certain "Nazarene potential" in a community. If the potential is large enough, a second Church of the Nazarene is warranted. Otherwise, additional congregations will stifle one another's growth. By studying the average size of congregations and their proximity to other congregations, this model can be tested.

Since most people readily recognize that the "Nazarene potential" applies differently by cultural group, only Churches of the Nazarene identified as predominantly White, English-speaking were studied. Further, since different types of communities are assumed to have different potential, the churches were further identified by eleven community types, basically determined by population concentrations within specified distances of the church.

	Anglo Churches with Nearby Anglo Churches		Anglo Churches without Nearby Anglo Churches		
	Number	Avg. AM	Number	Avg. AM	
Major Urban Core	159	126	30	71	250,000
Large Cities	292	158	81	122	100,000
Fringe Major Urban	299	141	85	136	100,000
Small City or Suburban	207	137	116	118	50,000
Suburban	200	120	115	111	50,000
Small City Core	75	167	99	118	25,000
Fringe City	192	99	235	96	25,000
Small Town	59	95	295	90	5,000
Bordering Small Town	105	99	483	77	5,000
Near Small Town	132	62	490	62	5,000
Rural	66	46	890	46	10

In actual experience, the presence of additional congregations within three miles of an Anglo Church of the Nazarene seems to increase the outreach effectiveness of that congregation. The average worship size increases in almost all community types with at least one additional congregation nearby.

Community types are based upon population within three radii of the church. These are used consistently by the Church Growth Research Center in its analyses. The final column, "Minimum Population within 5 Miles," is provided as a rough guide to the community size. Worship figures are from the 1995 district journals.

Space Coast

Launching a new district in the United States is no longer wise. Look at the Florida Space Coast effort--within ten years, the district was dissolved back into Central Florida.

In 1985, the Central Florida district launched a pioneer area along its eastern shore, the Florida Space Coast. This was part of an effort by the Church Growth Division to identify and evangelize under-reached portions of the United States. This plan was well-documented in Dr. Bill M. Sullivan's doctoral presentation, and will not be further described here. However, the effectiveness of this plan is regarded as minimal, based upon the Florida Space Coast record.

We will examine that record briefly.

When the Pioneer Area was first proposed to the Central Florida Advisory Board, the 1984 statistics listed 6 churches with 601 members and 611 average worship attendance. The district population was estimated at 500,000 with high growth rates anticipated in the future.

By the time the district was created in 1988, there were 16 active organized churches with 1,134 members and 1,212 in worship each week.

In 1993, a change in the district superintendency provided for a temporary superintendent while a decision was made about the viability of the district. At that point, several of the reported churches had been disorganized, and it was generally believed that the district would not remain separate.

In 1995, the district was reabsorbed by Central Florida, and the last clerical transfers were made in the General Secretary's 1996 statistical report.

In the ten years prior to the creation of the pioneer area, the zone's churches received a total of 394 new Nazarenes. In the seven years of the district's existence, 1,172 new Nazarenes were received. From 1976 to 1985, annual membership growth exceeded 10% only once, when a new church was organized in 1977; membership actually declined three of those years. In the district's first five years (until the temporary superintendent), growth averaged 12% annually, with 3% growth as the lowest annual change. Finances improved as well—from under half a million raised for all purposes in 1985 to over one million in 1989, with increases annually until 1993.

If district creation is a problem in the United States, it is in the area of financial expectations, not evangelism. The money and effort expended in the Florida Space Coast resulted in excellent growth in an under-reached portion of the United States.

Large Districts

So many small districts in the denomination are a drain on our resources. Let's put some of these districts together to evangelize more effectively. And we certainly don't want any more district divisions!

Previous studies have indicated that Nazarene districts in the USA with more than 75 churches do not grow as well as smaller districts. The chart above again shows the pattern first noted in the early 1980s. If we are to get good growth out of larger districts, we probably need a different organizational model.

Actually, several of the largest districts seem to have had better-than-expected growth since 1980. These are Alabama, West Virginia, Michigan, West Texas, and Southern California. Only West Texas was not divided during this time period.

If there are problems with creating new districts, they are not problems of evangelistic effectiveness.

Size Effectiveness

Smaller churches are more personal. That's why they grow better than large congregations.

In the early 1970s, the growth rates of our large churches were considerably less than those of our smaller congregations. But during the 1980s, Nazarenes in Canada and the United States learned how to manage growth in our larger congregations.

In 1996, nearly half our membership growth occurred in congregations running 250 or more in worship the previous year. Another third came in our mid-size churches.

1995 AM Worship Size	1995 Full Members	Gain in Members	1995 AM Avg.	Gain in AM Avg.	New Nazarenes	Congregations
0	5,967	833	-	3,347	833	387
1 to 49	77,258	293	58,346	223	4,681	1,926
50 to 99	143,024	938	114,814	(1,603)	7,185	1,624
100 to 249	219,678	3,304	175,584	237	10,676	1,181
250 to 999	140,153	4,051	116,732	2,930	7,109	299
1,000 or more	23,536	767	20,067	528	922	13
Total Can/USA	609,616	10,186	485,543	5,662	31,406	5,430
% of Total						
0	1%	8%	0%	NA	3%	7%
1 to 49	13%	3%	12%	NA	15%	35%
50 to 99	23%	9%	24%	NA	23%	30%
100 to 249	36%	32%	36%	NA	34%	22%

250 to 999	23%	40%	24%	NA	23%	6%
1,000 or more	4%	8%	4%	NA	3%	0%

percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

Since our churches running from 50 to 99 in worship showed an attendance decline in 1996, it is difficult to express the gain of the large churches as a percent of total gain. Still, their gains were equivalent to 60% of the gain in worship last year. Thus, the largest 6% of our churches were responsible for about half our gains in membership and more than half the attendance gains in the 1996 assembly year.

Actual percentages of growth by size category are also revealing. Our congregations running less than 100 grew less than 1% in membership and worship in 1996, while those running 250 or more grew from 2% to 3% in both categories.

1995 AM	Percent	Gain	New Nazarenes as Percent	
Worship Size	Members	Attendance	of Members	of Attenders
0	14.0%	NA	3.9%	NA
1 to 49	0.4%	0.4%	6.1%	8.0%
50 to 99	0.7%	-1.4%	5.0%	6.3%
100 to 249	1.5%	0.1%	4.9%	6.1%
250 to 999	2.9%	2.5%	5.1%	6.1%
1,000 or more	3.3%	2.6%	3.9%	4.6%

percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

However, in soul winning as expressed in terms of new Nazarenes, our smaller congregations are more effective. The new Nazarenes in our smallest congregations were equivalent to 8% of the previous year’s worship attendance. In our largest congregations, they represented less than 5% of the previous year’s worship attendance.

Another way of phrasing this is that it took 12 attendees to win 1 new Nazarene in our smallest churches, but it took nearly 22 to win 1 in the largest churches.

People in smaller churches are able to win more converts than those in larger congregations. But it would seem the larger churches are able to retain more converts.

New Church Effectiveness

Why do we want to start more small churches? Investing in our existing congregations makes more sense.

Large churches do produce gains in the Church of the Nazarene, but it is important to realize that new churches also produce excellent growth. With less than one-fifth of our churches begun since 1980, over two-fifths of our gains have come from these newer congregations.

Church Org'd	Member Gain	Worship Gain	New Nazarenes	Works
1980 or Later	4,145	3,417	6,497	971
1960 to 1979	891	-385	4,000	797
1940 to 1959	1,305	806	8,712	1,823
Before 1940	3,845	1,824	12,197	1,839
Total	10,186	5,652	31,406	5,430
1980 or Later	41%	NA	21%	18%
1960 to 1979	9%	NA	13%	15%
1940 to 1959	13%	NA	28%	34%
Before 1940	38%	NA	39%	34%

percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

And in worship, the newer congregations gained more than all the older churches combined.

Membership gains in our oldest churches—those begun before 1940—were nearly as great as in the newer congregations. However, there were twice as many of these “old” churches as newer—those organized since 1980 or still counted as missions. In worship and membership gain, then, our best results came from our newest congregations.

While new Nazarenes were significant in our new works, the more established congregations did proportionately as well in outreach. Retention seems to be better in our new congregations, however.

We do want our churches to grow better than they have, and we do not want to disparage the evangelism in our older congregations. Still, the most effective evangelism in the Church of the Nazarene of Canada and the United States is through the growth of new churches.