

# An Analysis Concerning the Benefit of NewStart and the Potential of Growth Among Existing Churches in the Church of the Nazarene

A question has been raised that asks, “If NewStart is so important, how come we have increased our membership by 160,000 even though the number of churches has declined?” The question is important because the implication suggests that we should put all our resources into helping existing churches grow, and not be so concerned with adding new churches.

Using the annual statistics kept by the General Secretary’s Office at Nazarene Headquarters, I have compiled church data for the period from 1980 to 2002. The data was organized so that comparisons could be made for churches that were organized before 1980 to those that have been started during the 1980 to 2002 period. Churches organized before 1980 were also placed into size categories (based on their 1980 worship attendance) in order to examine the affect size has on potential growth.

Table 1  
Number of Churches and NewStarts<sup>1</sup> by Category and Year

Year	# of Active Churches Organized Before 1980	# of Active Churches Organized Since 1980	# of Active NewStarts	# of Inactive Churches and NewStarts	Total # of Works
1980	4,818	52	29	125	5,024
1981	4,790	114	43	129	5,076
1982	4,747	163	67	139	5,116
1983	4,734	216	71	131	5,152
1984	4,692	291	75	140	5,198
1985	4,656	330	72	150	5,208
1986	4,617	384	113	169	5,283
1987	4,589	447	134	197	5,367
1988	4,550	501	210	234	5,495
1989	4,504	558	153	254	5,469
1990	4,480	581	134	269	5,464
1991	4,452	604	130	277	5,463
1992	4,423	633	128	255	5,439
1993	4,391	670	123	265	5,449
1994	4,338	688	111	297	5,434
1995	4,302	705	115	303	5,425
1996	4,263	718	129	320	5,430
1997	4,217	741	141	330	5,429
1998	4,183	758	161	333	5,435
1999	4,138	771	182	349	5,440
2000	4,107	776	227	362	5,472
2001	4,056	783	248	377	5,464
2002	3,999	800	267	352	5,418

<sup>1</sup> “Church” is used when referring to organized works. “NewStart” is used when referring to a work that is not yet organized. The term “work” is used when referring to both churches and NewStarts. “Active” denotes a work that actively meets, as opposed to “inactive”, which may still have property or members but does not meet.

Table 1 shows the total number of works each year by breaking them down into 4 categories: 1) Those organized before 1980 and still active, 2) those organized from 1980 to 2002 and still active, 3) those that are NewStarts (not yet organized) and still active, and 4) any work that is inactive. Together, these 4 categories add up to the total number of works in the USA and Canada in any given year. (Note: Since Table 1's figures are cumulative, the columns should not be totaled.)

The first thing to notice in Table 1 is that the total number of works actually increased by 394 from 1980 to 2002. This will surprise some at first, but closer examination shows that the peak was reached in 1988 at 5,495, so that there has been a decline since then of 77 works. Also, the rising number of inactive works somewhat masks additional losses.

For example, if one only considers active churches the declines appear even steeper. Contrary to the gain in total works from 1980 to 2002, active churches decreased by 71 during the time period (in Table 1 add the first two columns—Active Churches Organized Before 1980 and Active Churches Organized Since 1980); and from the 1989 peak of 5,062, active churches have fallen by 263.

However, ***the most telling decline is in the number of active churches that were organized before 1980—a total loss of 819 (-17%)***. At that rate, all of the churches organized before 1980 will be lost over the next 130 years. In fact, it probably will not take 130 years to lose the remaining 3,999 churches because the rate of loss will most likely accelerate as these churches continue to age.

We should not be overly concerned that churches are disorganized; after all, everything eventually dies. Churches are affected by things like population shifts, economic changes, and the aging of the founding generation, just to name a few factors. But the fact that churches have a life cycle and are eventually disorganized is precisely the reason why new churches are so important.

One's initial assumption might be that membership will show a corresponding decline? But looking at Table 2 one is surprised to see that total membership increased by 159,918, and that membership in the active churches organized before 1980 actually rose by 85,919 (even though we just noted that the total number of churches in this category fell by 819). Coupled with the decline in the number of churches, the average membership for churches in this category increased from 102 to 144. Results like this may cause us to consider closing all our small churches; but the results need further scrutiny.

First allow me to give a statistical caution—rising averages can be misleading. The larger a church the more likely it is to still be active in subsequent years. In other words, we are closing small churches and this causes the overall average to rise.

Furthermore, the rate of membership growth in these churches was in decline and is now negative. In 1980 membership growth for churches organized before 1980 was 1.3%. From 1980 to 2001 the growth rate steadily declined so that in 2001 it was only 0.2%. ***And last year churches in this category actually declined in membership for the first time, posting a 0.3% loss***—a trend that is sure to continue in the “year of membership audit and reconciliation” and beyond. So, although churches in this category showed a membership increase of 85,919 over the past 22 years, they are now beginning to post membership losses and, as the trend continues, will do so at an increasing pace.

Table 2  
Membership by Category and Year

<b>Year</b>	<b>Membership in Active Churches Organized Before 1980</b>	<b>Membership in Active Churches Organized Since 1980</b>	<b>Membership in Active NewStarts</b>	<b>Membership in Inactive Churches and NewStarts</b>	<b>Total Membership</b>
1980	489,808	1,520	0	717	492,045
1981	496,087	3,176	0	805	500,068
1982	500,390	5,258	0	1,173	506,821
1983	508,056	7,237	0	985	516,278
1984	513,826	9,958	0	1,197	524,981
1985	517,481	11,690	0	1,449	530,620
1986	522,623	14,633	181	1,803	539,240
1987	530,836	18,535	328	2,430	552,129
1988	535,584	21,817	983	2,798	561,182
1989	539,514	25,833	772	3,309	569,428
1990	541,360	28,643	671	3,926	574,600
1991	546,216	31,885	1,027	3,940	583,068
1992	552,957	36,165	986	3,834	593,942
1993	555,018	40,513	914	4,294	600,739
1994	556,808	44,071	664	5,392	606,935
1995	558,426	46,545	700	4,935	610,606
1996	563,319	49,751	873	5,859	619,802
1997	567,417	53,003	1,116	6,059	627,595
1998	571,111	56,121	1,350	6,441	635,023
1999	573,229	56,725	1,792	6,230	637,976
2000	576,582	60,587	2,242	6,041	645,452
2001	577,467	63,802	2,882	6,879	651,030
2002	575,727	66,783	2,901	6,552	651,963

A comparison should be made between the churches organized before 1980 and those organized since 1980. In 2002 the churches organized before 1980 represented 74% of all works, but their membership gain of 85,919 only accounted 54% percent of the total increase in membership. Compare that to the churches organized since 1980. These churches only represented 15% of all works in 2002, yet their net membership gain of 65,263 accounted for 41% of the total increase in membership. It would seem that newer congregations are more productive and/or more efficient in producing membership growth.

Comparisons of worship attendance in Table 3 are even more striking. As a group, churches organized before 1980 showed an attendance loss of 2,490 from 1980 to 2002. Compare this to the increase of 58,838 worshipers in churches organized since 1980. Some may argue that the above comparison is not fair because the growth in the number of worshipers since 1980 is mainly due to the increasing number of churches in this category; but that is precisely the point being illustrated. Membership and attendance growth is only sustained by the starting of new churches.

Table 3  
Worship Attendance by Category and Year

Year	Worship Attend. in Active Churches Organized Before 1980	Worship Attend. in Active Churches Organized Since 1980	Worship Attend. in Active NewStarts	Worship Attend. in Inactive Churches and NewStarts	Total Worship Attendance
1980	454,893	1,790	374	41	457,098
1981	454,305	3,839	565	73	458,782
1982	461,019	6,062	1,241	164	468,486
1983	468,184	8,599	1,404	22	478,209
1984	461,935	11,882	1,443	60	475,320
1985	458,666	14,028	2,416	180	475,290
1986	455,681	17,084	2,968	205	475,938
1987	453,120	20,478	3,055	459	477,112
1988	449,119	23,583	4,134	384	477,220
1989	444,690	26,861	3,980	410	475,941
1990	442,507	30,543	3,985	1,014	478,049
1991	450,060	33,433	4,390	253	488,136
1992	447,329	35,888	4,138	190	487,545
1993	442,402	38,652	3,785	203	485,042
1994	438,418	41,313	3,572	259	483,562
1995	437,892	43,858	4,179	335	486,264
1996	439,630	46,787	4,272	516	491,205
1997	445,786	49,073	4,999	398	500,256
1998	446,654	51,874	5,355	363	504,246
1999	448,817	52,210	5,460	344	506,831
2000	450,939	56,376	6,431	458	514,204
2001	448,301	57,698	7,267	509	513,775
2002	452,403	60,628	7,222	375	520,628

### Conclusions

So why is NewStart so important if the Church of the Nazarene has been able to increase membership by 159,918 even though the number of churches has declined?" The first reason is because the decline in the total number of churches started near the middle of the 22-year period, with the peak number of active works occurring in 1988. Between 1980 and 2002 the number of active works actually increased by 167.

A second reason is that, as a group, the active churches organized before 1980 were able to post membership gains for most of the 22-year period. However, their rate of growth steadily declined, and last year's rate was actually negative. When worship attendance is considered, this category of churches had an attendee loss of 2,490 over the 22-year period. (Note: An individual church of any age may show growth in either membership and attendance; but as a group, the older congregations become the more likely they will be to have cumulative losses.)

Finally, much of the total membership growth was because of NewStarts and churches organized since 1980. Even though the number of these works represents only 20% of all 2002 works, without these churches and NewStarts membership growth would have been cut almost in half, and worship attendance would have declined rather than showing a net increase of 63,530.

While resources are necessary to help existing churches grow, population shifts, immigration, generational changes and unreached areas are just some of the reasons why NewStarts are needed. There is no conflict between growing existing Nazarene churches and increasing the total number of Nazarene churches through NewStarts.

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