

# A CENTURY OF ONE AND MANY

## *A History of One Hundred Years of the Church of the Nazarene*

The Nazarene Centennial is an anniversary, not a birthday. It marks a marriage that linked existing families and created a new one. A century ago, the Nazarenes were a predominantly American family with relatives in other countries. Today we are an international family of congregations on every inhabited continent. No single language, race, or nationality claims a majority of our members. As an expression of the Holiness Movement and its emphasis on the sanctified life, our founders came together to form one people who then went forth into the world to become a people of many cultures and languages.

### GENESIS OF A CHURCH

The Church of the Nazarene was neither the invention of one person or group nor the expression of merely one idea. A unique child of the Wesleyan-Holiness Movement, it arose from a widespread yearning among a portion of the Holiness people who had become estranged from the Methodist Episcopal Churches and sought new connections and united action beyond their local ministries.

The core of early Nazarene identity derived from the Wesleyan-Holiness Movement, which originated in the 1830s. Its leaders sought to bring John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection to a place of honor in American Methodism. The movement was spurred initially by Rev. Timothy Merritt of Boston, publisher of *The Guide to Christian Perfection* magazine, and Mrs. Phoebe Palmer, a significant lay leader in New York City, then the capital of American Methodism. Palmer directed the influential Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness which met weekly in her parlor, and for over 30 years her preaching and writing encouraged the expanding Holiness Movement in the United States, Canada, and the British Isles. The National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness was founded by Methodist ministers in 1867, marking the beginning of the movement's second generation. Evolving into the National Holiness Association (NHA), it inspired scores of local and state Holiness associations. Then, in its third generation, the Wesleyan-Holiness movement splintered, divided by race, regionalism, differing views on the church, baptism, the Second Coming of Christ, women's roles in the church, and loyalty to Episcopal Methodism.

The Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene originated as committed leaders strove to unite the splintered holiness factions. Phineas Bresee, a native of the state of New York, served as a pastor and district superintendent for a quarter-century in the Midwest and completed his ministry on the Pacific coast. His service as a vice-president of the NHA stirred a yearning to promote unity among Holiness people. C. B. Jernigan was instrumental in uniting Holiness factions from Georgia to New Mexico, and C. W. Ruth, a leading NHA evangelist, helped acquaint all constituent groups that united in 1907 and 1908 to form the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene. The Nazarenes became (with the present-day Wesleyan Church) one of two great ingathering denominations that eventually drew together a majority of the Holiness Movement's independent strands. By the close of 1915, the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene embraced seven previous denominations.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These were: the Central Evangelical Holiness Association (New England), the Association of Pentecostal Churches of America (Middle Atlantic States), New Testament Church of Christ (South), Independent Holiness Church (Southwest), the Church of the Nazarene (West Coast), the Pentecostal Church of Scotland, and the Pentecostal Mission (Southeast). Several mergers occurred regionally before regional churches, in turn, united together in 1907 and 1908.

## **CORE CONVICTIONS**

The spiritual vision of the early Nazarenes centered in John Wesley's core doctrines: justification by grace through faith, sanctification by grace through faith, entire sanctification as a distinct inheritance available to every Christian, and the witness of the Spirit to God's work in human lives.

Because these convictions were held by all the splinter groups in the Wesleyan-Holiness Movement, a key question is this: Why, out of over 20 small Holiness denominations, did three particular churches unite in 1907 and 1908, while others did not? What uniquely bound this trio of regional denominations that cast their lot together?

In addition to the Wesleyan doctrines of grace, the Church of the Nazarene, the Association of Pentecostal Churches of America, and the Holiness Church of Christ held other convictions in common:

- Full liberty of conscience about baptism, affirming the validity of infant baptism and believer's baptism alike, and affirming the validity of sprinkling, pouring, and immersion as acceptable modes of baptism.
- Full liberty of conscience regarding millennial theology.
- The conviction that all lay and clergy offices of the church should be open to women, including ordination to the ministry. All three denominations had ordained women in their ranks.
- A moderate view toward divine healing, affirming it but not excluding the use of medical professionals and modern medicine.

Other Holiness denominations that insisted on premillennialism or immersion as a basis of membership, or rejected the ordination of women, or excluded the use of medical agencies were incompatible with the broader vision of the Nazarene founders.

## **OUT OF MANY, ONE—UNITY IN HOLINESS**

C. W. Ruth joined Bresee's church in Los Angeles in 1901 and remained there for 18 months as associate pastor before returning to full-time revivalism, his first love. Between 1906 and 1908, he introduced to one another all merger partners who participated in "the year of uniting"—October 1907 to October 1908.

The First and Second General Assemblies were like the two bookends of this process.

In October 1907, the Association of Pentecostal Churches of America and the Church of the Nazarene met in Chicago to complete a merger under discussion for nearly a year. Though this was the tenth general meeting of each group, it was designated as the First General Assembly of the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene—the name chosen for the united group. Phineas Bresee and Hiram F. Reynolds were elected general superintendents.

In April 1908, Bresee organized a congregation in Peniel, Texas, the administrative center of the Holiness Association of Texas. Many key leaders of that body joined the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene at that time.

The Pennsylvania Conference of the Holiness Christian Church, which Ruth had once headed, united in September 1908.

In October 1908, the Second General Assembly was held at Pilot Point, Texas, the Holiness Church of Christ headquarters. The “year of uniting” ended with the merger of the southern body with its northern counterpart. E. P. Ellyson was elected to join Bresee and Reynolds on the Board of General Superintendents.

The church name was shortened in 1919. The word “Pentecostal” had always been a synonym for “holiness” to the Wesleyan folks, but it was developing new popular meanings and was dropped by the Fifth General Assembly.

In 1923, the Sixth General Assembly designated the Second General Assembly, which brought “the year of uniting” to a close, as the denomination’s official anniversary date.

## **THE ENDURING SIGNIFICANCE OF PILOT POINT**



**A Shining Example of Holiness:  
Leaders who played key roles in  
the merger to become the  
Church of the Nazarene:  
Phineas Bresee (left) and  
C. B. Jernigan (right).**



Consider how unlikely the Pilot Point assembly was.

A divisive regionalism, so strong that it led to America’s bloody Civil War, had poisoned the well of American Christianity for four generations, splitting three of the largest denominations—Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians. Methodists did not reunite until 1939; Presbyterians did not do so until 1983; and there is no current prospect of a Baptist reunion.

Yet in 1908, in a town north of Dallas, Texas, three Holiness groups, each representing a different region of the United States, overcame their regional prejudices and married their fortunes.

Phineas Bresee, a staunch Yankee, had draped his pulpit in the American flag throughout much of the Civil War. His personal heroes were Methodist bishops Gilbert Haven, a staunch abolitionist who advocated marriage between the black and white races, and Matthew Simpson, who preached at Abraham Lincoln’s funerals in Washington D.C. and Springfield, Illinois.

On the same platform with Bresee was C. B. Jernigan, a native of Mississippi, whose father was a Confederate officer and whose mother had stood up to Yankee soldiers seeking to confiscate the family’s livestock to feed their army.

Those who gathered at Pilot Point to negotiate the merger of churches understood full well that they were breaking new ground in American Christianity. Their common experience of Christian holiness was breaking down their own walls of prejudice.

The union of churches at Pilot Point was a shining example of the social reality of Christian holiness. At the heart of the Christian message is a word of reconciliation: first between sinners and Divine Love, and second, among estranged members of the human family. Pilot Point signifies the reality that holiness heals hearts and unites people who are otherwise driven apart by sin and conflict.

## **BECOMING ONE AND PUTTING DOWN ROOTS**

The Church of the Nazarene sought stability in its first quarter-century. The publishing companies and papers of uniting groups were consolidated in 1912 to create the Nazarene Publishing House in Kansas City and *Herald of Holiness*, edited by B. F. Haynes, as the first denominational paper. *The Other Sheep* (later *World Mission*) magazine began publication in 1913 under founding editor C. A. McConnell. Both magazines were published until 1999, when they were discontinued in favor of *Holiness Today*, a new publication. In the meantime, Spanish, Portuguese, and French editions of *Herald of Holiness* appeared over the years.

A missions auxiliary (now Nazarene Missions International) was authorized in 1915 and a youth auxiliary (now Nazarene Youth International) in 1923. The General Board, created in 1923, brought stability to the denomination's corporate structure, replacing independent departments that had operated with little coordination.

The General Board allocated one unified budget for all general entities of the church.

## **OUT OF ONE, MANY—A MISSION TO THE WORLD**



**Mission to the World: General Board of Foreign Missions, 1914**

In unity the Church of the Nazarene went forth to become a people of many cultures and languages. In 1908 there were churches in the United States and Canada and organized work in India, Cape Verde, Mexico, and Japan. Nazarenes working in Africa under other mission agencies soon became official Nazarene missionaries, and work in China followed shortly. The Pentecostal Church of Scotland merged with the Nazarenes in 1915, bringing a network of congregations in Great Britain. The Pentecostal Mission, uniting the same year, brought additional work in Cuba and in Central and South America. There were congregations in Syria and Palestine by 1922. H. F. Reynolds advocated “a mission to the world,” and support for world evangelization became a distinguishing characteristic of Nazarene life. Along with churches and schools, Nazarenes built hospitals in China, Swaziland, and India in the 1920s and 1930s and in Papua New Guinea in the 1960s.



**Prompting a New Era for Missions:  
General Superintendent  
H. F. Reynolds in China, 1914**

The great era of Nazarene missions dawned after World War II as an explosion of missionary activity led the church into new areas like the Philippines and Papua New Guinea and to a fresh re-engagement in areas like Korea. The Mid-Century Crusade for Souls and other revival efforts characterized the church around the world. “Showers of Blessing” radio program began, followed by the Spanish broadcast “La Hora Nazarena” and later by broadcasts in other languages. Indigenous Holiness churches in Australia, Italy, and Nigeria united with Nazarenes between 1945 and 1990.

As the church grew culturally and linguistically diverse, it committed itself in 1980 to *internationalization*—a deliberate policy of being **one church of many congregations** worldwide, rather than splitting into national churches as earlier Protestant denominations had done. The communications and transportation revolutions of the 20th century enabled the church to take this step. By the 2001 General Assembly, 42 percent of delegates spoke English as their second language or did not speak it at all. Today over 60 percent of Nazarenes and 80 percent of the church’s 428 districts are outside the U.S. The early system of colleges in the U.S., Canada, and the British Isles has developed into a system of educational institutions worldwide, including graduate theological seminaries in North America, Central America, and the Asia-Pacific region; liberal arts colleges in Africa, Canada, Korea, and the United States; and nearly 40 theological schools worldwide.

## **A CHURCH OF ONE AND MANY**

Enriched by diversity, bonded in unity, what holds us together is greater than what distinguishes us. Our core values are firm: We are Christian. We are Holiness. We are missional. The mission of the Church of the Nazarene is to make Christlike disciples in the nations—disciples who hear, understand, and obey the teaching of Jesus. As a missional church, we are a discipling church.

The century ahead will present its own new and complex challenges, but we have a sense of our trajectory. As a church of one, we continue to seek many. As a church of many, we remain one.

—Stan Ingersol