**Ecclesiology in the Church of the Nazarene and the Superintendency**

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I want to express my personal thanks to Dr. Tom Noble and Dr. Stan Ingersol for their outstanding work in expressing both the history of the Church of the Nazarene’s ecclesiology and the adaptations that have come into existence either in written form, spoken form, or assumed form.

Several leaders in our denomination have referred to a lack of a written ecclesiology, yet we have certainly been operating with an assumed ecclesiology. Many of our ecclesiological ideas, it appears, may be the result of compromises with the variant groups under the “big tent” called the Church of the Nazarene, as well as the result of adaptations of the various cultural and ethnic norms. But at least we are now talking about our ecclesiology!

There are two specific areas that I would address as practical implications of both Dr. Noble’s and Dr. Ingersol’s work on our “assumed” and “somewhat historical” ecclesiology:

1. The district superintendent’s role and responsibilities.

2. The local congregation’s responsibility for self-governance.

**1. The district superintendent’s role and responsibilities.**

I must admit my excitement in reading both Tom Noble and Stan Ingersol’s papers in regard to the role and responsibilities of the district superintendency.

For example, Tom Noble stated on page 6 and 7 of his document:

*Article I of our Articles of Organization and Government makes it clear that the purpose of that (a pragmatic episcopal form of government) is the pursuit of mission. After stating that the superintendency is 'to complement and assist the local church in the fulfilling of its mission and objectives', Article I goes on to state: The superintendency shall build morale, provide motivation, supply management and method assistance, and organize and encourage organization of new churches and missions everywhere.*

A pastor on another district asked me recently what I saw as the top five priorities of a district superintendent. Not one for being “fast on my feet” I blurted out, “to cast vision, to be a cheer leader of pastors and churches, to encourage and promote the expansion of God’s kingdom (church planting), and leadership development.” After further thought, I stand by my comments. Perhaps the one thing I left out (and the pastor did ask me for five), so I will add it here, “to care for and guard the churches under my supervision.”

The specific reference to this question is because the district superintendency is often viewed and understood to be a “middle management” or “administrative position.” In reality it is a leadership position; a position elected by the laity and clergy alike. The person elected to this position is called to lead in the health, development, and mission of the Church of Jesus Christ. It is a position of significant apostolic and “missional” responsibilities along with transformative potential. Noble reminded us on page 7 of his document, *“…the 'necessity' of the superintendency was a necessity, which arose out of mission.”*

Further, Tom Noble suggested two principles or values arising out of our heritage of Nazarene ecclesiology on page 8. The second one, according to Noble *“is in accordance with our Nazarene heritage and ecclesiology that there should be a superintendency, elected from below, which is responsible for leading the people of God in mission, both the proclamation of the Gospel and 'works of mercy,' through which new local congregations may be established.”*

The district superintendency is not a “caretaking” position. It is a position that calls for strong leadership, humility, courage, wisdom, and a dogged persistence to see Christ’s kingdom come right here on earth, as it is in heaven.

**2. The local congregation’s responsibility for self-governance.**

Tom Noble has made it clear that our ecclesiological history asserted the local congregation as self-governing. Allow me to quote from his paper, The Church of God: Sketching a Nazarene Ecclesiology:

*For Free Church ecclesiology then, each local Church is the true Church when it is self-governing. (page 2)*

*Those of us who move around the general church, superintendents and general officers and seminary professors, all too easily forget that for most of our fellow Nazarenes, the local Church is the Church! (page 6)*

*It is in accordance with our Nazarene heritage and ecclesiology that each established local church manages its own affairs and that the church board and pastor, elected by the people (laos) of God, should be seen to be responsible to the members' meeting. That is the bedrock Nazarene principle of congregational government. (page 8)*

And from the *Manual* (2009-2013) Article I, 28.2:

“*We are agreed that authority given to superintendents shall not interfere with the independent action of a fully organized church. Each church shall enjoy the right to select its own pastor, subject to such approval as the General Assembly shall find wise to institute. Each church shall also elect delegates to the various assemblies, manage its own finances, and have charge of all other matters pertaining to its local life and work.”*

While we do not disagree over the basic premise of congregational self-governance, we all have had times when we felt it was necessary to step-in, or act, or intervene in a local situation. Some examples include, when do we appoint pastors? Or when do we intervene in a congregational situation (mess)?

**a. When to appoint pastors?** Of course there are Manual guidelines for such decisions, such as Paragraph 117. *The pastor of a church that has been organized for less than five years, or had less than 35 members voting in the previous annual church meeting, or is receiving regular financial assistance from the district, may be appointed or reappointed by the district superintendent, with the consent of the District Advisory Board.*

However, there are times when a congregation is in crisis, and that calls for other actions of the district superintendent (and the District Advisory Board), including the possibility of terminating the tenure of a pastor, and the probability of appointing a new pastor.

The practical implications of “appointments” have concerned me for some time, and for the following reasons:

1. Legal ramifications. I do not run scared from legal issues, as my legal fees will testify, but they are a concern to me. Appointing a pastor specifically and totally places the district superintendent and the District Advisory Board in a “liable” position. I do not refute the idea that “approving a pastor” that the local congregation may call is also a potential liability, but the appointment process does not allow for much wiggle room (legally).

2. Ownership. I have discovered that some congregations have the temptation to “disown” a process in which they did not actively participate. In fact, one congregation even complained (in a “town meeting” forum) that I had consistently sent them pastors who were not in good health (actually they used the word “sick”). I was happy to remind them that I did not send them the pastors they had selected, but that they had brought the names to me. In an appointment scenario, I have started asking the church boards or leadership teams to invest in the process of appointing a pastor with the Advisory Board and the superintendent. It is more than “in consultation with,” but an actual process that seeks their approval, acceptance, and ownership.

3. Collaborative results. While not as prevalent, there are times when an appointed pastor does not always engender the collaborative relationship that we are looking for between a congregation and a pastor. Some churches resist working with a pastor because the appointee is viewed as a “district person,” and does not have the congregation’s best interests in mind. This is rare, but it is also real. Therefore, the church’s investment in the process of an appointment of a pastor is critical.

**b. When to step into a congregation’s issues (interventions)?** Once again there are *Manual* provisions for issues of intervention (sort of). Paragraph 125. Local Church in Crisis. ***“****Upon learning that a local church is approaching crisis, the district superintendent with the approval of the District Advisory Board shall have the authority to impanel a committee to review the situation and implement procedures to avert a crisis. The committee shall consist of two assigned elders and two lay members of the District Advisory Board, and the district superintendent who shall serve as chairperson.”*

Of course this *Manual* directive assumes that the district is aware of an approaching crisis, and most of time we may be, but not all the time. My personal concern is not as much with a “crisis situation” as it is with “pre-crisis.” When a church is consistently plateaued or declining in terms of health, morale, and mission how does a district intervene and help move the self-governing congregation to a better state of health?

While our ecclesiology emphasizes the “self-governance” of congregations, it does not mean that boards cannot ask for input and help from the district. For the last several years, the Mid-Atlantic District has advocated “interventions” for the purposes of improved health and mission. I am excited to report that several of our congregations have responded to our invitation, and have allowed us to work with them on a process of change to improve morale, health, and mission. I need to emphasize that this initiative is highly “relational.” It is not “authority oriented” or “top down.” It is by invitation, and is collaborative.

While the “crisis” option is always an option in dealing with difficult situations, we have found that the stigma of “crisis status” does not bode well for a congregation’s self-image. In fact, it takes years at times for some congregations to lose the reputation or the lingering cloud of “crisis status.”

**In conclusion:**

Hopefully good questions come as a result of the work on ecclesiology in the Church of the Nazarene such as, “If mission can shape structure (which we have heard from by Stan Ingersol, page 3), *can mission also determine process*?” How does this possibility affect the superintendency as well as our ecclesiology? How does our cultural variants affect both our ecclesiology in the superintendency?

What are your questions?

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