Statistics: What Do We Want to Know?
A Brief History of Data Collected by the Church of the Nazarene
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Membership, attendance, finances: These are the core items reported for individual churches by most Protestant denominations today. The Church of the Nazarene is no exception.

The very first journal published after Pilot Point included a current membership figure for each church and how much each church reported raising and spending. Although attendance was not reported, Sunday School enrollment figures were given. In addition to these basic numbers, the early document included property values and indebtedness, a breakdown of spending into several categories, and the first indication of lay leadership: the number of officers and teachers in the Sunday School.

As in other denominations, the reports became larger over the next decades. The additional items were indicative of the interests of the newly merged denomination: Money spent on evangelists, deaconesses, and support of pastors. The financial report also showed the multiplicity of denominational emphases before the general budget system was put in place. There were separate offerings for general superintendent salaries, district superintendent salaries, home missions, world mission, district superintendent moving expenses, world mission specials, and more. By 1923, there were columns to report money given for Nazarene tracts, orphanages, general administrative expenses, Christian education beyond the local church and the colleges, general assembly, and social welfare.

The annual reports became simpler after the support system was centralized in the general budget. Before the General Budget system was begun in 1923, district journals listed up to 28 financial categories outside the local church. Only five non-local items were reported in the 1928 General Assembly journal.

That is one dramatic example of how structural changes have affected data collection. We can also see how changing Nazarene practices have modified our collection system. Even societal changes have consequences reflected in our reports. The various categories for “ministerial salaries” will be illustrative.

A Microcosm of Changes: Ministerial Compensation

The 1908 journal reported what each congregation paid its ministers. This was a single field for all money used to support our ministerial staff until 1964.\(^1\) That year, churches were asked to separate benefits from the salaries themselves. This perhaps reflected more on general social trends than on Nazarene changes. With fringe benefits becoming more common in American business, it seemed important to separate what was actually paid to the minister from what it actually cost to have a minister.

\(^1\) From 1945 to 1952, data was put in the housing allowance field. However, it seemed to be more a “fair rental value of parsonage” category, although it was treated as an expenditure item in the financial reports.
Eventually, the amount reported paid to senior pastors was no longer clear. Many of our churches had associate pastors, even if only part-time. In 1976, associate pastor costs were reported separately, and in 1978 we split that column into two as well: salaries and benefits. For a dozen years, senior pastor compensation was clearly separated from the costs of having associates.

During the 1990s, the general budget system underwent modifications, and the ministerial compensation reporting system changed again. An increasing number of ministers opted for housing allowance in lieu of parsonages. Without going into detail on the changing budget system and rationale, we can say that it seemed appropriate to deduct housing allowance from the budget calculations. This meant that the compensation categories had to be split between “housing allowance” and other salary and benefits. In 1990, a new column was added to record housing allowance paid to staff.

Perhaps in order to keep the form as simple as possible, this became a single field. One immediate consequence was that it was no longer possible to determine how much it cost the church to have a senior pastor. There were now five compensation fields: Pastoral salary, pastoral benefits, associate salary, associate benefits, and housing allowance for all.

With the skyrocketing cost of health insurance, another field was added in 1992. Ultimately, all health insurance payments were put in this category. This further confused the issue of how much it costs a church to have a senior pastor.

During all these changes, the USA Pensions office was able to make some reasonable estimates for senior pastor compensation packages. As the fields became more mixed, the estimating procedure grew more complicated and less certain, but a report was generated each year, providing a rough guide for Church of the Nazarene pastoral salary and benefits in the United States.

When the new Annual Pastor’s Report Form (APR) was designed, we went back to the 1908 model. Since housing allowance and health insurance were no longer part of the budget calculation process; and since we had not been able to compute a senior pastor’s salary since 1990; we just asked for all compensation to be put into two categories: salary paid and benefits paid.

Today’s category includes all support staff as well as ministerial staff. This is a reasonable reporting system from a local church perspective. Total salary packages can be readily computed. But it is no longer possible to estimate ministerial salaries. When the Research Center is asked about salary ranges, we can only supply “total salaries and benefits paid” for various churches. Pensions has stopped trying to make senior pastor estimates.

**Other Changes**

Research Services has compiled a seven-page list of data fields that have been electronically recorded since 1908, *Data Fields Available for Church of the Nazarene Statistics*. The fields have been grouped into broad categories. Those whose source is “Current APR” are those that are currently asked of our churches globally. These include some items, such as membership, that have been reported consistently since 1908.
Those items whose source is “WorkStats” are those that were available in the previous statistical system. “Former WorkStats” date back a little further, but are still available electronically. “PrevStats” are items that have never been part of the computerized system at the Global Ministry Center. However, the Research Center has those figures in an Access database, and they have been converted to the new system as appropriate.

A few dozen data items are listed at the bottom of the document. Many of these have been included in the reporting fields mentioned above. However, none of these is available electronically in their old form, at least today.

Under the People/Discipleship category, thirteen data items are now collected. In time past, another 53 categories were recorded. Some items, such as VBS pupils and VBS teachers, are now combined into a single VBS enrollment. Some detail is lost, but the major emphasis is still present. Other items, such as Cradle Roll or college attendance among Nazarene youth, have simply been dropped. There is no way to reconstruct those categories under the new system. And others, such as age groups, have been retained in general form, but the new categories have effectively removed many reference points from further study.

Several categories are no longer surveyed. People/Holiness has been replaced with a question under Congregation/Church Activities. People/Ministers are no longer collected from local churches in the annual report. We are moving toward a different system for collecting this information. People/Lay Leadership has no replacement questions.

People/Spiritual Attributes is worth special mention. The Global Ministry Center has been sensitive to charges of being too concerned with the bottom line. For two quadrennia, we tried to include questions that probed the spiritual dimensions of the church. Our questions could probably have been designed better, and fuller instructions would have been helpful. But pastors are apparently uncomfortable with trying to gauge spiritual conditions, even those as non-specific as “Bible Knowledge” or “Generosity.” The section has since been dropped.

**Global Data Collection**

Every Nazarene mission field reported statistical information from the earliest years. Those areas under the Home Mission umbrella (variously including Europe, American territories, and English-speaking members of the British Commonwealth along with the United States and Canada) standardized their reporting system by the mid-1920s. Other mission areas reported under different systems, usually standardized by geographic regions or Nazarene fields. These other mission areas reported to the World Mission department, where further standardization was applied.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, global data collection by the denominational headquarters was centralized in the General Secretary’s office. Initially, the report forms for the United States and Canada were applied globally. Coinciding with the development of the regional system in world mission areas, a truncated report form was devised for churches in the six world mission regions. Gradually, additional data fields, especially financial, were included in the world mission region reports.
After the 2009 General Assembly, a global reporting system was devised. This system dropped the number of data items collected to 68 from well over 300 in the United States and Canada forms, while raising the number of items collected from the other world regions.

**Conclusion**

Up to 300 separate data items have been electronically recorded for individual Churches of the Nazarene for each year since 1908. This compiled database is used in many ways.

- The data is made available to each local church for its own analyses.
- The data itself, organized into consistent categories, allows researchers to discern trends and make comparisons between eras. A study last year, for instance, compared Depression-era finances to those in today’s economic climate.
- Combined with demographic data, analyses have been made about communities and people groups where the Church of the Nazarene has been particularly effective.
- Theories about church strategies can be tested. The ineffectiveness of mergers, the importance of core groups, the existence of size barriers, and the prevalence of small congregations have been empirically validated.
- Time-series data has enabled districts to determine which churches are at the bottom or top of attendance cycles.

Separately, a look at which items have been included at different eras may shed some light on societal, ecclesiastic, or governance issues affecting the denomination. Some hints have been given above, but further research is welcome. The separate document mentioned earlier, *Data Fields Available for Church of the Nazarene Statistics*, provides a guide to the items considered important at different times in the denomination’s history.

The data sets are available through Research Services. Further explanation of the actual data categories can be obtained either from Research Services or the Nazarene Archives, both at the Global Ministry Center.