

REFLECTIONS

By Leonard G. Wymore



The NACC—Then and Now!

There have been 63 North American Christian Conventions, and I have been privileged to attend 53 of them. Can anyone match my record? If so, I plan to be in the front row in Indianapolis on July 8 encouraging the participants on the platform and in the audience to *imagine* the glory of the church in Christ Jesus throughout all generations (Ephesians 3:21). I would be honored to shake your hand and share a few anecdotes from conventions past.

An Important Purpose

I believe in the purpose and ministry of the NACC and will defend it and support it even if it misses some of my expectations and needs. The rationale for having the convention has been expressed using many terms. A worship bulletin promoting the 1968 convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, put it this way:

From the first North American Christian Convention in October 1927, in Indianapolis, Indiana, until the present, the emphasis of this unique gathering has been on inspirational preaching, perceptive instruction, and enriching fellowship. The great New Testament themes have been treated repeatedly with special insight and power. It is not a gathering of churches but of likeminded individuals.

The convention does not attempt to legislate for the churches or pass resolutions on social or political issues. Instead of being aloof to these issues, however, the convention addresses them in workshops where leaders seek ways to apply the teachings of Christ to the local level.

The convention is committed to the idea that the teachings of Jesus, if understood and applied, are the greatest revolutionary force in history, with the power to right every wrong and to meet every human situation. The convention has not been, and is not intended to be, a base of sectarian cohesion, but rather it points to Christ and His Word as the necessary base of the only possible unity.

The unpublished theme for the first three conventions was "Preach the Word." The speakers meant it! There were as many as three sermons in the morning and two in the afternoon and, in some

years, two in the evening. Great emphasis was placed on Christ, His ministry, His teaching, and salvation. The nature of unity and the New Testament church always was a concern. Special sessions for Sunday school workers and events for the youth were included. Exhibits, much like the present, included those of missionaries, colleges, parachurch organizations, and publishers. Each convention stood alone, and the small continuation committee would arrange for the next gathering when they determined the need and place.

Early Growth

In 1950 the committee decided to enlarge the planning committee to 50 and have it arrange for each annual convention. The programs during the 1950s gave more attention to young people, including sermon contests in 1952 and '53.

In the spring of 1956, Standard Publishing invited me to join its staff to plan, lead, and promote Christian education rallies. These began with a national convention in Cincinnati in August 1956, and a second national convention in Springfield, Illinois, in 1957. The following year there were four regional rallies, and in 1959 we brought together personnel to staff 39 two-day regional meetings.

In 1960 at Columbus, Ohio, the NACC and the National Christian Education Convention met in concert, with 4,480 attending. The manuscripts for 157 workshops were submitted in advance and published in a 176-page bound volume. This was the first year for child care of 1- to 5-year-olds, a full program for children ages 6-12, and another full schedule for teens. The combined conventions were held in Wichita, Kansas, in 1961; Lexington, Kentucky, in 1962; and Long Beach, California, in 1963. Standard Publishing did the printing and mailings, and I coordinated the enlistment of personnel and supervision of local arrangements.

At Long Beach (1963) the NACC committee prepared a job description and called me to establish a separate office and staff in Cincinnati. The NACC for 1964 met in St. Louis, Missouri, July 7-10, with Leon H. Appel of Lincoln, Illinois, as president. There

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were at least 10,000 or more in attendance. The total cost for the year was \$73,122. With bills paid we pressed on to Tulsa, Oklahoma, for 1965.

During that year we introduced Bible Bowl for the teens. Bee Nelson, editor of *Straight*, a teen magazine from Standard Publishing, alerted the NACC office that several youth groups in Illinois and Indiana were conducting Bible quiz sessions that followed the format of the then popular *College Bowl*. General Electric, owner of the program, gave us permission to proceed. Thirty-one teams competed using the text of Mark's Gospel and 2 Corinthians 15.

One statistic from that first year speaks for the value of the quiz program. Some years later, 42 percent of the members of the top three teams were involved in full-time church ministry. Gary Coleman joined the staff in the summer of 1967 with Bible Bowl as one of his major responsibilities. He served 30 years in that role. "Bible Bowl planted God's word indelibly into young minds," he said, "and developed and matured thousands of youth in Christ."

Changing to Meet Needs

Many additions and changes in the structure of the overall program have followed. Some were requested by individuals while others resulted from the committee observing a need.

In 1966, for example, Doug Dickey, the campus minister at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, encouraged a special series of sessions for college career persons. Year after year James O. Pierson of Knoxville, Tennessee, led workshops for parents and workers with people with disabilities. In 1997 in Kansas City, Missouri, he and others led in a heart-touching morning session surrounding this theme. Cecil Bennett of Cincinnati began signing the main sessions to the deaf in 1968. Beginning in Oklahoma City in 1978, Duane King of Council Bluffs, Iowa, headed up workshops and worship sessions for the deaf and those who share in this ministry.

During the early years of the convention the sermons frequently dealt with doctrine and the authority of Scripture. The need to have more time for sharing in these areas was expressed in 1973, and the Theological Forum was introduced and continues to this day. At about the same time the interest in archaeology was introduced, and archaeology workshops also continue today. The needs of the family and personal

spiritual growth have been addressed. In the last decade, the planting of new congregations and church growth in general have been great topics.

Guest speakers have been featured when it seemed appropriate to the planning committee. Many of these guests have expressed appreciation for the opportunity to become acquainted with our uniqueness as a fellowship. Among many good results, a number of our people have shared in sessions with the leaders and members of the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana. They, too, refer to themselves as a movement to restore New Testament Christianity.

The convention has made repeated efforts, through program and personnel, to reflect the presence and needs of the total spectrum of our people. In the decade of the 1980s, for example, we became aware that leaders in smaller congregations were eager to have their activities given more attention. Medford Jones and others assisted in workshops, panels, and nationwide surveys in response to this interest. The networking tables planned for Indianapolis this July will address a similar need today.

One in Christ

The ministry of the NACC provides the opportunity for thousands of individual Christians to face up to the challenge and grasp the full significance of what it means to be "in Christ"; but more than that, to be with God; and more than that, to be one in each other, completely made into one body, His body, the church.

The NACC is for all who are interested in defending, reviving, and furthering the restoration and extension of New Testament Christianity.

We must listen to each other to discover needs, subject matter, and abilities among our people. All who support the concept of the restoration of New Testament Christianity have a contribution to make in the program and in the funding of the expenses of the NACC. In recent years some have been missing in both areas.

The program announced for this summer should revive our interest. I hope to see you there!

Leonard G. Wymore retired in 1986 as executive director of the North American Christian Convention. He is still active in ministry today from his home in Johnson City, Tennessee.