

District Superintendent's Report "Growing Young"

After being diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) that forced his early retirement from baseball, Lou Gehrig stepped to the microphone at Yankee Stadium on July 4, 1939 to thank the fans for their support and to famously declare himself "the luckiest man on the face of the earth." His emotional farewell was one of the most iconic moments in sports history. Today, as I stand to present my ninth and final report as superintendent of the North Arkansas District, I feel like "the luckiest man on the face of the earth."

In my first report to the Assembly, I suggested that our move to Arkansas felt like we were, in the words of John Denver, "coming home to a place we've never been before." Debbie and I believed then and we believe now that our ecclesiastical appointment was indeed a divine appointment. I view God's amazing work among us as the validation. William Willimon rightfully refers to the clergy as "community persons" with a *bivocal calling*. He understands that vocational ministry emerges from the call of God; however, the church must also call for there to be authentic leadership in the name of Christ. I am so grateful for God's call to vocational ministry that is just as clear today as when I first heard it at a Nazarene youth camp in Adrian, Georgia. I am indebted to my parents, pastors, professors, and church members who cultivated the call and profoundly shaped my ministerial identity. Looking back across 45 years of joyful service, I am very thankful for the church's call to five pastorates and two districts where Debbie and I have been privileged to journey together with thousands of faithful folks who have enriched our lives. In the words of Bill Gaither, we are "greatly blessed and highly favored." As my November retirement draws near, you might expect me to walk farther down memory lane and perhaps address some of the challenges related to growing old. Instead, I want to speak from my heart today about the all-important issue of "Growing Young."

Before proceeding, however, let me acknowledge our distinguished guests. Drs. Carla and Chuck Sunberg, welcome to North Arkansas – home to the largest retailer on the planet and some of the most devoted disciples of Jesus Christ in our denomination. You have already met most members of our pastoral team at February's Ministers and Mates Retreat in Branson. During these two years of jurisdictional responsibility, you will get better acquainted with our wonderful district family and

better understand why saying goodbye to them will be so difficult.

We are thrilled to have President Keith Newman, his wife Carolyn, and Dr. Terry Toler here from Southern Nazarene University. As members of the presidential search committee, Dr. Ken Stallings and I had front-row seats to the Spirit-led process which brought Dr. Newman to our school for “such a time as this.” We are optimistic about SNU’s future, totally convinced that Keith possesses the character, experience, gifts and vision required to navigate the stormy seas surrounding Christian higher education these days. The Newmans are no strangers to many NARK Nazarenes since they led our Van Buren Church back in the late 80s. Learn more about them by reading the Inauguration Issue of *Direction* magazine found in your delegate packet. By the way, research reveals that young adults are 90% more likely to stay in church if they attend a college that has a strong Christian environment. That’s just one of many good reasons to send our sons and daughters to Southern Nazarene University. The District Advisory Board and several of our local churches have endowed scholarship funds available for qualified students.

Representing Nazarene Bible College are my dear friends - Dr. Harold and Cheryl Graves. Thanks for coming and thanks for remaining true to NBC’s core mission of preparing adults for ministry while leading the successful transition to a distance education model with a leaner organizational structure and a new center of operations. We will hear inspiring reports from Dr. Graves and Dr. Newman today.

A year ago at our Assembly in Jonesboro, I shared my deep burden for passing the faith along to emerging generations who have been leaving the Church at an alarming rate – even here in the Bible belt. We call them “nones” and “dones”, but by lumping them into these general categories we could easily forget that they are precious souls for whom Christ died. They are not just demographic groups; each one is someone’s child, grandchild, brother or sister. Each one has a name. Like the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son in Jesus’ parables...each one is valuable.

Propelled by the inspiration of last year’s Kickstart service, North Arkansas leaders have taken significant steps toward “growing young” as a district. Step #1 was a combined meeting of the departmental councils who humbly acknowledged our desperate need to prioritize young adults and started developing various strategies to engage them. It was indeed a defining moment for our district because on that day we agreed that we could never go back to business as usual nor settle for

the status quo. Brainstorming in small groups yielded several great ideas: intergenerational ministry opportunities (Work and Witness trips, etc.), a training event to help parents and church leaders keep children and teens connected to the church, an intense effort to enlarge our social media “footprint”, young adult representation on every district board/committee, and the immediate need for a fresh approach to our District Assembly/Conventions. Have you noticed the graying of our gatherings? (Some hair turns gray; mine turns loose!) So our visionary department heads – Jim Lynch, Mark Snodgrass, Peter Kline – went to work in a collaborative effort to re-envision what could happen here if we dared to address some basic questions: Why do we meet for annual conventions and assembly? How long should the meetings last? Who should be involved in the planning and promotion? What platforms could be leveraged to promote the event? Are there agenda items that should be added or eliminated? How do we streamline the convention/assembly business without squeezing out corporate worship inspiration and “cross training” information? What changes, if any, would encourage young adults to prioritize our annual gatherings? Several of us wrestled with these questions and more. The result is Ignite – a high-energy, fast-paced, intergenerational, missionally-focused event that is definitely not your grandparents’ Assembly.

Why take time to describe the back story of Ignite? I have done so in hopes that local church leaders will see that the district has made “growing young” a high priority and go home to do likewise. *Holiness Today* recently published the results of a survey by the International Bible Society that revealed a sobering statistic: 83% of all Christians make their commitment to Jesus between the ages of 4 and 14! The Barna Research Group surveys indicate that American children ages 5 to 13 have a 32% probability of accepting Christ, but youth aged 14 to 18 have only a 4% probability of doing so. Adults age 19 and over have just a 6% probability of becoming Christians. (Source: Nazarene Research Services). Let those numbers sink in for a while. Focus on the “4-14 Window”. Parents, “Impress God’s commandments on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:7). Pastors and lay leaders, plan children’s crusades, VBS and others activities with the primary purpose of influencing children to make a decision to follow Christ. But don’t stop there...spend time with the kids...listen to their questions...pray with them and for them...encourage them to take an active role in worship services...send them to church camp or better yet, go with them. My passion about reaching and retaining our kids has been stoked by *Why They Stay* – a book co-authored by Drs. Steve Parr and Tom Crites, based on a national research project among young adults who grew up attending church and stayed committed to it. Much has been written about the next generation leaving the

church and why they stray; too little attention has been given to why they stay. Everyone here will receive a copy of this insightful book today.

Going forward, I hope that all district and local church decisions related to personnel, finances, and programs will be examined in light of this question: *Will this course of action enable us to better connect with emerging generations?*

According to the latest report out of the General Secretary's office, the North Arkansas District was among the USA/Canada Region's leaders in almost every statistical category during the 2016-17 church year. We had the second highest net increase (+331) in church membership. Furthermore, North Arkansas was one of only 13 districts to have an increase in worship attendance and one of 32 districts to show gains in discipleship attendance. Most importantly, we reported 574 conversions and 459 new Nazarenes. Our "nickels and noses" numbers have been trending upward for the past five years. "Big Mo" (Big Momentum) has been on our side! In light of society's growing apathy toward organized religion, I have been wondering how long Mo would stay with us. While the 2017-18 "dashboard report" indicates that we have lost some momentum, I would remind everyone that statistics do not tell the whole story of God's great work in and through us:

| | |
|--|------------------------|
| Average Weekly Sunday School/Discipleship Attendance | 4,203 (-51) |
| Sunday School/Discipleship Enrollment | 8,597 (+66) |
| Average Weekly Corporate Worship Attendance | 4,483 (-72) |
| Church Membership | 6,572 (-9) |
| New Nazarenes | 285 (-174) |
| Conversions | 455 (-119) |
| Baptisms | 204 (-74) |
| Total Raised for All Purposes | \$7,636,724 (+135,236) |

It is no secret that most of our recent gains can be traced to our new starts, most notably CrossRoads Cowboy Church. Once again, they have earned the General Superintendents' Growth Award by excelling in those practices that are central to the advancement of the church. For the third time in the last four years, they are receiving the Church of the Year "Eagle Award" for their unwavering commitment to evangelism and church planting that has resulted in 156 conversions, 127 new Nazarenes, record-breaking attendance (average worship attendance - 881; average weekly SDMI attendance - 595), and the successful launch of CCC-Pleasant Plains. Congratulations, Pastor Ron and Wanda Riddle! Congratulations, CrossRoads Cowboy Church! Bentonville Community,

Jonesboro Forest Home, Rogers Primera and Searcy deserve honorable mention. You will hear inspirational video reports from these churches and more during the course of the day.

With few exceptions, our more established churches have been on a plateau or in decline for several years. 28 reported no new Nazarenes and 11 reported no conversions this year. In keeping with the “Growing Young” theme of this report, it should be noted that all but four of our churches have children attending Sunday School and all but five have youth in discipleship training. That may be TMI (too much information), but it is important information. My purpose here is not to embarrass anyone, but to define reality and to highlight our need for vibrant church renewal. Pastors, I highly recommend two new initiatives that may breathe new life into congregations whose vital signs are unhealthy: 1) the RAND Project to be introduced by Pastor Tim Britton later today and 2) Organic Outreach to be taught by Dr. Kevin Harney during PALCON at SNU. Both of these tracks should lead to a fruitful future, as clergy and laity alike engage Kingdom work together. Long after my tenure ends, I expect to hear amazing reports of how God used one or both of these initiatives to produce remarkable turnarounds throughout the district.

North Arkansas Nazarenes are generous with their God-given resources, as evidenced by this year’s *Funding the Mission* investments in connectional interests that advance the cause of Christ at home and abroad. Here are the latest figures:

| Category | Amount Given | Percentage |
|----------------------------|--------------|------------|
| World Evangelism Fund | \$407,653 | 5.78% |
| Pensions and Benefits Fund | \$156,120 | 2.21% |
| SNU Educational Fund | \$157,501 | 2.24% |
| District Unified Fund | \$378,911 | 5.37% |

40 of our churches reached or exceeded their giving goals: World Evangelism Fund - 5.5%; Pensions and Benefits Fund - 2.25%; SNU Educational Fund - 2.25%; District Unified Fund - 5.5%. (See the list of churches that paid all budgets in full on page 15 of your delegate booklet). Generosity was on full display when two very gracious members from our Batesville Church – Elmer and Debbie Cochran – donated an awesome 40-passenger tour bus to Southern Nazarene University. It should also be noted that our SDMI invested \$15,000 for the construction of a new dormitory at South Arkansas District’s Heath Valley Camp, and Jim Thomson gave countless hours of labor toward the project. This will provide much-needed space for our 300+ children who attend camp there.

Rev. Guillermo Mairena, our newly appointed Hispanic Ministries Coordinator, reports encouraging developments on several fronts: 1) 17 students participating in six ministerial courses scheduled for 2018 with the goal of covering all 24 required courses over the next 4 years, 2) 10 participants in a DCPI “Church Planting Essentials” training session, 3) plans for several cooperative enrichment/fellowship events for the members of our four Hispanic congregations. Predictably, many of our Latino brothers and sisters are quite nervous about the uncertainties related to federal immigration policies. I am well aware that immigration has become a very divisive issue, but we can all agree on the Scriptural call to be hospitable and loving toward the immigrants among us. They need our affirmation now, more than ever before. One tangible way to demonstrate hospitality is to share our facilities with Hispanic new starts, particularly in those cities and towns with growing immigrant populations.

| City | Population | Hispanic Population | Percent |
|-------------------|------------|---------------------|---------|
| 1. Ft. Smith | 87,603 | 15,465 | 17.7% |
| 2. Russellville | 28,738 | 4,038 | 14.1% |
| 3. Jonesboro | 71,576 | 4,016 | 5.6% |
| 4. Siloam Springs | 15,832 | 3,584 | 22.6% |
| 5. Conway | 63,555 | 2,996 | 4.7% |
| 6. Clarksville | 9,338 | 2,103 | 22.5% |
| 7. Dardanelle | 4,676 | 1,833 | 39.2% |
| 8. Sherwood | 30,210 | 1,508 | 5% |
| 9. Berryville | 5,339 | 1,431 | 26.8% |
| 10. Green Forest | 2,775 | 1,330 | 47.9% |

Almost all of you have heard the heartwarming story of how God answered prayers by bringing Pastor Greg Baker and the True Grace Gospel Church into our hearts and into our fellowship two years ago. They have been such a blessing to the entire district. Going forward, we must become more intentional in our efforts to reach our black brothers and sisters who comprise 16% of the

state's population. It is not enough to simply welcome them to our churches, if and when they come. Diversity and inclusion must be among our highest priorities in missional efforts. Make deep connections with people of color...lean into their stories...share your story...think creatively about how you and your church can bridge the racial divide...celebrate cultural diversity...pray for our ongoing search for African-American pastors...most importantly, fulfill Christ's command to love our neighbors as ourselves. I have a holy hunch that young adults who seem to be more comfortable with intercultural models of community will lead the way in this noble effort.

When the church entrusted me with district superintendency 17 years ago, I didn't know what I didn't know. Today, like Farmer's Insurance, "I know a thing or two because I've seen a thing or two!" Here's what the Lord has taught me along the way:

1. God does some BIG things in small, out-of-the-way places. (i.e. El Paso, Osceola, Garner) Having said that, my hope is that the district would find ways to open or reopen work in the many small towns, particularly in northeast Arkansas and the Ozarks, that do not have a Wesleyan voice.

2. Our Lord rewards those who move from their comfort zone and "step out of the boat" in obedience to His call. It has been that way from the very beginning of time when God instructed our first parents to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" with shalom (peace). The suggestion here is that to be fully human is to be on mission for God. You know the story. After the Fall, chaos ensues. Things get really messy with a murder within the first family, widespread wickedness led to the flood and then God reveals His plan to repopulate the earth through Noah's family by repeating the original marching orders for mankind: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth", bringing order (shalom) out of chaos. The whole world had one language. And then there's this odd story (Gen. 11) about the tower of Babel. Those who were commissioned by God to go, to be fruitful, to fill the earth with shalom, decided to settle, using bricks (suggesting permanency) to build a city with a tower. The Bible says that they wanted to "make a name for themselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." (Gen. 11:4) Created to go and fill the world with the knowledge of God, they settled. Friends, settling is the enemy of mission; therefore, God confused their language and scattered them from their safe, holy huddle to resume their work. Later, God called Abram from his comfort and security: "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you" (Gen.12:1). Time and time again, we read God's clear call to GO. But let's face it...we prioritize safety and comfort...our tendency is to stay in the boat rather than heed Jesus'

call to a wave-walking adventure. In so doing, we thwart God's mission and settle for little or no growth.

3. Churches that adapt their methods to changing times can thrive, not just survive. Inspired by Disney's Academy Award-winning movie *Frozen*, my 2015 report was entitled "Let It Go." I want to repeat some of my text because this point is so vital in our effort to reach and retain young people.

I find a few of the *Let It Go* lyrics to be helpful and instructive: *I'm never going back, the past is in the past, let it go, let it go.* "It" is anything, good or bad, that keeps us stuck in the past missing the new thing God wants to do in this generation. Brian Zahnd has likened the church's position as the "end of the line" for the track we have been on. His analogy is genius. Listen carefully to his words: "We are like people on a subway who have taken a particular train as far as it will go. We have two choices. We can sit on a train that is going nowhere, or we can disembark and find our way through the confusing labyrinth of the terminus and locate the proper platform to catch the train which will take us farther down the line." In the midst of constant change, it is tempting to succumb to nostalgia and wistfully recall some point in the past that we identify as the "glory days." But we cannot go back. An idealized memory of the past is not a vision which can carry us into the future. So "it" may be the very thing that worked well in another generation. "It" may be the fear of failure fueled by haunting memories of yesterday's botched ministry attempt. "It" may be the ease associated with our customary way of doing things. "It" may be a genuine concern that embracing new methods will offend those who employed older ones.

Apparently, there were those in Jesus' day who were stuck in the past. Mark 7:1-8 describes a confrontational scene in which the Pharisees and teachers of the law took issue with some disciples who were eating food with "defiled" hands instead of honoring the "traditions of the elders" that required a ceremonial washing of one's hands, cups, pitchers and kettles. When asked "why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders?", Jesus replied to these religious leaders, "*You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.*" Ouch! Could we be guilty of doing the same? Holding on to human traditions, rather than embracing God's directives. If Jesus were physically present here today, I have a holy hunch that He would be shouting "Let it go! Let it go!" Those human traditions – whatever it is that keeps you from embracing the new thing God wants to do in this generation – LET IT GO!

We would be wise to take our cue from the men of Issachar who "understood the signs of the times and knew the best course to take" (1 Chron.12:32). Knowing the current trends and how to best live in light of them is critical for the future of the church. So what are they? There's not sufficient time to provide an exhaustive list, but I want to mention a few of those trends that are having the most profound impact on the church: religious pluralism, communication via social media, apathy and/or

antagonism toward organized religion, biblical illiteracy, decline in denominational loyalty, a diminishing church volunteer work force, great interest in compassionate ministry, changing giving patterns, the spectator approach to worship, redefinition of marriage and family, shortened childhood, sexual/gender identity issues, and the mainstream acceptance of the pornographic. It is time to have serious conversations about how the local church responds to the new normals in culture. The congregation that chooses to ignore these complex issues can easily become as irrelevant as the typewriter collecting dust in the attic. In his classic book *Christ and Culture*, Richard Niebuhr outlines the five different ways the church has historically related to culture: *against* culture, *of* culture, *above* culture, *in tension with* culture, and *transforming* culture. Given the repulsive nature of our increasingly secularized society, we might be tempted to simply rail *against* culture from a safe distance in holy huddles. After all, God's Word says, "Come out from among them and be separate." I contend that we have taken the doctrine of separation too far. Call me crazy, but I believe the church can and should transform culture. To do so, however, we must avoid being compromised, cloistered, and combative. Furthermore, we must be willing to discard methods that may have been useful in the "good old days" in favor of new ones that are more effective in reaching students and young adults.

The recent "Yanny vs. Laurel" internet sensation (an audio version of the dress color debate of 2015) reminds us that our words can be heard quite differently. They are often misunderstood. Therefore, I want to emphasize that my appeal is for changing *methods*, not changing our *message*. There are not many roads to heaven...declare that Jesus is *the way, the truth, the life*. Beware of those who want to distort the simple, yet profound, truth of the gospel. Continue to preach and teach holiness, not because it is the defining doctrine of Nazarenes but because it's the call of God for His people throughout the Bible from cover to cover. It's okay replace antiquated metaphors and fuzzy terminology with a fresh new articulation of holiness, but we should be very careful lest we "throw the baby out with the bathwater!" (Forgive me for that antiquated idiomatic expression).

Lou Gehrig closed his farewell speech with these words: "I might have been given a bad break, but I've got an awful lot to live for!" So do I. A wise friend recently told me that when a man retires *from* something, he should retire *to* something. It's my intention to redirect my ministry toward interim pastoral work, church consulting, a few writing projects, and more time with my extended family.

Let me conclude by expressing sincere appreciation to our department heads, the District Advisory Board, pastors, and church members for the special privilege of serving alongside of you. The North Arkansas District team is second to none. “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (Philippians 1:3-5). Debbie and I have done our best to honor the sacred trust associated with the superintendency. We love you deeply. Your friendship has blessed our lives; your prayerful support has sustained us through some ten-tissue days. Dr. Sunberg will soon begin her work with the District Advisory Committee to find my successor – a process that should be bathed in prayer and one that will solicit input from multiple sources. I have utmost confidence in the process and the people involved. My hope is that you will continue to “grow young” under the godly guidance of another “lucky” leader.

Great Days Ahead,

D. Randy Berkner