

Internalization: Perspectives From a Local Church Whose Church is This, Anyway?

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Introduction

As I begin my task of addressing the issue of internationalization, I am immediately confronted with the vast differences between internationalization at the world-wide "general" church level and the local level. In some ways the two are so different it is hard to imagine how principles gleaned from one could inform the other. The different degrees of bureaucratic complexity, geographical dispersion, and logistical difficulties in administration and decision-making are striking, to say nothing of the very different histories and political realities of each. And yet, as I look at the issues facing us in our particular multi-congregational, multi-national local setting, many of the questions, discussions, frustrations, and fears in front of us are strangely similar to those of the global scene. Cognizant of the limitations of comparing the two and yet believing that in many ways the particular local in question, Los Angeles First Church of the Nazarene, is something of a microcosm of the general, I proceed with care.

Los Angeles First Church of the Nazarene: A Mini-Case Study

On October 30, 1895, a church is born in Red Men's Hall. From the earliest days the church has been committed to reaching people with the Gospel regardless of their occupation, background, income, education, social prestige, or ethnicity. On the first page of the minutes of the founding of the church are the words:

The field of labor to which we feel especially called in is the neglected quarters of the cities wherever else may be found waste places and souls seeking pardon and cleansing from sin. This work we aim to do through the agency of city missions, evangelistic services, house to house visitation, caring for the poor, comforting the dying.

These words were lived out in those early days through such means as the formation of a Chinese Mission and the organization of a social action group called, "The Order of Saint Stephen.

Over the years the church developed a keen memory of the past and a pride in its status as the founding church. The church was blessed with many who remembered the glory and zeal of those early years, the Glory Barn, the preaching of Dr. Bresee, the march to Sixth and Wall Streets (the first locational move of the church). In the memories of the past, the buildings themselves took on something of a "sacred" quality. Those "hallowed halls" were reminders of people and traditions and celebrations that were dear to the heart. Even after moving away from Sixth and Wall to Twenty-Fifth and Magnolia, and then to Third and Vermont, memories of former leaders, events and buildings remained very dear to those who could remember personally or to those who remembered through the stories of parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents. The energy exuding from the sacred memories of earlier years and former buildings seemed to a degree to be transferred to the buildings and leaders in the new

locations almost as though their own version of the Ark of the Covenant with all of its treasures from the past was moved into each new facility. In addition, movement into new facilities was accompanied by the making of new memories formed out of sacrifice, commitment, and community accompanying the dreaming of corporate dreams and accomplishing of corporate goals.

In the meantime, silently but surely the shadowy sociological phenomenon of upward sociological mobility, "redemption and lift", as we like to refer to it these days, was making its impact. Old L.A. First Church, with or without its commitment to minister to the poor, became middle class, and for the most part, middle class white.

One gets the feeling that the move to the then comfortable white middle-class neighborhood of Third and Vermont was intended to allow the church to minister to those who were socio-economically similar in makeup to what the membership of the church itself had become. Further, seemingly the move was intended to assist the church in merely surviving by moving out of the neighborhoods that were deteriorating. And for awhile this strategy seemed to work. In the early middle sixties, fifteen years after the move to Third and Vermont, the church was flourishing. Sizable crowds attended the worship services. A number of the members had moved to upper-middle class status. The troops were rallied and a majestic new sanctuary building was constructed.

But the flourish was short lived. The changing ethnic make-up characteristic of other neighborhoods poked its imposing head through the barriers and into the back yards of the neighborhoods around Third and Vermont. The non-Hispanic white population in the immediate area dropped from 80% in 1960 to 45% in 1970. The morning worship attendance in a few short years was cut in half, and then nearly in half again. The church was in crisis. The church seemed to be dying. The viable positive options needed to be limited to relocation of adaptation.

For whatever reason the church took the gamble of adopting the latter strategy. The world all around, at last the "local world", was changing. The good old days were longed for and their loss was grieved, but they were ground. It soon became apparent that if the church was to adapt to the changing community, the very nature of its ministry would have to change drastically. But after all, the people who were moving into the neighborhood also needed the Gospel, didn't they? There were more people and more needs than ever before! and, after all, the church was founded partly for the purpose of reaching the poor, wasn't it? Maybe it was time to re-examine the historic mission of the church. This time the mission to the poor would include immigrants who were characterized not only by their socio-economic status, but also by their unfamiliar cultures and languages.

Well, the doors were opened and a tiny American congregation was organized. It survived awhile, and then faltered and disappeared. But in its wake other congregations were formed...Korean, Spanish, South-East Asian, Filipino. The church was learning to adapt to a changing world. But the formation of the new congregations was not without its questions, problems, and certainly not without its resistance.

The established congregation maintained full control, control of the finances, control of the building, control of the policy making. After all, it was their church, full of their memories alone. They had built it. They were paying for it. It was theirs. If they were willing to open their facility, it did not necessarily mean they were willing to give it away or even relinquish a degree of control. The church with all of its heritage and memories, symbolized by the physical building itself, needed to be cared for, maintained, protected, and preserved.

Friction and frustration frequently mounted as parishioners of these new ethnic congregations were blamed wither rightly or wrongly for marks on the walls, unclean kitchens and abuse of musical instruments. Different cultural ideas of child-rearing and supervision added to the confusion. Occasional mandates and resolutions were handed down from the official church board aimed at correcting abuses and protecting the facilities.

When the new congregations began to grow and take members into the fellowship of the church, the established English-speaking congregation was faced with a dilemma. Since the local world was changing ethnically, and since the church had opted for a strategy of adapting to those changes, and since the direction of the change appeared to be permanent, the resulting ministry strategy of sharing the facility with other language congregations began to develop a permanent quality. Sharing facilities could no longer be safely viewed as the decision of a landlord to temporarily rent out an extra room to a border until the "renter" found his own place. This was a long-range, probably even a permanent ministry strategy. This was a picture of a mother giving birth to children who were to remain in the family and share the use of the household. But this strategy also gave birth to a dilemma. Should these new members be given full rights of membership in the local church? Should they be able to vote on the pastor? Should they be given a voice in the formation of policy? If so, should it be an equal voice? Do they even want a voice in policy-making or are they content to merely have a roof over their heads? As members of the church, should they be given a voice in the way the facility is being used? Should they be permitted to play the pipe organ? As members of L.A. First, could they appreciate the sacred history of the church, and would they take care of the facility in a way that would be appropriate to the measure of sacrifice that brought the building into being? Did they really deserve to be full members with all the rights, privileges, and powers of membership, both individual and collective? After all, whose church is this anyway? Even if the new members of the new congregations could be accepted as children with rights of occupancy, could the metaphor ever change to one of an egalitarian marriage with parity in authority and power? Whose church is this, anyway? There is much that must be preserved. We would seemingly be poor stewards to simply "give away" what so many before us had worked so long and hard to pass on to us. Whose church is this, anyway?

It seems to me that we all know that the Church is the Lord's. Even when sometimes we forget and our ethnocentrism and provincialism lead us astray, still we really know and believe that the Church is the Lord's. But even that knowledge does not presuppose knowing the answers to the questions posed by the dilemma.

I don't think it is stretching it to suggest that the questions may come out of an honest heart. It seems to me to be a legitimate desire to want to insure that we hand on to future generations the great treasures of the church which we have inherited. There may also be a built-in fear that the newcomers of those from other cultural immersions are not socialized

into our traditions enough to fully appreciate who we are, how we got where we are, and where we need to go. At least not enough to give them the keys of the building for awhile. At the same time, there may be an equally strong sense of responsibility to give full rights of membership, including decision-making authority to anyone who is in good faith, chooses to untie with us. And when we are confronted with the issue of control, we reach the necessary conclusion that the commitment, money and energy invested in the church was not so much bequeathed to us as it was dedicated to the Lord -- to accomplish the mission of the Kingdom of God.

It seems to me that the key issue in the process is that of relinquishing the privilege of complete control responsibly. We may be unduly resistant because we are being used to being in control (and enjoy the position) or because we somehow believe it is our birthright (enter ethnocentrism and paternalism). And isn't it really true that we might do our new or international members a disservice by dumping the administrative and bureaucratic responsibilities of governance into their laps prematurely, not just before they are able, but at times, perhaps, even before they are willing or interested. Like a parent with a house full of quickly maturing teenager, soon to be young adults, we are faced with the task of relinquishing control responsibly. The church is the Lord's. It is not ours, it is His. And we will need to carefully listen to His voice and respond to His gentle prodding if we are to traverse the road toward internationalization safely.

Heading a Direction

Realizing that we must proceed cautiously, but nevertheless, that we must proceed, a multi-congregational organizational committee with representatives from both the Spanish and English-speaking congregations has been meeting for nearly two years. Their purpose is to develop a structure that can allow for appropriate representation and accountability of the different congregations with regard to decision affecting the church at large. The proposal that is emerging contains the following elements:

- A coordinating council is to be created with authority over facility use, facility maintenance, facility cost, joint programming, and mutual legal and financial concerns (e.g. insurance).
- Membership on the coordinating council is to be limited initially to Spanish and English speaking congregations with other congregations to be included as they mature.
- Both membership and financial giving are to be included in the formula which will indicate the number of members each congregation will have serving on the coordinating council.
- Church boards of each congregation will retain authority over all programmatic and financial issues not given to the coordinating council.
- Each congregation will vote on the pastor of their individual congregation only.
- The issue of legal ownership of the facility will be deferred for at least five years.

Conclusion

We are optimistic! Being a multi-congregational church not only has frustrations, it has great joys. We have the privilege of experiencing a God-given sense of unity in spirit and unity of

purpose that seems to be rare outside of God's Church. We have the joys of seeing the mission of our church fulfilled in reaching out to the people of our community through each other's ministries in ways that would be impossible through any single congregation alone. We are optimistic. The Church is the Lord's!