

North Arkansas District– District Superintendent's Report

2020-2021

Dr. Chambo, Dr. Newman, Rev. Thrasher, and delegates and guests of the North Arkansas District Assembly,

It is my privilege to present my third report as district superintendent of the North Arkansas District Church of the Nazarene. Two assemblies ago, way back in June 2019, at my first district assembly with you, [and it feels like a lifetime ago after these past months of pandemic, COVID-19 restrictions, social distancing, the overuse of the word, 'unprecedented,' lockdowns, quarantines, masks (who ever foresaw the day that discarded masks would become the new cigarette butt, lying around everywhere?), vaccines, Zoom calls (which aren't going anywhere), ministry pivots, and I could go on, but I'll spare you!], I asked you to join me in beginning to pray a Matthew 9:37-38 prayer like this: *"Lord, give us workers to the harvest: great laborers for our local churches, great pastors for our churches, great servant-leaders who will serve the global church, and great church planters to begin new works, so we can do great work in your harvest field."* I asked you to set your phones to 9:37 every morning or evening, and take a minute or two and ask God to raise up laborers for your local church's ministries, to raise up those who would feel called to serve the global church as pastors, and to raise up those who would feel called to plant churches and ministries on our district. I also use this time to pray for Southern Nazarene University, since I originally got the idea from Dr. Newman. If you took me up on that, I want to say thank you. Every morning, unless that alarm goes on and I'm in the middle of something, I stop—even for just a breath prayer—and ask God to bless you and us in these ways.

But in the past year, as I've engaged that passage through prayer, I've noticed two outcomes I didn't catch originally. In each of the three Gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) where this invitation from Jesus is mentioned, it is connected to him sending out the 12 disciples to basically do what He had been doing. But in an interesting twist, Luke tells us in his account that after the twelve have gone out, Jesus then sends 72 to join them in preaching/sharing the Good News, rescuing the lost, healing the broken, and bringing His Kingdom and His values to bear on the world. He still sends us into the world to perform His works in our ministry to others, to get outside of our comfort zones and out of our buildings, and love our neighbors, to go into all the world and make disciples. There are two things I noticed in this story. First, He called them to pray for workers to the harvest, but then He sent them. So, like them, we pray, and, like them, we go...we don't wait, because as we're praying, we notice that we are often the answer to the prayer we're praying. But then something awesome happens. As we go, Jesus answers our prayer by sending others to partner with us.

But this pandemic year highlighted a second directive Jesus gave to His disciples in this most amazing story. In all three Gospels, to paraphrase, Jesus basically says,

"Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic...depend on the hospitality of others...recognize the urgency of the time" (Matthew 10:9-15, Mark 6:8-11, Luke 9:3-5). In essence, Jesus was reminding his followers of the necessity of traveling lightly, to not let ourselves become so encumbered by life's cares that we are not able to flex, pivot, and innovate in creative ways as the time, circumstances, or needs of others are placed in front of us. This is a great reminder to all of us personally, and I confess that I often feel convicted that instead of being in control of my stuff, sometimes it feels like my stuff is in control of me, but it's also a timely instruction for us as church leaders. We learned this past year just how tied we all were to our buildings, programs, worship and discipleship rituals, and ministry routines. The realities of the pandemic forced us to let go of some of the things we thought we could never live without, only to find out we absolutely can live without some of those things. Jesus gave us a needed reset, and I pray we continue to listen to what He wants to teach us through all this, and to run everything we do in church work through the filter of 'Travel Lightly.'

I am proud of the work of our pastors for their nimbleness the past year. I had to say to others, and often remind myself, the we pastors were never trained for, nor have we ever had to lead through, a global pandemic. Constant change, having to make decisions that could not ever be accepted by everybody, upsetting or losing parishioners over masking/unmasking, cancelling in-person church to honor the request of the governor, and facing backlash if they opened back up too soon, or too late. Knowing there was no 'win/win' option during the heat of this issue, all right in the middle of societal and racial unrest, and the most polarizing presidential election cycle any of us have ever lived through, one that tested the unity of the Body of Christ in embarrassing and extremely harmful ways. Our pastors had to lead through all this—good thing they make the big bucks, amen?!?! Yet, the first thing I want to say in this report is how thankful I am for the skill, patience, grace, flexibility, resilience, and creativity our pastors exhibited over the past year and a half. I know we all felt inadequate, but I am so thankful they stayed the course! God chose to bring us into the world at a specific time in human history, and has He has raised them up for such a time as this! Partnering with them in ministry continues to be my greatest joy in this work.

Who would've thought any of us in ministry would ever see a day when we wouldn't gather for a district assembly, like 2020; when we wouldn't be able to meet physically in our churches for a short season; when we would be discouraged from shaking hands; when fellowship gatherings and small groups would be virtual; when we would be asked to plant new churches and ministries without being able to gather people physically; when we wouldn't be asked to turn in our average attendance numbers; and perhaps even more fascinating: when we would stop passing the offering plates! But this has been our reality at various points throughout the past fifteen months. Instead of these things, our pastors and laity have embraced flexibility and innovation over the past months in ways that reveal the creativity of our amazing God. During the peak of the pandemic, worship services continued through online

services on websites, Facebook, YouTube, parking lot/drive-in services with FM transmitters, among other ways; discipleship ministries and Bible studies, and other small group meetings continued through the use of Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and other online platforms. Pastoral care actually ramped up through all this as pastors and congregants became more creative in the ways they remained connected with one another. Now that our churches have resumed their in-person worship gatherings, I am encouraged to know many of these innovations are not going away. The future may not be predictable, but we can be certain that God won't be surprised. He is already there, preparing the way, and waiting for us to join Him where He is. I have learned over these months that Jesus loves His Church even more than we do, that He will see to His Church, and that we can trust Him to lead us toward a future that will accomplish His purposes, and bring glory to His name. God is using this season to rightly move us out of our comfort zones and to rattle our yearning for contentedness in church-life. God is teaching us new things every single week, and my prayer is for the Holy Spirit to continue to stretch and challenge us, so we can creatively embrace new ways to share the Good News of Jesus beyond our buildings, programs, and traditional means of ministry.

I'll say it again: thank God for our pastors, and for you; and for Jesus, who is looking at us now and saying, "See, I told you to travel lightly!" I pray we're learning this timely lesson.

Second, I want to thank God for the faithfulness of our churches. None of our churches have closed their doors these past two and a half years. Some are struggling, but everywhere I go, I see hope, and I envision possibility. Ministries and congregants are returning, and some are beginning to see the fresh presence of visitors and newcomers again. I think almost all of us were amazed that even as our average attendance numbers took a big hit during the pandemic, that our congregants stepped up and continued to support their church. Thank God for online giving! As a result, you continued to support your local churches and remained committed in your giving to others. I'm celebrating that 51 of our 59 organized churches, and the parent-affiliated congregations connected to them, along with our church-type missions reached all their giving goals for others. And every single one of our 59 churches, PACs, and CTMs took part in giving to others this church year. The end-result of which, Dr. Chambo, I am thrilled to share, is that our district's ministries gave more than 100% of our district's World Evangelism Fund allocation (\$445,920), the second highest total in our district's history; and more than 100% of our district Pensions and Benefits allocation (\$167,966), the most our district has ever given for P&B; more than 100% of our Southern Nazarene University allocation (\$166,988), Dr. Newman, the most we've given to SNU since the denominational apportionment restructuring in the late 2000s; and more than 100% to the District Unified Fund (\$405,367). This, in spite of the pandemic—did I tell you earlier that Jesus will see to His Church?

I am celebrating this historic accomplishment, even as I recognize that much of this was done without passing the offering plate. Can I throw a little water on our

celebration? My concern is not our giving in the short-term, but our giving in the long-term. This year revealed just how faithful our people are, and we thank God for them. But this was also a year when we didn't feed many new people into the front of the giving funnel, as you can see in the hit we took in conversions, new Nazarenes, and baptisms. As our churches age, and people pass away, or move from working to retirement incomes, we will not maintain these levels of giving apart from intentional leadership on the part of our pastors. Pastors and lay leaders, some of us may choose to stop passing offering plates, but we must continue to teach biblical stewardship to our congregations. If you choose to never pass the offering plate again, a decision I would give prayerful thought to before implementing, then please be intentional teaching stewardship in other ways. Jesus said that where our treasure is, that is where our heart is (Matthew 6:21). As a pastor, I taught stewardship consistently, because I found it to be true that when a person begins to give regularly, it is an indication of the increasing commitment of their heart to our church, but more importantly to Jesus. I encourage you to preach biblical stewardship, highlight it in membership classes, model it yourselves, and keep it before your people in creative ways.

Speaking of stewardship, I'd like to take a moment to simply remind all of us that SNU is our school...it belongs to the churches of the Nazarene in the South-Central region. Virtually every member of the Board of Trustees is chosen by you, the district assemblies, across our ten districts. Our district has four elected members on the board. Last year, there were nine students from our district. While that is good for recent years, we'd sure love to see more North Arkansas students at SNU. When I was pastoring, I would prayerfully ask our teenagers to at least consider SNU among their college options. That's my prayer for the teens of our district as well. But a college education is costly, and we want to help them as much as we can. Last year, our district was able to provide some scholarship funds to our nine students, thanks to a scholarship fund our district advisory board set up years ago at SNU, and some of the monies from the Lavena Lambert Scholarship Fund established by our district NMI about fifteen years ago in memory of our beloved former district NMI president. We would like to assist them even more. Pastors, this morning you were given a certificate celebrating your church's 100% payment of your SNU apportionment. Thank you, again. This certificate is actually a \$200 scholarship you can use to attend a class at SNU, or for you to gift to a student who is, or will be, attending SNU. The best part is that you can compile these up to ten years, and you can gift up to \$1000 per year to a student's account. I had the privilege to do this for a student when I was pastoring in Bentonville years ago. If you can leverage your certificates for yourself, or a student in your family or church, please do that. But, if you do not have any SNU students in your life or church right now, would you consider signing that certificate I gave you and returning it to me? If you will do that, my goal is to take all these I receive this year from you, and have them distributed equally among the, right now, eight students from our district who are registered for SNU this coming fall, up to \$1000 per student, to be added to the scholarship funds our district advisory board will award them this fall as well.

Third, district assembly is typically a time when we gather to highlight how we're doing in reaching people for Christ, conversions, baptisms, average worship attendance, and discipleship impact. Or not. As I said earlier, the pandemic year really made this difficult, acknowledged by the Board of General Superintendents' ruling to give a year of grace when it comes to many of these statistics. The average attendances you see in the booklets today are mostly not current...with few exceptions, they are from 2019. We know that although our churches have returned to in-person gatherings, for the most part, we have not returned to our pre-pandemic averages. I am celebrating today that in my travels over the past year, I have noticed our averages are creeping back up, even if slowly, to the point where most of our churches have returned to 70-80% or more of their average attendance prior to the pandemic. An interesting observation on my part is that some of our smaller churches are actually larger than we were before (in their in-person gatherings), and many of our churches are actually reaching more people than they were previously, even if their in-person numbers are not as strong, thanks to online platforms. But just about every single one of us have had to face the painful reality that some of our people are not coming back. Some used the pandemic as an off-ramp, and some have fallen away. Some of our faithful folks passed away and were not replaced. Some of our local churches even lost congregants as a result of Covid-19. We grieve every loss. We recognize the challenge of this year. It's one thing for our conversions, new Nazarenes, and baptism numbers to be skewed this past year, but we must put our heads and hearts together, tackle this disturbing statistic. Let's resume our Sunday schools and small groups, have a VBS, invite our friends and neighbors to church, get outside the walls and into our community, being good neighbors, like Nazarenes have always been. Let me challenge you: let's all strive for ZERO-ZEROS: zero churches reporting zero conversions, zero new Nazarenes, zero baptisms, or zero in any of our four areas of giving to others.

Let me celebrate something pretty cool that happened this year, in spite of the pandemic: Crossroads Cowboy Church led 150 people to faith in Christ, baptized 71 new Christians, welcomed 116 new Nazarenes to membership in the church, met all their giving goals, and planted another campus on our district, even while supporting two other campuses on our district, and even one on another district. God continues to bless Crossroads in reaching the western heritage culture all across Arkansas, resulting in their receiving the General Superintendents' Growth Award, again this year. The General Superintendents' Growth Award is not easy to attain. A local church needs to pay all their allocations in full, participate through significant financial and/or people investment in church planting, and show an increase of ten percent in worship attendance from the previous year. Congratulations Pastor Ron, Wanda, George, Jeremy, Josh, Chad and your whole team—meeting now in four locations: El Paso, Pleasant Plains, Natural Dam/Fort Smith and Charlotte, which is northeast of Batesville. I look forward to worshipping with you in El Paso on July 4th, and presenting this hard-earned award to your folks again this year!

Speaking of new ministries, the most disappointing thing about not being able to meet for district assembly in 2020 was that we were not able to introduce to you four new ministries that were started in the previous year. I'd like to tell you about them now, and add to these four the two new ministries started in this church year:

In September 2019, we launched Crossroads Cowboy Church—Natural Dam, in the Fort Smith area. This Parent-Affiliated Congregation, being mothered by Pastor Ron Riddle and Crossroads Cowboy Church—El Paso, is operating a full-blown arena-based ministry and serving that entire region. In recent months, Josh & Misty Davis, and their sweet little kids, following God's call on their lives, gave up their careers and security, sold their dream-home in central Arkansas and relocated to that area to assume leadership of this exciting ministry. These two are contagious—and God is already using them to bring this group of eighty plus folks together to reach the western heritage culture in western Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma. Good things are happening, and the future is bright!

Also, in September 2019, we launched Nueva Vida Iglesia del Nazareno in Siloam Springs, as a Parent-Affiliated Congregation of our Siloam Springs Church and Pastor Tim and Sarah Traxel. Even though a core of about twelve people had been gathered, this ministry had to be placed on hold last summer, due to the retirement of Pastor Manuel and Jasmine Rodriguez, but Siloam Springs Nazarene's commitment to hosting an Hispanic ministry in their facility has not wavered. Please join us in prayer for God to provide the right leader to help us and them to resume this ministry, and get things moving forward again for a future Siloam Springs Nueva Vida.

In November 2019, we launched Nueva Vida Iglesia del Nazareno in Jacksonville, as a Parent-Affiliated Congregation of our Jacksonville Church and Pastors Greg and Kristina Armstrong. Pastor Moises and Silvia Moraga have built a strong congregation of more than 35 congregants, are providing excellent spiritual leadership, have baptized more than 15 new believers, and the presence of this wonderful congregation of Hispanic Christians has been a source of rich blessing to the mother church as well. It has been a joy to watch this partnership come together. One of my highlights this year was being with them for their one-year celebration service. Every church I know who have welcomed our Hispanic brothers and sisters to begin a new ministry in their facility have discovered how this partnership has blessed their own ministry. May every church on our district catch this vision!

In April 2020, we registered Trinity Life Church of the Nazarene in Maumelle as a new Church-Type Mission, and appointed Dr. Tim and Kelly Bullington to lead this new ministry that is already more than 50 congregants strong. In their first full year of life, TLC is already fully self-supporting, were 100% in their giving to others, are eager to be connected to their district family, are growing and dreaming of their right next-steps in ministry to their community, and we are looking ahead to Pentecost Sunday 2022 when we are planning to fully organize this new Church of the Nazarene.

On Easter Sunday, in April 2021, Crossroads Cowboy Church's Pleasant Plains campus began a new campus in Charlotte, Arkansas with about 75 in worship. They have continued to meet each Sunday evening since that time, under the leadership of Pastor Ron Riddle and Pleasant Plains campus ministers, Jeremy and Jammie Cox. It's a beautiful thing: A church plant (El Paso) that planted a new church (Pleasant Plains) that is now planting a new church (Charlotte)! Crossroads Cowboy Church has moved from addition to multiplication. Praise the Lord! May every church on our district catch this vision!

In May 2021, we registered "The Lookout," a new house church in Mountain View, being planted by Pastor Bill and Teresa Gartung. This will be a retreat setting provided for ministry leaders to 'come away for a while' and lookout over their lives to see where God has brought them, and is taking them, and rest. They are building relationships in their community, and looking forward to gathering a small group together for worship and fellowship in the days ahead in their mountain-top home. Perhaps you know some folks in the Mountain View area who we might be able to reach out to and invite to be part of this new ministry? Please join us in praying for the Gartungs, and this new ministry in the beautiful mountains of northeast Arkansas.

Since the last district assembly in 2019, in addition to the six new church planting pastors mentioned above, we were also blessed to welcome the following senior pastors to our district's churches: Rev. Gretchen & Keith Rooney—Hickory Plains, Rev. Allison Beaty—McCrary, Rev. Jeff & Donna Lebert—Pea Ridge, Rev. Timothy & Teresa Hampton—Springdale First, Dr. Roberta Bustin—our interim at Batesville, Rev. Carlton & Kerry Hamrick—our interim at Marion Cypress Creek, Rev. Tony & Hydie Miller—Jonesboro Forest Home, and next Sunday, Rev. Jeff & Donna Taylor will be returning to our district to pastor (for a second time) our Sherwood Church. We're thrilled to have these men and women serving with us in North Arkansas.

Finally, I'd like to thank all of you for your service to Christ and our district. Thanks to our three auxiliary directors: Zina Weihe, NMI; Tim Britton, SDMI, and Peter Kline, NYI. These three leaders have navigated choppy waters the past year, and I thank them for their service to our district. Like all of us, they are looking ahead to resuming activities and events for their ministries. You will hear about some of the opportunities for growth and engagement from them later this morning. Thank you, Zina, Tim, and Peter. We love you.

I also want to thank those who chair the various committees that have continued to meet this past year: Curtis Clements, our able Finance Chair, Tim Bullington, our Board of Ministries chair, and Jim Sanders and Bill Millburn, who have provided leadership to our Properties Board. Each of these leaders, and their committees, have been indispensable to us in the office this past year. Thanks also to the members of our District Advisory Board—who have continued to partner with me in leading the district, while facing decisions no DAB has ever had to face these past two fiscal years. They are a joy to serve with, and their respect for you, one another, and our district comes

through every discussion and decision we've had to make: Laypersons—Dr. Don Guinn, Mr. Bill Millburn, Mr. Dale Webster, and Dr. Scott Woodward; Clergy—Rev. Tim Britton, Rev. Ron Riddle, Rev. Mark Snodgrass, and Rev. Steve Thrasher. Thank you all.

Special thanks to Mrs. Susan Baker, who works so well with us as treasurer for our district. She is steady, available, and willing to roll with the punches. Susan, Melanie, and I have learned so much the past two years, and it's been fun doing it together. Special thanks also to Rev. Steve Thrasher, who is as steady and faithful a district secretary as any district could ever hope for. There are very few in this room who can relate to the work of a district secretary, but they know fully the weight of this role. And Steve does it better than most, and with a heart for servant-leadership that makes it a blessing to partner with him.

And special thanks to Mrs. Melanie Thrasher for her excellent service as our district office/administrative assistant. Melanie has learned her role, right alongside me learning my role, over these past two and a half years. She has administrative gifts that fascinate me, yet she has always maintained the highest bar for her work, while being patient with me and the pastors and lay leaders on our district who have needed her assistance throughout the year. Always ready to serve. Always with a smile. She has been a joy to work with...and I say 'has,' because word of her gifts has gotten out, and she will be stepping away from our office after this week to begin a new career opportunity. We will miss her, but will always be thankful for the service she gave our district. The good news is that she's not going anywhere, because her and Hunter remain on staff at Greenbrier and, like they always have, will continue to serve as volunteers on our district, as needed. Thank you, Melanie, for your service to Jesus and the North Arkansas District.

Finally, friends, I want to close by telling you how much I appreciate you, your friendship, and most of all your prayers for me: professionally as the DS, but also personally for my family. You never know how a move will impact your life or the life of your family. I can say, quite honestly, that after two and a half years here, the transition back to North Arkansas has been the easiest ministry transition we've made in our more than 24 years of marriage and ministry. Ivan, Peter, Norah, and William have done so well, and we are thankful to have landed in a fine community, with excellent schools, neighbors we have grown to love, and a church family at Conway First that has embraced us...not as the DS's family...but as the Lindstrom family. Even though I travel to visit you most Sundays, Kelly and the kids are loved and allowed to be themselves there, and I'm thankful to Pastor Tim and Nichole, Kent and Debbie, Brian and Ashley, Caleb, and Lisa and the entire congregation for loving my family...especially our children.

Kelly and I are officially in our 25th year of marriage, and are looking forward to celebrating 25 years next May. Being married to a preacher is not easy, especially this preacher, but Kelly has always been my closest friend. I am thankful to God for bringing us together all those years ago. Our ministry or life journey has never been a

straight line, but it has been an adventure. And it has never been boring. Journeying with her through a life of service to Christ and His Church, and learning to parent these four very unique children with her, has been my greatest blessing.

I look forward to all God will do for us, and through us, in this new church year. We have a new opportunity to engage the work to which we've been called. Let's be intentional, lean, and creative, but let's get to work! Trusting in the promise from Galatians 6:9-10, "*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity [in other words—as long as we are drawing breath], let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers*" Galatians 6:9-10 (NIV).

You are deeply loved,

Dr. Mark A. Lindstrom
District Superintendent