

First Impressions

District Superintendent's Report
presented by
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Rogers First Church of the Nazarene

District Superintendent's Report "First Impressions"

Dr. David and Sharon Graves, distinguished guests from Southern Nazarene University – Dr. Loren Gresham, Dr. Terry Toler, and Dr. Tony Griffin, delegates and friends gathered for this 58th Assembly, it is a joyful privilege to present my very first report as superintendent of the North Arkansas District.

What a difference a year makes! In June 2009, Dr. David Graves pastored Olathe College Church; twelve months later, he's serving the global church with distinction as a general superintendent. Dr. Graves, we hold you in high esteem and welcome your jurisdictional leadership among us. You will soon discover that North Arkansas Nazarenes are wonderful folks whose devotion to Christ translates into loving support of church leaders. A year ago, I begged my close friend Dr. Barney Baggott to delay his retirement plans and insisted that he still had plenty of "fire in the belly" to meet the demands of superintendency. Obviously, he ignored my advice and road off into the sunset, presumably to find more time for his two favorite hobbies – golf and fishing. Not! Dr. Baggott is now employed as the camp manager for the Tennessee District. Reeling from Dr. Baggott's stunning resignation and a threatening tornado, 2009 Assembly delegates regained their equilibrium and demonstrated the good sense to elect Rev. Ken Stallings as the new DS. My hunch is that everyone went home feeling rather comfortable with the choice – everyone except Ken and perhaps Linda. After several days of prayerful consideration, Ken respectfully declined the election. A year later, Ken has finally agreed to serve as the DS – district secretary!

Last June, Debbie and I were preparing to represent the Wisconsin District at the General Assembly in Orlando. Who could have imagined that Dr. Jesse Middendorf, in consultation with the Advisory Council, would appoint me to the North Arkansas District less than three months later. After all, the Berkners had never visited "the natural state" and we knew just a few people here. Yet, in the words of John Denver, it feels like we are "coming home to a place we've never been before." Maybe that is God's way of confirming that our ecclesiastical appointment was indeed a divine appointment. A year ago, our family was rather small – Debbie, yours truly, and our only son Drew. Facebook

reconnected Drew to his childhood sweetheart; they fell in love and were married on February 27th; Drew became a stepfather and we became instant grandparents of Kyle (12) and Alana (7). Distance makes frequent visits impossible, so we got Mighty Max (a miniature dachshund) to fill the void.

Several years ago, a TV commercial reminded us that you only get one chance to make a good first impression. The adage is still true. Besides, those first impressions are nearly impossible to undo or reverse. That's why initial encounters are so extremely important; they set the tone for the relationship that follows. Since our arrival on October 7th, Debbie and I have driven about 30,000 miles to be warmly welcomed by new faces in new places. In the process, we've formed a very favorable first impression of the North Arkansas District family – the pastoral ministry team and laity alike – and we hope that the feeling is mutual. Thanks so much for opening your hearts to us. If our honeymoon is indicative, I believe that we can anticipate a strong marriage to the district for many years to come. During today's report, I want to speak more specifically about my "first impressions" and propose some strategic initiatives in response to them.

Impression #1: The North Arkansas District is blessed with many good and godly leaders. Special thanks are due the following who have served so well in key leadership roles: Administrative assistants – Karen Hollstein and Debbie Berkner; NMI President – Nona Floyd; NYI President – Kent Britton; SDMI Chairman – Ken Stallings; Advisory Board Members – Charley Appleby, Debbie Hobbs, Bill Milburn, Dale Webster, Tim Kellerman, Jim Sanders, Ken Stallings, and Larry Woodward; District Secretary – Mark Lindstrom; District Treasurer – Susan Baker; Missions USA Board Chairman – Alan Johnson; Board of Ministry Chairman – Tim Bullington; District Ministry Training Center Director – George Petry. The transition between superintendents was virtually seamless because these folks faithfully and effectively did their work, usually behind the scenes. Let's express our appreciation to all of these.

When someone gives their life in an effort to save someone else, we call them a hero. Firefighters, police officers, and soldiers who make the ultimate sacrifice are held in high esteem and rightfully so. They are heroes. But there's another group that merits that moniker – North Arkansas pastors and spouses. It's unlikely that any of these dedicated servants will become ministry martyrs, losing

their lives in the line of duty – unless they push too hard for changes in worship style, service times, or the church name! However, they are laying down their lives in daily acts of selflessness directed toward people inside and outside the church who may or may not recognize the sacrificial nature of their work. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Self-giving pastors top my list of heroes. Could we take a moment to honor our pastoral ministry team – pastors, associates, and spouses? I’d like to have them stand and remain standing as we acknowledge them and express our deep appreciation for their service rendered to God through the church. These men and women have taken seriously Jesus’ admonition: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant” (Matthew 20:26). Thank you, servant-leaders for preaching God’s Word with passion and power, for introducing the lost to Jesus Christ, for making disciples, for teaching holiness by precept and example, for comforting the sick and bereaving, for praying for your flock, for counseling those in crisis, for providing missional leadership, for overseeing the work of the church board and auxiliaries, for supporting denominational interests beyond the local church, and for all that you do in response to God’s calling upon your lives. Your names may never appear in lights, but you are real heroes.

As pastors report today, please give attention to their church’s statistical summary printed in the delegates’ booklet. Keep in mind, however, that numbers do not tell the whole story nor capture the spirit of a congregation. Pastors reports take us beyond the “nickels and noses” to reveal how God has been working in and through each congregation this year. Rejoice in their victories and take note of their concerns so that you will know how to pray specifically for them when you return home.

These are good ministers who are doing good work. Are they successful? The answer hinges on your definition of success. Sadly, we place too much emphasis on institutional measures of success – attendance, membership, giving, property, etc. Don’t misunderstand me. Those gauges are important, but they can be misleading and discouraging. I prefer John Wooden’s definition: “Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to do your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.” Enabling pastors to maximize their God-given potential is among my highest priorities in life. I believe that good is the enemy of great and the “curse of competence” could keep even the sharpest of pastors from becoming all that

they can be. While it's true that no one ever realizes his or her full potential, we should be striving to close the actualization gap between where we are and where we could be. Every member of the district ministry team needs to be a lifelong learner to remain effective in a postmodern world. To that end, I have encouraged them to attend the upcoming PALCON and begun planning for several team-training, team-building sessions to be guided by respected church leaders from within and outside the district. "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).

FYI: the District Advisory Board has purchased a 1 acre lot with previously designated funds for the purpose of building a new district office/resource center. A local architect has drawn preliminary plans for a 2,500 sq. ft. facility that includes a well-equipped conference room for committee meetings, on-site pastoral seminars and webinars. It's my desire to transform the "district office" into a "district resource center" that will equip the local church for frontline ministries.

Impression #2: **We are in the midst of a statistical slump.** The story of God's work among us is an ongoing narrative; you might think of it as a movie with no ending. And yet, we need to stop periodically and study a still picture to evaluate the health of our district.

Let's look together at the statistical summary:

Avg. Weekly Sunday School/Discipleship Attendance	3,315 (+239)
Sunday School/Discipleship Enrollment	7,738 (-623)
Avg. Weekly Corporate Worship Attendance	4,045 (-115)
Church Membership	6,260 (-75)
New Nazarenes	211 (-52)
Conversions	239
Baptisms	109
Total Raised for All Purposes	\$7,610,025 (-\$128,647)

Some of my impressions are rather subjective; this one is based upon the objective data . A closer look inside the numbers is quite revealing on several levels.

Sunday School/Discipleship Ministries: 30 of our Sunday Schools reported gains over last year; 22 showed losses; 6 remained the same. The following earned Sunday School Growth Awards: Bentonville Primera (Exceptional), Berryville (Superior), Bethel (Superior), Harrison (Superior),

Ozark (Superior), Rogers New Hope (Superior), Van Buren First (Superior), Bentonville (Honor), Pleasant Hill (Honor), and Siloam Springs (Honor). My sense is that most of our gains in this category can be attributed to revisions in the way we count SDMI attendance, now including discipleship groups that meet throughout the week for at least 30 minutes with approved curriculum. With that in mind, let me encourage each local church leadership team to dream of ways to get folks studying the Word in various venues (homes, business offices, elderly care facilities, apartment buildings, etc.) whenever it's convenient for the participants. Of course, our goal is not to simply boost numbers; it is to make Christlike disciples.

Corporate Worship Attendance: 21 churches reported increases; 33 declined; 4 remained the same. Predictably, churches that were without a pastor for an extended length of time suffered the greatest losses in worship attendance. Memo to self: move quickly to fill those empty churches!

Church Membership/Conversions: 24 churches reported net gains in membership; 24 experienced net losses; 10 remained the same. Of the 211 new Nazarenes, 168 were received into membership by profession of faith. Sadly, 24 churches reported no new members by profession of faith and 25 didn't have a single conversion. That should drive us to our knees, calling on God to renew our burden for lost and broken people. If you belong to one of those churches with no conversion growth, I challenge you to do three things when you get back home: befriend at least one unchurched person, pray for him or her daily, and share God's love one redemptive conversation at a time.

Impression #3: North Arkansas Nazarenes generously support our connectional interests. During a year in which charitable donations dropped by 3.6% nationwide (the first decrease since 1974), we could have easily allowed financial fears to limit our support of global evangelism, Nazarene higher education, retired ministers and district ministries. Not so. Instead, we did what we have always done – we gave sacrificially, demonstrating a missional mentality and our ongoing denominational loyalty. Rejoice with me in these amazing totals which may rise throughout the day:

	Our share	Actually given	Percentage
World Evangelism Fund	\$484,361	\$456,664	94.3%
Pensions and Benefits Fund	\$129,769	\$124,071	95.6%
SNU (Educational) Fund	\$227,028	\$192,335	84.7%
District Unified Fund	\$403,642	\$357,468	88.6%

I want to call special attention to two of these funds. First, there's been a change related to Pensions and Benefits. The pension amount an eligible minister will receive is now based on how much is paid to the P&B Fund by his or her local church. Also, I want to point out that every dollar given to Southern Nazarene University through the Educational Fund is passed along in scholarships to Nazarene students, several from North Arkansas.

The following churches affirmed the value of our connectional interests by paying all budgets in full: Altus, Batesville, Bentonville, Bentonville Primera, Cabot Russell Chapel, Clinton, Conway First, Conway Harvest, Farmington, Fayetteville First, Fort Smith First, Fort Smith Trinity, Greenbrier, Heber Springs, Horseshoe Bend, Jacksonville First, Jonesboro First, Jonesboro Forest Home, Liberty, Maple Shade, Marshall, McCrory, Morrilton, Mountain Home Twin Lakes, Newport, Paragould First, Paragould Woodland Hills, Pickens Chapel, Rogers First, Russellville, Searcy, Sherwood First, Siloam Springs, Springdale First, Springdale Primera, Van Buren First, and White River.

Thanks to Dr. Mark Lail's presentation to our pastors and treasurers, we are better prepared to embrace the new "Funding the Mission" system that calls for monthly investments of current income based on the following formula: World Evangelism Fund – 5.5%; Pensions and Benefits Fund – 2%; Southern Nazarene University Fund – 2.5%; District Unified Fund – 6%. For more information, go to www.fundingthemission.org.

Impression #4: We need to intensify our church planting efforts. Over the years, we have tried to provide a holiness witness in towns and cities throughout northern Arkansas. Church planting is in our DNA. It's time to step up our efforts because several congregations seem near the end of their organizational life cycle and new churches tend to be more effective than established ones in reaching the unchurched. By the way, every local church – big and small – will close its doors and cease operations someday. Circumstances determine the timing. Changing demographics, an aging congregation, and the economic downturn led Pastor Richard Heidi to contact me concerning the possible closure of the Horseshoe Bend Church this spring. He and the few remaining church members could have simply turned out the lights, locked the doors, and walked away with heads down; they chose to celebrate what God had done in and through the church for the past 35 years and

turn over their assets (building, bank account, CD, etc) for future newstarts in an act of “corporation sanctification.” Death leading to life. It’s a model befitting holiness people.

You may recall that Forest Home Church partnered with the district in recruiting James Betts for a newstart effort in the Jonesboro area. With the blessing and guidance of Pastor Ken Stallings, James has been busy gathering a launch team and developing strategic plans. Excitement is building in anticipation of the launch scheduled for 10-10-10. Please keep praying for this endeavor. At our next Assembly, we hope to celebrate with those who have had their spiritual thirst quenched at our Living Water Church. Future newstart locations may include Maumelle, Mountain View, Wynne, Blytheville, and Cabot. I would have included Marion in this list, but the West Memphis Church is relocating to Marion and joining the North Arkansas District.

It may surprise you to learn that Hispanics represent about 5% of the state’s population. Several years ago, the district made a conscious effort to reach out to them with the gospel “good news.” Aren’t you glad we did? We now have vibrant Hispanic groups meeting in Bentonville, Springdale, and Rogers. Pastors Beck Rodriguez and Fabian Correa are outstanding leaders with great passion for Christ and His cause.

Don’t you think it’s time to become more intentional about reaching our African-American brothers and sisters? Blacks represent almost 16% of the state’s total population. While the majority of them reside in the southern and eastern areas of the state (beyond our jurisdiction), many live near our predominately white churches. Let’s get to know them and invite them into our fellowship. Given the historical racial divide in the state, we may be wise to recruit African-American pastors for the purpose of starting racially diverse churches – perhaps in North Little Rock or Fayetteville.

Impression #5: **We must embrace the missional church model to effectively reach the unchurched in a postmodern world.** Some of you have heard my sermon about the “No Limits Church” based upon Zechariah’s vision, so I’ll reduce it to the Cliff Notes version because it illuminates my point here.

Fortified walls protected ancient civilizations against attacks from conquering marauders. They were simple at first. But each advance in weaponry (from the catapult to the battering ram) was

countered by wall modifications and enhancements such as a city ditch, a gate tower, a wall tower extending slightly beyond the wall, arrow slits, etc. A city's wall eventually began to serve a symbolic function – it represented the status, independence, and pride of its people. Thus, architecture became more and more ornate.

Back in 587 B.C., the Babylonians penetrated the walls of Jerusalem, the Holy City, and left the temple in ruins. During the rebuilding project, the prophet Zechariah had several night visions including the one recorded in the second chapter of the book bearing his name. A man with a measuring line in his hand, a surveyor of sorts, stood before him. When Zechariah inquired of his intentions, the man replied, "I'm going to measure Jerusalem, to find out how wide and how long it is." He left, presumably to begin his work of defining the city's boundaries and setting its limits. Another angel approached Zechariah with this simple, yet profound, message: "Run, tell that young man, 'Jerusalem will be a city without walls because of the great number of men and livestock in it. And I myself will be a wall of fire around it,' declares the Lord, 'and I will be its glory within.'"(Zechariah 2:4-5)

A city without walls...what an instructive image. Like so many of us, the Jews were restricted in their vision. They reasoned that Jerusalem must have walls and that they should be built where the old ones used to stand. The young surveyor represents conventional "we've always done it that way" thinking. Such thinking is fundamentally flawed; it sees a future population that is no different from the former days. The vision implies that the Holy City would embrace varieties of people – the city's current population, returning exiles from the four corners of the world to which they had fled (v.6), and the citizens of Gentile nations joining the chosen people and becoming the people of God (v.11).

Zechariah's vision holds profound implications for us. In some civilizations "wall" and "city" were so tightly linked that one term could stand for the other. One town secretary put it this way: "What has a wall around it, that we call a city." My concern is that the church is being too narrowly defined by its "walls" – those rituals, cultural norms, musical styles, spending patterns, evangelistic methods, etc. with which we have become quite comfortable. Can you envision a church without walls? Wouldn't it be fun to belong to a church that doesn't allow conventional thinking to hinder the new thing God wants to accomplish in your part of the Kingdom? Dear friends, the walls that protect us

can also limit us, or more precisely, limit what God wants to do in and through us.

If we want to see the Church of the Nazarene continue to be a vibrant voice for God's "good news", then we must exchange our "world to the church" mentality for a "church to the world" mind set. The "y'all come" approach no longer works. That means some of us will have to release our death grip on the programs and traditions, so that the congregation can get its breath and step out to actually engage the unchurched and dechurched people for whom Christ died.

Here's how that happens. First, pastors must surrender their "expert" status and accept the truth that the Spirit of God is within the people of God. What this means is that all the answers to the questions of how to be God's people in a particular time and place are among our Spirit-filled church members. Rather than creating bold visions, the pastor turns his attention to calling forth what the Spirit is up to among the ordinary people of God and in the neighborhoods where they live. How? By listening intently to their stories and coaching laypersons to do the same. Community hurts and needs are revealed. The us vs. them relationship fades, as the Spirit enables us to identify with the hurting folks around us. Warning: you could be moved to tears, but that's a good thing. Why? This quote from Frederick Buechner provides the answer:

Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not, God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go next.

Once those tears lead Spirit-filled Nazarenes to where and who they should serve, church leaders should empower them for action and channels resources to the scene where God is at work. One more thing, pastors. Bless those laity who dare to try something new and create an atmosphere where even ministry venture failure is celebrated. Otherwise, few others will be stepping out of the boat in response to Jesus' summons to serve.

Royal Caribbean International lures us to "the nation of why not" with images of surf simulators, ice skating rinks, and rock wall climbing. From its very beginning, this company has been guided by the "Why Not?" principle and it has proven to be a good business model. The "Nation of Why Not" is a place where innovation and imagination reign supreme; its "citizens" enjoy activities previously

thought to be impossible while taking a cruise.

“Why not?” thinking drives missional living! As the Spirit prompts God’s people to live out their faith in new ways, our response should be “Yes, Lord...why not?” It was the “why not?” spirit that led Emily Bullington to launch her lemonade stand, raising funds to build an orphanage in Kenya. 11 year olds don’t do things like that. Why not? Go for it, if God is in it! It was the “why not?” spirit that motivated Penny McCawley to donate a kidney to her boss David Passmore. Employees just don’t do things like that. Why not? When you pray through on something, go for it! It’s the “why not?” that will make us more missional than we’ve ever been before – individually and collectively.

Well, it’s time to end this report lest you get the impression that I am too long winded. Again, those first impressions are so difficult to reverse. Let me close by assuring you that I respect the office of district superintendent and take very seriously the sacred trust you have placed in me. May God grant us grace and guidance into a fruitful future together.

Respectfully submitted,

D. Randy Berkner