

A Nazarene Roots Project Resource

Stan Ingersol
Denominational Archivist for the Church of the Nazarene

Interview by Bob Broadbooks, USA/Canada Regional Director

“Reflecting on Our Nazarene Heritage”

BB: It is our privilege today to be visiting with Stan Ingersol. Stan has been the Church of the Nazarene archivist for many years. He is an authority on the early days of the Church of the Nazarene. Stan, how did you come to into the Church of the Nazarene?

SI: I came into the Church of the Nazarene twice. Once by birth, and once by conviction. On my father's side of the family, I am a third-generation Nazarene. On my mother's side, I am a fifth-generation Nazarene. I joined the church at Ponca City, Oklahoma, when I was nine. A few weeks later, we moved to Ethiopia, which is where I grew up. We lived there for seven years and had only the slightest Nazarene connection during that time. Today, there are thousands of Ethiopian Nazarenes. In the late '50s/early '60s, there were probably no more than three dozen Nazarenes in the whole country, and all of us were Americans. We had a Sunday school at the college where my father taught.

Once a month, we would all travel to the Mennonite mission, which was one hour away. They would conduct an English language service. This was our religious life at that point. I did go to a missionary boarding school for two years with Presbyterian, Lutheran, Mennonite, and Baptist missionary kids.

When we came back to the States, I was ready to start my junior year of high school. I believed more and more that I did not fit into the Church of the Nazarene. I also started reading widely in an author who today we would classify as part of the “new age” religion. I thought when I started college, I would make a big break away from the church. My father had other plans. He said I would spend my freshman year at Bethany Nazarene College. There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it because all the Ingersols started at Bethany. So, I went to Bethany. I really did not believe in orthodox Christianity at that time because the new age things I had been reading were taking me in a different direction entirely.

That freshman year was a great year in many ways. The academic dean, Bob Griffin, preached in chapel, and I saw for the first time how one could be a Christian and an intellectual. This had a very deep impression on me. Richard Howard, who was then the New Testament professor at Bethany at that time, also had a great impact on me. In taking his Introduction to the New Testament and Introduction to the Old Testament classes, he became a steady witness and influence in my life that year. While I was doing my required reading in New Testament for spring semester, I came to the 11th chapter of John and the raising of Lazarus. I had a moment in which I knew I wanted to be a Christian. I

made an adult decision there in my dorm room, which was truly due to the influence of Dr. Howard. I was a history major, but I had already figured out that the religion courses were a lot more fun. I became a religion major the next semester. Rob Staples taught theology there at that time, and he is the one who really turned me into a Wesleyan. So, like I said, I became a Nazarene twice. Once by birth, and once by deep conviction.

BB: What a great story! It is wonderful how the Lord got hold of you as a freshman in college. We rejoice that he did.

SI: As you can imagine, I believe greatly in the Nazarene college system. I believe it has great value and needs to be supported.

BB: Well, what does church history mean to you?

SI: Church history means a lot of things, but I will try to boil it down to three things. When I became a religion major, I didn't really have a call to preach as such, but I knew that was where I needed to be. I didn't sort it out until my junior year when I took my first church history class, and I realized that my interest in history, my interest in religion, and a small interest in philosophy just all sort of wrapped up together. The first church history class I had was taught by Paul Gray at Bethany. It was then that a light bulb came on, and I realized this was something I wanted to do.

In terms of the significance of church history, I would say two things in particular. Firstly, I think the study of church history is a way to understand who we are. It is really about unpacking our identity—our individual identity as Christians and our social identity as the church. Our identities are constructed. They are constructed through interaction with other people and the kinds of social groups to which we belong. When the Christian church is important in your life, then the study of church history is a way of understanding those people and those forces that have shaped your life and really shaped who you are. For me, the study of church history has always been about self-discovery at one level. I think for anyone, a study of church history is essential. It helps us understand where we fit in the larger story of what God is doing.

Phineas Bresee once gave advice to a young pastor who had wanted to go to Pasadena College. This pastor had married and suddenly, the way was no longer open for him to go there. He asked Dr. Bresee what sort of program he should be on for self-improvement. Dr. Bresee outlined a very rigorous reading program. He told the young pastor that he should make the study of history and geography a primary study and, in addition, that he should read some of the leading religious magazines of the day and some of the leading secular magazines of the day. He also emphasized biography, which is a sort of history. It was clear that much of Bresee's own depth came from the wide reading that he did.

BB: As we have said, you are the archivist for the Nazarene Church, but what should pastors and local churches do with their records? Some of them have records that go way back. What is vital to keep and what should pastors do with those records?

SI: I think it is fair to say that we haven't done as good a job as we should in terms of engendering an ethic of preservation for congregational records. Some other denominations do a better job. They actually require their senates/conferences/regional entities to have an archives and history committee that then works with congregations. We haven't done that, but the simple fact is that every congregation has a story. That story is embodied to some degree in the records that it generates.

The most essential record that a congregation creates is the minutes of the church board. At a very minimum, a pastor or a local church history committee should ensure that the strongest set of congregational records or minutes of the church board exist. Beyond that, certainly some of the minutes of other auxiliaries, like the Missionary Society, the Youth Society, and any other committees or work that the church has done where minutes are kept.

One of the things I think pastors should do is to ask the question, "If somebody wanted to write the history of this church in 50 years, what would they base their research on?" If you ask that simple question, it helps guide the answer to what should be kept.

Certainly a photographic record of the church should be accumulated. Perhaps some of the worship bulletins from different periods in the church's life could be collected. For instance, worship bulletins from the '30s, '40s, '50s, and '60s can show how the worship experience changed over the years and how the worship service changed. They reflect the different times and tides that have gone through the church's life. In the video age, there may be a little sampling of a sermon now and then; either an audio or video tape of a sermon. The key thing is really answering the question: If someone wanted to write the history of this congregation, what records would they need to base that upon? When you sit down and think about it, I think the answer becomes pretty apparent.

BB: So, if an elderly person in the congregation comes to the pastor and says they have some old records of the church, what should the pastor's response be?

SI: Simply, thank you. It is important to have a safe place to keep records. They should not be open in the sense that just anybody can take them. My experience working in the archives (and I have been there now for 25 years) is that many times, somebody whose parent or grandparent was the secretary of the church board often has essential records in their home. These are sometimes found in cupboards or an attic after someone passes away. There should be a good attempt to try to work with the older people in the congregation and even contact former pastors if necessary to see if a good record can be assembled and collected at the church.

BB: If you could pick one person's story from your research that best epitomizes the Nazarene vision, who would that be and why?

SI: For me, it would be Hiram F. Reynolds, who was the second General Superintendent. Reynolds had a very hard childhood. His family completely disintegrated when he was about seven or eight years old. His father died; his mother had no way to keep the family together; and he was farmed out to neighbors. He was taken in by a couple who intended to adopt him, but soon after he came to live with them, the wife got pregnant, and he was no longer the heir apparent. Then the farmer died, leaving behind his widow and baby. For the next 10 years, Reynolds worked (his childhood ended at age nine) for the widow, helping her keep things together in order for her not to give up the farm that she owned.

It was not an entirely savory set of circumstances. The widow would insist that he go to church from time to time and have some connection to the church. She had grown up with parents who operated a saloon. Her farm was abundant, and so she got into the wine-making business, in which he became her assistant. He grew up largely without many religious influences. When he was 20, he made his way to Chicago. He wasn't converted until he was nearly 25. He was converted in a Methodist camp meeting in New England when he went to visit his mother. One of the interesting dynamics of this is that through his own conversion, he influenced his mother and his younger brother, and they were all baptized together in the same service.

Reynolds attended seminary and entered the Methodist ministry. He pastored for about a decade and then went out into holiness evangelism. He later looked back on his early life—he talked about how hard it had been to serve the widow. It was back-breaking to do the work of a man as a boy. But there was a kind of stamina and strength that he developed in which, in hindsight, he could see the providential leading of God. When the merger between the group on the east coast and the group on the west coast took place in Chicago in 1907, Reynolds was selected as one of the two General Superintendents (Bresee being the other). He was a General Superintendent from 1907-32.

Reynolds was the best-traveled General Superintendent of the period. Dr. Bresee was elderly and did not travel much. E. F. Walker, who was also a General Superintendent, didn't travel as much. E. P. Ellison, who was a General Superintendent for three years, was young, but he was also a college president. Reynolds traveled all over the globe. He made repeated visits to China, Japan, the Middle East, and Swaziland. He had a mission of world evangelization. I think it would be fair to say that he stamped the Church of the Nazarene as a missionary church.

There was a great deal of interest in missions on the part of other people. One of the amazing things about Reynolds is that during the 25 years he was a General Superintendent, he was also Secretary of Missions for about 16 or 17 years. Every time he was conducting a District Assembly, he would use the platform to advocate causes of world evangelization. He embodied the principles

he believed in through his constant travel abroad and in trying to keep the different mission fields tied together with the American church.

BB: What a great story. Well, the Church of the Nazarene recently celebrated its centennial (October, 2008). What is the significance of a centennial and what opportunities does it provide?

SI: It seems to me that a centennial really provides two opportunities. One is for celebration. The other is for reflection. The celebration is over now, but a committee worked hard to equip local churches to celebrate the centennial back in October of '08. But for the question of reflection, I am not sure we have done very well yet. The church only gets one centennial, and there are no do-overs. Certainly, reaching the milestone of 100 years is a time to reflect on the meaning of what this journey has been. There are different ways in which this can be done. There are books coming out that will help pastors and lay people unpack some of this. The real focus is reading, reflecting, and coming to grips with this history that we have. It is a history that is wrapped up with the message of Christian holiness and discipleship. It is also a history in which the development of international churches is the central theme. I think we still need to look at our story and reflect on it for the implications on our future.

BB: Stan, you are one of the writers of our new denominational history. It is called *Our Watchword and Song: The Centennial History of the Church of the Nazarene*. What should readers expect to find in this book?

SI: I think they will find that this is a book that has a number of different layers that are peeled back piece by piece. The other writers on this project are Harold Raser (professor at Nazarene Theological Seminary), Floyd Cunningham (current president of Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary), and David Whitelaw (retired professor of Olivet Nazarene University and Point Loma Nazarene University). One of the things we struggled with was how to write a history for an international church. We have a denominational story that starts out with "made in America" stamped all over it. The end product of this is a church that today is nearly two-thirds made up of people outside North America. So, how do you write a history of an international church without turning it into simply a history of Nazarene missions?

For a while, I was dubious that we would succeed. Having seen the final product, I do believe we were successful. We have a number of stories in there that have never been told and some that have not been told in as much depth before. The way in which the international material worked into this is rather seamless. What we tried to do was look at the building up of Nazarene culture. There is certainly a distinctive Nazarene culture in the United States, which comes out of the camp meeting tradition and our roots in the 19th-century holiness revival. As the Church of the Nazarene spread around the world, there were other Nazarene cultures that developed in those other parts of the world—Latin America, Asia, Africa, et cetera. So, we have tried to get into the stories that

tell us about the development of these Nazarene cultures and what keeps us together as an international church.

In this book, we told the story of Nazarene compassion, of Nazarene missions; we told the story of congregational and district life, and we managed to do this in about 700 pages. It is a large book, which I don't expect anyone but students to read from beginning to end. It is a book that will feed a lot of people's interests. Timothy Smith took 150 pages just to talk about Nazarene origins and the first 25 years of the denomination; Purkiser spent another 300 pages bringing the story up to 1958. We have written a book that starts with John Wesley and the Wesleyan Revival and the energies of Revivalism that began there. It continues with the development of the Wesley holiness hermeneutic, it takes us through the 19th-century Holiness Movement and the story of the parent bodies. It deals with the great leaders and great situations in the church and brings the story up to the year 2000.

BB: Stan, we are deeply appreciative of you and your work. We thank you for preserving our history in not just printed form, but in telling us the stories of our church. The stories help us love and appreciate where we come from and anticipate where we are going.