

District Superintendent's Challenge to the 38th District Assembly
Growing Up – Growing Out
God has a unique plan, for your unique church, in your unique neighborhood

Would it be alright with you tonight if we saved a lot of the statistics and those kinds of things for tomorrow? I'd like to talk to you and share with you tonight a little snapshot of why I am so grateful to do what I do. Some like to tease me and say that as your DS I get to do the two things that I love most: talking and eating. In truth, it's an incredible blessing to be able to be with you, to worship with you and to see and sense on a regular basis the anointing and blessing of God on you and what is going on in your churches. I thank you for that opportunity.

This service has been a celebration of transformation. Salvation is synonymous with transformation. As a church we still believe the Lord can take a poor lost sinner and lift them from the miry clay and set the free. We still believe that.

Transformation

I know a little bit about transformation. My father would not come to church with my mother when I was a little boy. We had a pastor who kept stopping by our home every Saturday. My father said he had no need for church and wanted nothing to do with it. So, my siblings and I would march out of our house and to ride an old blue and white bus every Sunday. My mother would lead the way. Finally, one day my father said, "Maybe there is something to that." He went with us. He wasn't in church long before he went down to the altar. Remember when we used to call it the mourners bench? He was weeping and praying. The very next Sunday-seven days later-he was driving that blue and white church bus; just one week later. Can I tell you that today all five of my siblings worshipped in a Nazarene church somewhere across the country. At an early age I witnessed the power of transformation. And I am a believer!

We are in this together. I've been witnessing transformation across the district. Life- change is taking place. I've served as your District Superintendent for 11 years and have never been more encouraged than in the last six months. I'm seeing revival fires burning in Central Florida. New and encouraging things are happening.

God is answering our prayers. The stories you are telling are amazing. A few months ago over 300 people showed up on a Saturday for a Prayer Gathering. What a day! People crying, begging God to bring revival to our churches. It's a new day for prayer; many are fasting. A number of you are in a 21-day fast right now. God is already beginning to answer prayers and things are breaking in a good and positive way.

We are experiencing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in varied ways. Paul wrote, "And we...are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (II Corinthians 3:18). We are being transformed into His likeness. And so it's been about the Spirit.

Holy Strategy

But we also know and understand that, as we move with Holy Spirit as our foundation, there has to be strategy . . . a holy strategy. And strategy is carried out through structure. It's been amazing to see how many people are catching on to Mission Action Planning. Finally, it takes systems; what kind of systems are we going to put in place to make to reach hurting and broken people?

There is a hunger and desire for fire. But we also know, as Phineas Bresee understood, that the true fire of the Holy Spirit always leads us to discover how He is going to help us reach hurting and broken people. In order to accomplish this, our early founders relied on the Spirit and built God's church with sanctified strategies, structure and systems.

Let's take a trip across the district to see firsthand the transformational power of God's Spirit. In Leviticus chapter 6:9, God reminds us that if we really want to get close to Him, and sense His power and anointing, we must keep the fire burning. He points to the altar, referring to blood sacrifices. The Lord reminds his children to keep the fire hot. And what we desperately need in our churches is the cleansing fire of the Holy Spirit burning in our hearts.

God continually reminds us, "... the fire must be kept burning." (Leviticus 6:9). Ride with me to a church where the Holy Spirit awakened the pastor - at four o'clock on a Sunday morning - the Sunday of their "State of the Church" address. Full color booklets had been printed, the music planned and rehearsed, the 'vision' sermon polished and ready. Long before dawn, the pastor heard the voice of God imploring him to preach on Christ's return. He got on his phone and started texting staff members: "We're changing the message." At a brief pre-service meeting, weeks of preparation were put on hold in order to obey the voice of God.

At the conclusion of the pastor's obedient message, waves of people moved to the altar; lives were transformed. Brand new converts were waiting to speak with pastor at the close of that service. He was beginning to understand why God had asked him early that morning to preach on the second coming. A new convert said, "Oh thank you for this message. I didn't know that Jesus was coming back again." How could that be? That is the world we live in my friends. Things we take for granted, others do not know. Those people desperately needed a pastor who was more connected to the fire of the Holy Spirit than to his notes.

In an e-mail I recently received, a pastor writes:

"Brother Larry, Our church has recently seen two men come clean from their drug addictions. In a matter of weeks, they have come to see deliverance. We have seen salvation come to seekers every Sunday. Richard - a first time visitor - reached out for a new relationship with Christ. A Muslim teen has begun attending with her grandparents and her father. Two of her sisters have turned to Christ, abandoning the Islam way.

Oscar, who began attending six months ago, dressed in typical gang-type clothes. His hair is long and has tattoos we can't even count. Transformed! Oscar sits on the front row every Sunday and reaches deep into his heart for fresh truth. There is a strong spiritual battle going on most of the time here. But we are hiding in the powerful grace of our Lord and crying out to him for revival. Larry, it has arrived."

Revival is coming through new starts. Every Sunday nearly half of our people in worship on the Central Florida District are non-Anglo; we are a very diverse district. God is helping us through our New Starts. He is working through a brand-new baby Haitian church, pastored by Sobner Vertus.

Apopka Calvary was so excited about starting a new church they sent families and tithe dollars across the Central Florida District line. On the North Florida District, they established a new start. This pastor sent his people and his resources to start a church on another district! It doesn't matter who gets the credit, it's all about transformed lives.

You are going to find more about Lake Nona in the morning. Pastor Jeremy Johnson, his wife Tiffany and members from this new start are here with us tonight. This is a brand-new baby church, with an outstanding future.

More and more churches are sharing spaces. Two or three congregations sharing the same church building is a challenge. But when our priorities are on building the Kingdom, momentary inconveniences are a small price to pay. Praise God for that.

Travel with me to one of our very oldest churches. This church is steeped with tradition. They are in an inner-city area, surrounded by different cultures. This church has chosen to embrace these cultures that surround them. Their pastors are leading intentional discipleship initiatives. Tampa First is walking through uncomfortable territory. In many ways, the future of the Church of the Nazarene lies in the hands of pastors like Lynn Nichols and Jimmy Cruz.

Be encouraged with me tonight. As a district, we have not paid our world evangelism fund in full for 11 years. Central Florida has not supported our mission work around the globe at an acceptable level. Though many churches exceeded their goal, last year as a district, we only paid 73%. Thousands of dollars went unpaid. This year, more people are getting it. This year we paid 100% of our World Evangelism goal.

Much of this year's success is due to our ethnic churches. In my first year as District Superintendent, one of our ethnic church pastors reported \$400 paid to the World Evangelism Fund. This year his church gave \$11,000 to other people!

A young man in one of our Haitian churches discovered his church was not paying their World Evangelism Fund. He said to his congregation: "I went to a private school in Haiti. Do you know who built that school? The Americans sent the money so that I could go to a Nazarene school in Haiti. How many of you went to a private school in Haiti?" He said all the hands went up. "Who paid for that?" he asked the congregation. "We don't know" they replied. "The Church of the Nazarene paid for your schools." he said. "Now we are here, and the people are there. We are the Church of the Nazarene and we have a responsibility now to pay our World Evangelism Fund." This church has paid their World Evangelism Fund in full as well.

Discipleship: the fire of transformational discipleship. Leviticus 6:12 says, "The fire on the altar must be kept burning; it must not go out. Every morning the priest is to add firewood..." The writer is speaking to the priests, the ministers. As leaders ... as shepherds of the flock ... if we are not praying, our people aren't going to be praying. We have a huge responsibility to keep the fire burning in the church. And we do that on our own knees; making time and doing what it takes ... paying the price. I am seeing this happen among our pastors and it is awesome to observe what's happening as a result.

Transformational Holy Living

Finally, it is the fire of transformational holy living. Once again God speaks and the writer pens, *"The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously. It must not go out,"* Leviticus 6:13. We are going to talk about Mission Action Planning tomorrow, but tonight let me just tell you that we are seeing holiness at work. It is hard to comprehend how many feeding centers, schools, and daycares we have in Central Florida. Many people are reaching out in order to make a difference, going outside the four walls of their church. We are finally getting that it is not about seating capacity, but it is about sending capacity. It's not about how can we build bigger crowds.

Let's pull into the parking lot of a small church. A huge sign reads: "Traditional Worship." Hold it, better listen before you snicker. That pastor's predecessor had erected a sign announcing: "Contemporary Worship." The church dropped dramatically in attendance. I met with the board after he left and was asked a question I have heard so many times: "Can we continue to keep the doors open?" Less than 10 people were left in the church. The church is located in a retirement community. Think about this for a minute; with their current pastor they have gone from 10 to over 100 in morning worship attendance. I am not advocating that every church burns their contemporary CDs, but when Jesus says examine the harvest he means open your eyes and examine the harvest. The key is connecting to God's unique plan for His unique church in our unique neighborhood.

Prayer ignites and fuels revival fires. Our shared prayer to the Lord must be that every Church of the Nazarene in Central Florida becomes a House of Prayer. I can see it becoming a reality. But we also have to understand according to the New Testament that a cost and a price must be paid to become a House of Prayer.

Recently a Team Central pastor from a struggling church informed me that they were going to start a prayer chain; certainly not a new idea. But this one is unique. Their prayer chain begins each morning at 5:00am with the pastor getting out of bed and dialing a number. He prays with that person. They finish praying. That person then dials another number. Those two people pray, and so on. They keep that prayer chain going until 7 o'clock in the morning. Each day the call sequence is different, allowing for different prayer partners to connect each day. Just this week I spoke with one of their members. She said, "Something is happening at our church. There is a new joy and a new hope, and we are seeing a resurgence in our church. We are seeing new people again." She was so encouraged.

Keep the Fire Burning

In the early days of the Tennessee Valley Authority, a dilapidated log homestead had to be abandoned to make room for a lake behind the dam. A new home on the hillside had already been built for the cabin's poor Appalachian family, but they refused to move into their beautiful new split-level ranch.

The day of the flooding arrived, but still the family refused to move. As the bulldozers were brought in the Appalachian family brought out their shotguns. No amount of legal brandishing or bulldozer menacing would budge this family from their cabin.

Then someone from the TVA decided to try one last-ditch effort to end the stalemate. They called in a social worker to talk with the family and find out what their problem was. "We ain't goin' anywhere." The family announced to the social worker. "Nobody can make us. We're not budging no matter how many threats you make or how rundown our li'l cabin may look to you!" The social worker pleaded, "Help me to explain to the authorities why you won't move into your beautiful new home."

"See that fire over there?" , the man asked, pointing to a blazing fire in the primitive hearth of the log cabin? "My grandpa built that fire over a hundred years ago." "He never let it go out, for he had no matches and it was a long way to a neighbor's. Then my pa tended the fire, and since he died, I've tended it. None of us ever let it die, and I ain't a-goin' to move away now and let Grandpa's fire go out!"

This gave the social worker an idea. She arranged for a large apple butter kettle to be delivered to the home. She explained to the family that they could scoop up the live coals from the fire and carry them to their new home where they would then be poured out and fresh kindling added. In this way grandpa's fire need never go out. Would this be acceptable?

The family huddled, and then agreed to move from their shack in the hollow to the new home on the hillside. But they wouldn't budge – 'til they could take with them the fire of their ancestors.

Our Heritage

We are a Holiness people. We were born in the fire. It has always been about lost people, about needy people. At the turn of the century Phineas Bresee was a very highly paid pastor in a prestigious Methodist Church. In those days the average pastor's salary was \$700 a year; his annual salary was \$4,200. Bresee got in trouble for starting a soup kitchen. His people protested, "We don't want people like that around here." Inspired by the Holy Spirit he founded a clinic for people who could not afford medical care. His opposition grew. But the straw that broke the camel's back was when Dr. Bresee started a home for unwed mothers. That was it, and he was out of the Methodist Church. He was gone. You see, he refused to let the fire die.

You cannot separate the Holy Spirit from compassion. If you do that all you have left is piety. Tomorrow I will be teaching on Growing Up, Growing Out and reaching your community. You're already doing it. We're going to keep doing it. Are there any pastors . . . priests, that want to say "Yes, I'm going to keep the fresh fire burning. I'm going to put the wood on every day. You can count on me. My church can count on me. If nothing else I'm going to be on my knees pleading with God to keep the fire hot in our congregation." Are there any pastors here that would come and join me across the front of the church as we sing and pray together?

(Over 100 lead pastors and associates came forward, committed to keeping the transforming fire of the Holy Spirit burning in their churches)

Respectfully submitted,
LARRY D. DENNIS