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Why Nazarenes Practice “Interdependence”

“We now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts people from **every nation** who fear him and do what is right.” (Acts 10:34-35)

What a marvelous creation of God! What an incredible design! What a divine strategy! God takes imperfect people all over the world who believe in Jesus and he gathers them into divine groups. These groups meet regularly for worship, community, encouragement and service to others. They lock arms with each other to provide a witness to the world that they are one with Jesus and the Father (John 17:21-23).

In the Bible, the word church is used two ways. First, it is used to refer to every Christian who has ever lived in time. This is the church “universal,” and the word church is used this way in the Bible four times. The other 110 times it is used in the Bible, the word church refers to a body of believers with whom we spiritually connect. The church at Corinth, the church at Philippi, the church at Thessalonica and hundreds more—these were all congregations in which individual Christians remained connected to one another.

In early church teaching, it was inconceivable that someone would claim to be a Christian and not be both connected to a local body of Christ and part of the global movement of God. Dozens of commands given to Christians in the New Testament cannot be obeyed unless a believer is both connected and active in a local church. There are

dozens of “one anothers” in the New Testament, i.e. “love one another” (John 13:34), “be devoted to one another,” “honor one another” (Romans 12:10), “live in harmony with one another” (Romans 12:16), “accept one another” (Romans 15:7), “serve one another” (Galatians 5:13), “instruct one another” (Romans 15:14), “carry each other’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2), “be kind and compassionate to one another,” “forgiving each other” (Ephesians 4:32), “submit to one another” (Ephesians 5:21), “encourage each other,” “build each other up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11), “don’t grumble against each other” (James 5:9), “confess your sins to each other,” “pray for each other” (James 5:16), “offer hospitality to one another” (1 Peter 4:9), and “live in harmony with one another” (1 Peter 3:8), just to name a few!

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Throughout the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit leads the church to maintain connectedness with other local churches. The theological word for this is “**interdependence.**” The movement of God through the people of God required relationships to

be established and maintained, especially where the church was expanding beyond the local level. The movement broke out in Samaria when Philip was sent there by the Spirit (Acts 8:5). The apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter and John to Samaria to help fuel the movement by leading them to understand and receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-15).

The movement spread to Africa when the Holy Spirit directed Philip to leave the revival in Samaria and meet the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39). The movement crossed all kinds of ethnic and cultural barriers when Peter embraced a Roman centurion and broke Jewish law

to enter his house (Acts 10:27-28). Peter’s vision led to the discovery that “God would accept people from **every nation** who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:35). The seeds of a global movement of God through the people of God exploded with new possibilities!

The movement was fueled by the Holy Spirit sending out Paul and Barnabas to Cyprus and then throughout what is today modern Turkey (Acts 13:1-14:28). This movement of God never developed a

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spirit of “independence” in the church’s expansion. We see the early church always maintaining a spirit of interconnectedness and “**interdependence**.”¹ This is why in the Church of the Nazarene we believe so strongly that our “interdependence” has New Testament roots.

When major questions arose about both doctrine and church operations, “Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders” (Acts 15:2) to discuss the issues. Why? Because they were never independent but interdependent. “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” was the spirit with which the church operated (Acts 15:28).

Even when ministry differences became apparent and separation occurred between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39), this did not hinder Paul’s commitment to remain interdependent with the church. As he and Silas “traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the **apostles and elders in Jerusalem** for the people to obey” (Acts 16:4). This caused the churches “to be strengthened in the faith and grow in numbers daily” (Acts 16:5). **The evidence for “interdepen-**

ence” in the early church between congregations is indisputable.

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independently from each other. Everyone operated with a deep belief in the interdependence of the church. The movement

of God through the people of God was too valuable to allow the non-essentials within the movement to divide them.

Following these examples in the New Testament, Nazarenes choose to operate interdependently with the local, district, and global church² for seven biblical reasons. First, **this is where we spiritually mature in Christlikeness.** Maturity cannot be achieved without community. The church is the institution God has chosen to prepare us to meet him and spend time with him for all eternity. The church is where we are regularly washed with the water of his Word and challenged to become more like him (Ephesians 5:26-27). We move to new levels of Christlikeness when we embrace our brothers and sisters from different communities, cultures, and countries.

Secondly, **the church is our spiritual family.** Paul writes, “Let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10). Our spiritual family, the church, will last longer than even our physical family. In heaven, we will be in the family of the church forever. In the

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Thirdly, **the church is where we discover and use our spiritual gifts.** Paul writes, “Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant” (1 Corinthians 12:1). “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others” (1 Peter 4:10). If we do not use our God-given spiritual gifts to help build up Christ’s church, the church and the work of Jesus in the world will not be what it could be. Every part is essential as the church “grows and builds itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:16). All the spiritual gifts a local church needs, God can and will raise up within that church. Different gifts expressed through the different cultural forms of the church in different parts of the world make us better.

Fourthly, **the church is where we receive spiritual protection.** The Scriptures instruct pastors, “Guard...the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God... because savage wolves will come in among you...and distort the truth” (Acts 20:28-29). Part of the church’s responsibility is to help people separate truth from error and provide spiritual protection.

Fifthly, **the church provides us with spiritual accountability through practicing interdependence.** The Bible says, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently...Carry each other’s burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1-2). An important benefit of church membership is accountability, which everyone needs for their spiritual growth.³ This is a maturity issue as well as an issue of obedience to the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 28:19, John 14:23-24). Every member in the Church of the Nazarene is accountable to their local church. Every minister in the Church of the Nazarene is account-

able to a district. Districts throughout the world are accountable to each other through the General Assembly.⁴

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Every superintendent elected by the church, either by a District Assembly or General Assembly is accountable and interdependent, along with and **to every pastor**. Not only are pastors accountable to their churches and to superintendents, superintendents are accountable to pastors and to each other. This is the way a healthy, multiplying church movement should operate. The way we

are accountable and interdependent with each other is one of the greatest strengths of the church!

Sixthly, **the church provides local churches the opportunity to do together what is impossible separately**. When local churches come together and lock arms, they are unstoppable. They relate with their community. They maintain connection and interdependence with churches on their district. They can learn from other churches within the Nazarene network in their region and beyond. Wherever a church is interdependent, healthy and multiplying, it is the result of local communities, churches and districts gaining agenda harmony to do together what we can never do by ourselves.

Lastly, **the church is created by the Holy Spirit to help us fulfill Christ's Great Commission**. Every Christian is called to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Separate and isolated, we cannot become the locally and globally-minded Christians God wants

us to be. It is by linking arms in local communities among churches and districts that we can make a huge impact locally and also send and support missionaries in 160+ countries of the world.

We are a multi-national church, with six regional offices located throughout the world. Most people have heard of Apple, Inc., a company that sells computers and phones, etc. It is one of the wealthiest and most well-known companies in the world and the first company in history to gain a market cap⁵ of over \$1 trillion. Apple’s market cap makes the company larger than the GDP (Gross Domestic Product)⁶ of 183

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out of the 199 countries for which the World Bank⁷ has GDP data. Apple, Inc., has a lot more money than the church, but only operates in 24 countries of the world (ones where they can make money). The Church of the Nazarene operates in 160+ countries, almost 7 times more countries than Apple. We do not enter countries based on economic factors.

We operate within the poorest countries of the world. Our only agenda is the agenda of Jesus.

Because we are a global movement of God, we now send missionaries from dozens of countries to the locations where they are most needed and suited. We are not limited to just a few countries or negatively impacted by what may be happening in the geo-political realm. **Every country has an equal place at the Nazarene global movement table.** No country is deemed more important than any other. The Church of the Nazarene is a 21st century expression of the vision given to Peter by God. “God does not show favoritism but accepts people

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from **every nation** who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34-35). What a privilege to participate in this kind of an international, interdependent movement of God through the people of God!

Questions for Reflection—Chapter 5

1. Discuss the “one anothers” that are listed in the New Testament. How are they currently practiced in your church? Take a moment and thank God for the way your church is becoming more like the early church. What practical steps can you take to keep improving?
2. We call maintaining our connectedness with other churches beyond our local church **interdependence**. Discuss and give examples of how the early church practiced interdependence among churches.
3. Even when the early church organized itself into “culturally conditioned forms” of Jewish and Gentile churches, they remained interdependent. How can your church maintain connectedness with other churches from other countries and cultures?
4. Discuss the seven biblical reasons why we maintain and practice interdependence. Which one stands out most to you? Which ones were new?
5. Discuss how in the Church of the Nazarene pastors are accountable to their churches and to superintendents, and superintendents are accountable to pastors and to each other. Do you feel this accountability is spiritually healthy? Why?

6. What are the dangers church leaders face when they are not in a family of churches that provides accountability?
7. Discuss how the Church of the Nazarene globally operates differently than Apple, Inc. Does this change the way you think about the church? How?