

SOUTHWESTERN OHIO DISTRICT  
CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

*57<sup>th</sup>  
District Assembly*

ANNUAL REPORT  
OF THE  
DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

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### *If We Are Who We Say We Are. . .*

We are fond of certain words, ones that we believe shape our identity and express the essential qualities of who we are and what we believe. For us in the Church of the Nazarene, “holiness” has been a significant word for both our identity and our proclamation. But words are not empty shells – they carry the weight of our integrity and embody our character. They hold the power to shape perceptions and create understanding; they can operate as instruments of connection or tools of division. Our words stand on the faithfulness of our confession, or they collapse under the pressing weight of our hypocrisy.

In this, my final report to you as district superintendent, I choose not to talk about achievements, goals, or the measurements of ministry. It is someone else’s place to do that now, and as important as those matters might be, I am more convinced than ever that they are distant in priority from the issues of character. We can fly the banner of holiness over every church and paste that word on all that we do, but that word we claim to cherish, the one we fight to defend, will do more harm than good for the mission if we are not who we say we are. My departing word to you as a district family is this: be faithful to our confession. Do not simply use the word holiness, but be a holy people.

No doubt, most everyone associated with the Church of the Nazarene would stand in agreement with the statement that we need to be a holy people. But as much as we might give assent to the idea, the character of holiness is too often lacking in our relationships, our priorities, and our mission. We have too easily settled for behavioral codes rather than genuine transformation and religious appearances in place of true Christlikeness. We now live in a postmodern world, marked by suspicion. Others are not impressed by our slogans or proclamations; they look for consistency and authenticity in who we are. Our message will be lost in the sea of thousands of different voices if we do not free ourselves from the shallow and distorted concepts of holiness and begin to embody the transforming power of God’s grace that can mold broken humanity into the image of Christ.

We must understand what holiness is and how it is revealed in our everyday, real-life interactions. We need to see clearly how genuine holiness shapes and directs the mission and priority of the church. And perhaps within all of this, we need to remember what holiness is not. If we are who we say we are, then:

#### **Holiness will not be about power over others, but about serving in self-sacrifice.**

When Jesus told his disciples that the Son of Man would be betrayed and put to death, Peter was brash enough to rebuke Jesus and tell him how things are supposed to go. And according to the systems and values of our world, Peter’s reaction was more than understandable. Victory means that others submit to you; kingdoms rise by exerting power over others. Submission and death do not equate to success in the world’s formula. It’s about power, control, and force.

The Church has always had a tendency to follow Peter in this episode of misunderstanding and error. From the days of Constantine, we have made our attempts to wed the kingdom of God with earthly manifestations of power and authority. We set out to enforce our values through the rule of law and equate that with carrying out the mission of the Church. And throughout history, we see that every time we take hold of the sword of earthly power and influence in the name of the kingdom, the Church loses its true power and effectiveness. Sooner or later, we are cast out of our cultural position of privilege and preference, and we find ourselves in a strange land. We can look today at countries that are completely

secular, and yet at one time, they were the center of Christendom. We are witnessing that same trajectory here.

Typically, when that happens, our first response is to fight to regain what we feel we lost. We struggle to retake that position of preference, and we grab hold even more tightly to the sword of earthly power in order to achieve our goals. We want to believe that if we just get the right person elected, if we can pass a particular law, if we can boycott others into submission to our will, then everything will be in order, and we will once again enjoy power and privilege. But such attempts have never renewed the vitality of the Church and have never advanced our true mission.

As much as we may not want to face it, the people of God have never been at their best when they stand in the center of cultural privilege and political power. To the contrary, they have always been most effective when standing in the neglected and persecuted margins, representing a kingdom that is radically different than any of this earth. Holiness is not revealed in a grasp for political or cultural power; it is not demonstrated in the attempts to force our position on others. The kingdom of which we are a part operates by a different principle and is fulfilled in a different manner.

Jesus made it clear that not only would he lay down his life for the sake of others, but if we are going to follow him, our path must be the same. The call of his kingdom is not one of power over others, but the call to pick up a cross and follow in the Spirit of the crucified One. If we are going to proclaim a message of holiness with integrity and consistency, we must live as servants, willing to lay down our lives for the sake of others. Holiness always looks like Jesus, so genuine holiness can never be separated from the self-denying road of the cross. This is how his kingdom comes. Our fight for earthly power and control signals a lack of trust, the belief that the way of the cross is not sufficient to accomplish our purpose. That lack of trust reveals an inconsistency between our lives and our message, and it's one the world sees and uses to dismiss us as just another special interest group forcing its agenda on others.

The way to truly overcome is to reclaim a holiness that results in loving our neighbor as ourselves, even those neighbors who differ from us, disagree with us, or even despise us. It's the holiness we see in the Jesus we claim to follow. Instead of turning people into enemies, love them the way Jesus loves them. Instead of angry political rants that suggest our hope is built on the American political system and its powers, show the transforming power of God's love by serving those in need. Instead of blaming the world for being what it is, make a difference by serving as light in the darkness. Winning some culture war is not our primary call; building the kingdom is. And this kingdom comes by the way of the cross, not through the powers and agendas of earthly kingdoms. Be faithful to our confession and live as a self-sacrificing servant not just inside the church, but out in our world.

And if we are who we say we are, then:

**Holiness will not be about division or winning arguments, but about reconciliation and the unity of love.**

There can be no question that we live in a time marked by conflict, hatred, and violence. Human beings are reduced to issues, and we allow the issues to divide us. We live in a polarized climate where the only common denominators seem to be anger and fear. People are unwilling to listen, incapable of empathizing with others, void of any sense of humility or confession, self-righteous, and stubborn. And the sad truth is, those words do not simply apply to those outside the Church. We have often looked at

Paul's admonition in Romans 12:1 to not be "conformed to the world" as simply a matter of moral behaviors. His word to us, though, is to be "transformed through the renewing of our mind." Worldliness is not simply a matter of outward behaviors; it is one of character, attitude, and spirit. Too many of us who proclaim a testimony of holiness have, in fact, been shaped in our character more by the spirit of this world than the Spirit of Christ.

Some of the greatest frustrations and disappointments I have wrestled with in this role have been directly related to professing followers of Christ unwilling to seek reconciliation, forgiveness, and unity. In direct opposition to our testimony, we have been conformed to the divisive spirit of the world rather than the Spirit of grace. In our conflicts, we sound more like Fox News and CNN than we do the Jesus we claim to follow. We have forgotten that the words "be quick to listen and slow to speak" are actually in the Bible. Too often I have witnessed willful disobedience to Jesus' direction in Matthew 18, the refusal to acknowledge the plank in one's own eye, and the deliberate dismissal of the Scriptural command to bear with one another and forgive as the Lord forgave you. Instead of honest and transparent conversation, we play games of manipulation in the shadows. Our greatest concern and driving motivation becomes getting our way and winning the battle rather than reflecting Christ in our midst. And perhaps most troubling of all is our casual acceptance of it.

It's interesting that when I was in my doctoral program, I was in a peer group made up of ministers that we would generally label as theological liberals. They disagreed with me on many if not most doctrinal issues. But despite our theological differences, they were never unkind or mean-spirited. They always listened to my perspective, even in disagreement. And although they may have questioned my position, they never questioned my heart. Can I tell you that has not always been my experience within our own tribe, among those of us who call ourselves holiness people? There are too many who can testify to that same experience.

Make no mistake – the gap between our testimony and our attitude does not go unnoticed. We air our differences on Facebook for the world to see, we slander people of our church family to those who don't even attend our church, and we draw others into our battle who have no business being there. And the world looks at us and wonders why they would ever want to be a part of this. They experience enough conflict, division, manipulation, and gossip where they are. They don't need more, and yet that's what some of us seem to offer them.

Authenticity and integrity matter. We cannot expect others to believe our story about a God who loves them and will forgive them no matter what they have done if we cannot demonstrate love and reconciliation in our own relationships with one another. Our world desperately needs the spirit of grace and reconciliation. Where will they find it if we do not model it? Why would they believe it is possible if we live out the same fractured, divisive spirit as the world?

I've heard that I am unrealistic when it comes to this topic, but I take issue with that. It would be unrealistic to suggest that conflict or disagreement should never happen in the church, but that is not my contention. I fully understand and expect that, given the reality of our human condition, conflict will occur. It would be unrealistic to expect that the Biblical approach to peacemaking would be carried out uniformly and perfectly within the church. Again, I understand the imperfections of the church, the fact that we are all at different places in our spiritual journey and our level of maturity, and the reality that there will always be some who do not live up to their testimony. I will not stop, however, or apologize for calling the church to what it can and should be. If we can set aside or ignore Biblical directive simply

because we deem it to be unrealistic, we are placing our authority above that of Scripture and setting a dangerous precedent.

As a body of people who embrace and proclaim the word holiness, we can and should do better in living out a spirit of reconciliation and unity in our relationships with one another. We can and should do better in following the Biblical directives of peacemaking in our disagreements. We can and should do better in having transparent and honest conversations for the sake of understanding rather than dealing in manipulation and gossip. If we are who we say we are, if we are truly walking in the experience our holiness doctrine proclaims, then we should be so filled with love for God and for one another that anything less should be deemed unacceptable and in need of confession and God's grace.

And if we are who we say we are, then:

**Holiness will not be about isolation from the world, but loving and grace-filled engagement with our world.**

There are some who like to point out that Jesus often made people angry and offended them with the truth. Typically, they use this as an excuse for screaming judgments at the world. What they overlook is the fact that, when you read the Gospels, what you see is the people Jesus usually offended or made angry were the religious people like us. Jesus troubled them with his frequent association with the wrong kind of people, and the fact that he confronted their self-righteousness in the process. Those who think holiness is defined by cutting off association with broken people, isolating ourselves within walls of superiority, and casting judgment on others from a distance, will always find themselves in conflict with the Spirit of Jesus.

There has always been a tendency within holiness circles toward isolation, the defining of "separate from the world" not as different in character, but cut off and removed from the people of the world. In an effort to guard our own purity, or so we believe, we create closed circles. We say that others are free to come and join us and become like us, but we have no desire to meet them and love them where they are. And when we live life in isolation, we lose not only our sense of mission, but our perspective as well. Like the religious leaders in Jesus day, we become judgmental, angry, and fearful.

When we don't have relationships with those outside our circle, it becomes easy to cast judgment from a distance, and simply dismiss others as unworthy sinners or enemies we need to fight and destroy. Those we see from a distance are reduced to an issue or a label, which makes them easy to disregard. Rather than seeing human beings we see drug addict, adulterer, prisoner, pornography user, homosexual, Muslim, or refugee. We dump entire groups of people into one category with one definition, then we can judge and dismiss the whole lot of them. We're able to do it without thought because we don't know their name, we've never looked into their eyes, we've never sat down at the table with them, and we've never heard their story.

But that's what Jesus did, to the dismay of religious folks. He shared a table with tax collectors, talked with a Samaritan woman at a well, demonstrated mercy to the one caught in sin, and welcomed those considered outsiders. When we follow in the path of Jesus, we do not yell judgment from our distant and isolated perch; we engage people where they are, revealing the love and grace offered to them through Christ. We recognize that our enemy is a spiritual one, not the person we have labeled; we go

into the world with the confident and radical optimism of grace, believing that anyone can be transformed by the power of God's Spirit.

In isolation, we become captive to anger. We look at the world, not with compassion, seeing others as sheep without a shepherd as Jesus did, but with accusation and disdain. Our conversation becomes filled with complaint rather than marked by grace, and we blame the world as if it could be anything other than what it is apart from the grace of God. As we join the angry and accusatory voices of the world, the true picture of Jesus is lost. Rather than sinners being drawn to us and our message as they were to Jesus, they are driven further away.

Perhaps we need to remember again the responsibility that Jesus laid on us. He said you are the light of the world and you are the salt of the earth. Darkness cannot be anything but darkness apart from the light, and if the darkness spreads it's because the people of light have hidden themselves away and failed to embrace the mission of grace. True holiness does not allow us to be content pointing fingers of blame at the world outside for the mess that it is. We cannot with integrity blame the world for the lack of growth and vitality within the church. Jesus never commissioned the culture, the government, or the schools to be the light of the world. They are incapable. The responsibility belongs to His Body, and if the church is failing to make a difference, then it is no one's fault but our own.

Isolation is not the response of faith and hope, but the fruit of fear. Fear calls us to withdraw, to believe that nothing will get better, and to make self-preservation our priority. But we follow the One who taught us to pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Self-preservation will preserve nothing; in this kingdom, we only find our lives by losing them. So, as people of hope, we do not withdraw in fear, but move forward knowing that the kingdom of God is moving among us and will be fulfilled. Holiness is not defeatist hand-wringing or resigned complacency, but hope-filled participation in the coming kingdom. If we are who we say we are, then we will refuse to live in judgmental, angry, and fearful isolation. We will engage our world in love and the optimism of grace.

I hope you will hear these words for what they are, a call to truly be the people we claim to be. My nine years in this role have convinced me more than ever that what is needed most in our churches is not more money, better programs, or greater goals. What we need is to live as a body of genuine disciples of Jesus who demonstrate in everyday, real life the love and grace of true holiness. Only then will the Spirit of God be free to do the work of the kingdom among us; only then will the world of broken humanity take notice.

### **Thanksgiving and Prayer**

My prayer for you all moving forward is that you will be faithful to our confession. By God's empowering grace, live a life of genuine and authentic holiness; be the embodiment of love's fullness. May it be revealed in your relationships with one another and your engagement with our world. And, as you walk in faithfulness and integrity, believe that God will do great things among you. Thank you for the opportunity to serve you these years, and know that you will remain in my heart and prayers always.

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