

Nazarene Revisioning Chat Transcript

On Tuesday, July 8, 2008, Tom Nees held a live open chat with Nazarene pastors in the United States and Canada on denominational revisioning. Below is an edited transcript of the revisioning conversation. All ancillary comments were removed other than specific questions and their responses. To ease response, some questions were combined or rephrased. Included also are additional responses to questions that were asked during the chat, but not answered until after the live session was finished. Questions to Nees appear in bold print.

Tom Nees: Welcome to the live online chat. I want to thank you for joining me today in a conversation on Nazarene revisioning. It's a big topic and you—our Nazarene pastors—are vital to the discussion as we consider how to be faithful to God's call as a denomination. Please know I intend to share the results of this conversation with our general superintendents and other Nazarene leaders so they are fully aware of your thoughts and ideas as we reflect on our mission, particularly in the U.S. and Canada. I welcome your best thoughts, ideas, and questions on the topics we've developed. I know that some of you will enter and exit as we go along. Let's get to it!

How do we begin to view people with disabilities as whole people called by God to be a part of our local congregations, using their God-given gifts for the church's edification and God's glorification?

Tom Nees: You've answered your own question. People with disabilities should be accepted and treated as you have stated. Too often our churches have failed to recognize both the resource and the opportunity for ministry among and through people with disabilities.

How will revisioning benefit the multicultural groups in the church?

Tom Nees: A part of what is driving revisioning is globalization and the realization that English-speaking white people will be the minority group in the Church of the Nazarene in the near future, if not already. Particular countries will have their own cultural issues to address as a part of an international, multicultural denomination.

How will English-speaking leaders in the church resign to soon being in the minority with the mammoth growth of the church outside the United States?

Tom Nees: Church leaders will accept this as an answer to prayer. Nazarenes in the U.S. and Canada have supported missions around the world so that the church will be international and multicultural.

What will the revisioning discussion do to promote gender diversity?

Tom Nees: With an increasing number of God-called women prepared for pastoral ministry there is a need to change the culture of our local churches. Women have and will serve well in pastoral ministry as well as in administrative positions.

It was suggested in one of the threads in the revisioning forum that the Church of the Nazarene hire an outside consulting firm to help in the revisioning process. Has this been considered?

Tom Nees: The General Superintendents have appointed and received reports from a group of independent church leaders known as the "Thought Partners." Some of their ideas have been discussed with Global Ministry Center leaders.

What does it mean to be a missional church? Our church tries to reach out to our neighborhood, but how do I know if we're truly being missional? How do you measure missional?

Tom Nees: The word "missional" is used to describe congregations that are intentional about applying missions in their own neighborhoods. In the past, we supported so-called "foreign" missions, while often overlooking the opportunities for missionary work close to home. Missional often describes a "sent" church vs. a "sending" church. A missional church is both and understands that it exists to carry out God's mission in the world and that the congregation itself is not the target audience for its resources and activities.

Does Headquarters have a management analysis function or any PEC (program element codes) or similar functional descriptions and workload data that could be used to calculate any sort of overhead/operational expenditure data for the different functions and levels, such as center verses district?

Tom Nees: There are proposals being discussed to accomplish the purpose that you have described. Recommendations have been advanced to do an inventory of all of Global Ministry Center's resources and projects to determine the value added to the local church. The question being asked of every position and every program is its value to the local church.

To what degree will the revisioning forum content and this discussion be shared and utilized with the greater church? Might this information lead to any General Assembly proposals?

Tom Nees: The forum is designed as a ninety-day project to complement a series of focus groups with pastors and district superintendents. Information from the focus groups and the forum will be summarized and presented to the general superintendents as well as other denominational leaders. General Assembly actions are developed by delegates, many of whom have read and participated in the forum. They may choose to initiate recommendations in harmony with what they are hearing.

At the M7 conference, Reggie McNeal said that God is at work in the world, not the church. If that's so, what is our denomination doing to foster the development of non-churched based ministries, such as campus ministries, faith-based non-profits, and house churches? Given what McNeal said, shouldn't our priorities be there?

Tom Nees: I don't agree with the statement that God is not at work in the church. McNeal has helped us understand that the typical local congregation as we have known it needs to change and reinvent itself or become obsolete. While some forms of church will likely disappear, many new expressions of the Christian faith are emerging.

Is it time to look at the polity of the U.S. church and eliminate some level of detail and structure allowing for more flexibility in the local church as has been done in the global regions?

Tom Nees: Yes. There is general recognition that while the *Manual* section on the local church is helpful in creating accountability for churches and pastors, that parts of it have become dated. The fact is there are hardly two churches alike anymore only intensifies the issue. Local congregations are creating new structures—“new wineskins” to communicate the gospel in a variety of new ways.

Are we not talking about organizational change, rather than doctrinal change? I hope so!

Tom Nees: The revisioning discussion is largely structural and organizational, not doctrinal.

I think we need our districts and denominational center, but how do you see their role vis-à-vis the local church?

Tom Nees: The general superintendents have repeatedly stated that everything done by the districts and denominational center should support the ministry of the local church. As a denomination we are a network of local churches. Our primary means of propagating the gospel is through church development—starting and strengthening churches. Everything must support that priority.

Is it time to flatten the U.S. church with less district overhead and general church offices as well? We must find a way to leave more dollars at the local church level where ministry happens.

Tom Nees: That is a timely observation and recommendation. District and general church structures should always be recognized as a means to an end, that is, the health and growth of local churches. Anything at the district or general church level that is extravagant or extraneous should be eliminated.

Persons have spoken in the online Revisioning forum that some of our ethics statements need to change to reflect being (at least) aware of our social context. Will this occur at our general assembly?

Tom Nees: As I followed General Assembly business through the years this has always been a topic of discussion. There is a general assembly committee assigned to receive and review recommendations about personal and social ethics.

I pastor a small church in a dying Midwest town. It's rough out here. Our people are discouraged. What is the denomination doing to help and encourage our small churches?

Tom Nees: Denominational resources are available to churches everywhere. In fact, since 75 percent of Nazarene churches in the U.S. and Canada are 100 or less, most of what is provided is used by and intended for the small church. Regardless of size or location, churches exist to advance God's mission and message. Keeping the mission and message front and center is essential.

It seems that unaffiliated congregations are able to achieve more—more for global missions and more for local ministry. What is the value of denominational connection?

Tom Nees: That's a good question that many pastors are asking. We have to make a better "case for connection" than has been done in the past. As regards missions for instance, there is a lot to be said for being a part of a global missionary movement in over 150 world areas.

If we look at district staff and where their time is spent, what would that look like? I fear too much time is spent in calling pastors and overseeing finances. How can those issues be addressed?

Tom Nees: These are good questions. Every pastor, as a part of a district, has a way if not an obligation to raise these issues. Every dollar spent by the district or the general church was put in an offering plate by someone who believed that this is God's money for God's mission in the world. Church leaders have a stewardship responsibility to use the funds for their intended purpose.

When you're a little church in a depressed economy, it is hard to pay budgets when you don't really know where and how the money is being used. Can our Headquarters do a lot more to tell our churches what's going on with the money we're spending? I'd sleep easier knowing our hard-earned money was going to causes that change lives and are not used simply to buy furniture for someone's office.

Tom Nees: There needs to be more transparency in how denominational funds are used. Churches need to know that every dollar sent for denominational interests is being used to advance God's mission in the world.

David McClung, Nazarene leader and former president of Eastern Nazarene College, wrote a reflection paper, "Does the Church of the Nazarene need a turn-around?" Has there been any positive response to that by general superintendents or district superintendents?

Tom Nees: McClung's paper has received positive and less than positive responses. He has encouraged many people to express their own perspectives. What, if any, of his recommendations can or will be considered for implementation is a question. Regardless, his communiqué is probably the most widely circulated paper of its sort.

A generation ago, we were intent on building "holiness" churches. What kind of churches are we building now? Does our denomination have any intentionality about what kind of church we are building for our people? It seems to me that we are not very focused.

Tom Nees: Nazarene churches are still intentionally message driven. However, some new words and definitions are being used. Without the familiar language of our "holiness" past it may appear that the message has been discarded. I don't think so.

We are a message-driven church but I fear that by changing the words to our message (as many are inclined to do), are we not, in fact, changing the message?

Tom Nees: That is a danger. However, if you follow the history of the Wesleyan-Holiness Movement and the Church of the Nazarene, you will observe considerable development in our understanding and expressions of the holiness message. Ours is folk theology which benefits from many contributors.

How do we maintain our theological identity when some of our Nazarene churches in the U.S. are posting doctrinal statements on their church websites that are from other theological traditions?

Tom Nees: You raise an important issue. I fear too much of what is being communicated is from sources outside of our own biblical and theological tradition.

I wish I knew if the theological liberties being taken were due to ignorance or due to blatant disregard for our church's teachings. Do you have a thought on this?

Tom Nees: There may be some of both. However, most pastors/theologians I know are seeking new and effective ways to communicate historic Christianity. They would not see themselves as departing from but rather building upon the theological writings of the past.

Will our perspective of Holiness remain the same? Can we reinvision the church and maintain the central distinctive of the Church of the Nazarene?

Tom Nees: The Church of the Nazarene remains a message-driven movement.

Do you think that revisioning discussion will help bring together a more holistic and integrated understanding of holiness in terms of personal piety, social holiness, and social justice? In other words, will we return more deeply to our roots?

Tom Nees: Revisioning is primarily about church structures rather than doctrinal interests. However, structures do reflect how we go about advancing the Kingdom through our message and mission. Our organizational structures encourage or discourage commitment and compassion.

What do you see as our greatest hurdles to deal with as a denomination in the next several years?

Tom Nees: Making the case for connection to a denominational fellowship is a challenge since so many churches are independent. Cultural changes that effect church attendance will be a big challenge. Globalization will have a great impact on the denomination. What will the Church of the Nazarene be like when there are as many Nazarenes in Africa as in the United States?

I believe in diversity and that our church should be more multicultural. Yet, white leaders predominate, especially at the top. It seems to me that we can't wait for the majority to change—or it will be too late. What can we do to get more diversity within our ranks?

Tom Nees: Diversity doesn't just happen. To advance an inclusive church in a multicultural society will take intentional planning to be sure our leadership represents the diversity that already exists in the church, as well as sends a message to others that all people groups are welcome among us, and that we are willing to change as others enrich our faith community.

It seems to me we need to rethink how our districts are conceptualized and configured. What's being done in this area right now?

Tom Nees: Discussions about districts are ongoing. Districts are a means to an end and need to be adjusted as the need demands.

I hear lots of talk about shrinking the size of district and general budgets in favor of them being solely in service to the ministry of the local church. What specifically are the "services" that the district and general church is currently providing the local church? What "services" are we envisioning for the future? Are we clear or unanimous yet on what those are?

Tom Nees: There is an ongoing interest in determining how district and general church structures can best serve local church development. In a connectional fellowship such as ours we agree through legislative processes to work together on ministries and missions important to all of us. As a part of the revisioning process an inventory of all Global Ministry Center resources and programs is underway. A comprehensive survey is being sent to pastors to solicit feedback about programs and resources that are needed and those no longer needed.

How will we ensure that more ministry dollars will end up at the local level with regard to the general church and the districts?

Tom Nees: In our connectional movement every congregation, however large or small, is connected and committed to ministries and missions beyond itself. It's not either the local church or collective or collaborative missions and ministries—it's both/and.

The real answer to being able to pay budgets is always an ever increasing and tithing church body. That would mean to me that we need to concentrate on growing the church and discipling to include good stewardship. Help us grow and we can pay more, right?

Tom Nees: There is a parallel between personal tithing and the support of denominational missions through budgets and apportionments. Just as we encourage tithing regardless of personal income or need, so we encourage congregational participation in the mission of the collective church regardless of income or local needs. Just as no one of us can afford to tithe, so no local church can afford to share in the expense of global missions. Tithing and supporting missions is a spiritual priority to which we give ourselves even though we have many other pressing needs and obligations.

Loyalty is often a by-product of other things. How is denominational loyalty created?

Tom Nees: Denominational loyalty is often the result of long-standing family connections and familiar traditions, but it must go further than that. A denomination, to retain the support, if not loyalty, of its constituents must be identified with a compelling cause or vision for the future and not just hold on to traditionalism.

How does one not sacrifice denominational integrity with the urgent demands of ministry?

Tom Nees: I don't think that that is a conflict. Denominational integrity is all about meeting the very real and urgent demands of ministry.

How does the denominational headquarters move to Lenexa, KS, fit into the revisioning discussion?

Tom Nees: Relocation was initiated in the interest of efficiency and long-term savings on building expense. It also has the potential of providing a new creative environment where all headquarters personnel will be close enough to one another to work together for the global interests of the church.

Local churches can access excellent resources from a multitude of sources outside the denomination. Do we really need the denominational center and districts to develop resources?

Tom Nees: That's a very good question. We have conducted "media summits" with pastors to learn where pastors are going for the resources they need. What you say is true and raises the need to consider this issue. The denominational center should only be developing the resources needed and asked for by pastors.

What do you think we have accomplished in the past 80-minutes of our chat that can be placed in the hands of the Board of General Superintendents?

Tom Nees: The contents from the online forum and live chat discussion will be provided in the form of an executive summary.

Thank you so much for taking your valuable time to participate in our chat today. I enjoyed conversing with you. Please know that questions that weren't answered in the chat will be reviewed and some will be answered by me in our online revisioning forum. God bless!