

REPORT OF THE INTERIM DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT
South Carolina District Church of the Nazarene
“The Neighbor We Don’t See”

Dr. David Graves, General Superintendent, Dr. Dan Boone, President of Trevecca Nazarene University, guests, delegates and friends of this 76th District Assembly of the South Carolina District, I am honored to address this convocation tonight and to, in a word, share with you my first and last report as your Interim District Superintendent.

As many of you know, Dr. Estep and Diane are two of our dearest friends. I have a tremendous amount of respect and admiration for Dr. Estep as a leader and am humbled to have been asked to bridge the gap between his term of service and that of the leader you will elect in a couple of days. I have been honored to serve alongside of many of you, and to feel for a few months at least, the responsibility and vision for your churches.

Would the members of the District Advisory Board please stand – Ministers: Terry Weyman, Joshua Fite, Bill Harmon, Matt Johnson, Rodney Lindsay; and Laypersons: Rebeca Crandall, William Felder, Patty Hambrick, Ron Howard, Ken McDougall. Would you show them your appreciation for the many hours that they have served the Kingdom and your district over this past year, but in particular over the past six months. They are some outstanding and committed servant leaders. I would also like for us to take a moment and thank LaNora Jensen, our District NMI President and District Treasurer, Rev. David Snodgrass, our District NYI President, and in abstention, Rev. Kyle Poole, our District SDMI Chairman and newly elected District Superintendent of the Georgia District. Please give them a round of applause. Rev. Greg Pressley is perhaps the standard for all district secretaries, and he has been an outstanding help to me over these months.

We appreciate the valuable ministry of Rev. Alan Pullen, our Gunter Camp and Conference Center manager, and Rev. Gabriel Moreno, our District Hispanic Ministries director. I love the passion and the vision of our District Church Planting director, Ben LaPlace. Rev. Ray Moore has served faithfully and lovingly as our District Minister of Pastoral Care. Would you give these folks a hand of appreciation? Dr. Larry Wagner has served as the director of the Carolinas School of Ministry and has recently retired and relocated to Kansas City. We appreciate Rev. Scott Crandall assuming this vital position.

But there are so many more of you who carry the load of district ministry. If you serve on a board, a council, serve in our camps, help at the campground, serve as a Mission Area leader, or any other position, would you please stand. Let’s thank God for them.

I cannot tell you how pleased I was to work with and be around Peggy Smith, our Executive Assistant, and Rachael Watts, our Office Manager. These ladies are so committed and so

efficient. They are an absolute treasure to work with, or to work for, however you look at it. Please let them know how much you appreciate their ministry in the office.

In your handbook you have a record of the progress and outreach efforts of the district team over the past church year. This is the record, for the most part, of our fruit bearing during the last 12 months. Some have tilled the soil, some have planted, some have watered, but thank God for the increases. I won't take time to go over these in detail, but let's say thanks to God for 1,106 conversions, 398 New Nazarenes, and 295 baptisms. These are numbers that matter. Let's also be glad for increases in church membership, Discipleship Ministries, and Sunday School Enrollment. Let's praise God for 112% paid on World Evangelism Fund.

These numbers indicate a partnership between pastors, laity, the local church, and the One who said, "I will build my church." We are connected and we can do more together.

For the remainder of our time together tonight I want to focus on our theme – Neighbor. I so appreciate the members of our District Assembly planning team that began working with Dr. Estep on the development of this theme and worked to plan our entire assembly. They have been great to work with – will you please stand. Thank them, please.

Let me remind us of a couple of scriptures tonight, with a few paraphrases, to help us set our focus for the days ahead.

Matthew 9:35-38

9:35 Jesus went through all the **neighborhoods** (towns and villages), teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. 36 When he saw the **neighbors gathered at work places, schools, community organizations, civic groups, and subdivisions** (crowds), he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into **your neighborhood** (his harvest field)."

John 4:27-38

27 Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked, "What do you want?" or "Why are you talking with her?"

28 Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to **her neighborhood** (the town) and said to the people, 29 "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" 30 They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

31 Meanwhile his disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat something."

32 But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about."

33 Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?"

34 “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. 35 Don’t you have a saying, ‘It’s still four months until harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at **your neighbors and neighborhoods** (the fields)! They are ripe for harvest. 36 Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. 37 Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. 38 I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labor.”

This is the Word of God for the People of God.

The Bible is full of references to towns, villages, crowds, gatherings, tribes, multitudes, nations, and cities.

And the New Testament is filled with stories of Jesus’ encounters with the people who occupy those places. I think it is fair to say that he would call them, or think of them, as neighbors.

It cannot be disputed that Jesus has a concern for those whom he refers to as neighbors. Jesus proclaims that the greatest commandments are an equal expression of love for God and for “our neighbor.” Perhaps the most popular story of the gospels is the story of the Good Neighbor (or Samaritan). That story is one that addresses the concern and the missional focus of your district leadership team this evening. “Who is my Neighbor?” What is more interesting to me than the answer to the question is the question itself. To think that we who live in a relatively crowded world, surrounded by people, have to ask, “who is my neighbor?” is fascinating to me. We live in an excruciatingly connected world; where a person can sneeze in one part of the world, and we can say “God bless you” in South Carolina. Yet, we don’t know our neighbors.

And when Jesus confronts the question of “who is my neighbor,” he does so by emphasizing not a person, a place, or an area – but a responsibility. Remember he details the care and concern of the Samaritan journeyman, and says, “who behaved like a neighbor.”

Jesus says “THE FIELDS ARE RIPE” with “NEIGHBORS.” Do you see them? Do you notice them? In Matthew 9 Jesus saw the neighbors, the crowds. In John 4 he tells us to open our eyes and to look.

Everywhere you look there are neighbors. At work there are neighbors, at school, next door. In the area around your home, in the area around your church. In downtown Columbia, Greenville, and Charleston. In Manning, and Moncks Corner, in Hartsville and Hilton Head, there are neighbors.

“Look upon” or to “lust after” is to “look upon with a desire to possess.” This is no casual looking. This is looking with intent. It is looking with a purpose. It is intentional looking.

Again Jesus seems to be calling us, or calling us out. Obviously, his concern is that we fail to see our neighbors.

“To Look” is to notice the **proximity of the harvest. Your neighbor is close enough to see.** It’s as near as our next-door neighbor, it’s as close as our co-worker, it’s within the distance of the kid sitting at the next desk.

IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE WE HAVE A TREMENDOUS CAPACITY TO SEE THE LOST (THE HARVEST) CLEAR AROUND THE WORLD. I CELEBRATE THAT WE ARE A CHURCH THAT CAN SEE INTO 162 COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD AND HAVE A VISION OF THE LAST 80.

BUT IT CONCERNS ME THAT WE CANNOT SEE THE NEIGHBOR WE DRIVE PAST ON THE WAY TO CHURCH ON SUNDAY.

A Samaritan woman can be your neighbor. A rich young ruler might be your neighbor. A prostitute, a drug addict, a doctor, a lawyer, a banker and baker and a candlestick maker, might be your neighbor. An undocumented immigrant may be your neighbor. So too may a Muslim or an Islamist.

Look – Notice the **harvest immediately** – do not say four more months. The urgency of the situation is obvious to Jesus. The harvest is ripe, ready; today is the day of salvation. Jesus is most certainly calling us to the urgency of evangelism.

We are inundated these days with news of tragedy, disaster and loss of life. When these events happen, we are overwhelmed by the sadness. The loss of life. The economic damage that is done. The vulnerability we all feel.

We get lost in the innocence of the victims, the families that are ripped apart, the courage of first responders. But what about souls? Do we stop to consider that many of these folks have slipped off into eternity without Christ, without eternal life? We stew over keeping our people safe in this life, but what about the urgency of making sure they are safe in the next.

Your neighbors need Christ as soon as we can reach them. Not in four months, or certainly four years. We cannot put it off. We wouldn’t think of saying out loud something like, **“when we get this debt paid off, we are going to tell the drug addict about Jesus.”** **“When we get a new pastor, she can visit my dying brother.”** Can I make this proposition tonight? Your neighbors cannot wait for you to love them for Jesus’ sake and for the sake of their lost and broken souls. Their kids can’t wait; their spouses can’t wait.

I don’t know a lot about harvesting fruit, but I know this; if ripe fruit is not harvested, it is destroyed.

Look – Notice the **harvest socially**. They are harassed and helpless. Sheep without a shepherd. This is the way the Scriptures describe people who are lost, who are unbelievers, who are sinners.

When Jesus took the disciples on a little retreat for rest, they were confronted by a waiting crowd of over 5,000 men and at least an equal number of women and children. And in Mark 8 it says that this throng of people, this community of neighbors, were like sheep without a shepherd.

We love to label our neighbors. It gives us an excuse to dismiss them, to resist them. It is an excuse to walk on the other side of the street. So we put labels on them - adulterers, homosexuals, alcoholic or drug addict, liars, cheaters. They are the unemployed, the poor, the immigrant. They may be democrats or republicans; liberal or conservative; atheist or agnostic. But Jesus looks beyond the label and sees what they really are -- harassed and helpless.

When Jesus looked at His neighbors, He looked with compassion. The Bible says that Jesus was tempted and suffered in every way as we have. Could we not say that Jesus not only looked upon them with compassion, but with solidarity?

The harvest was a matter of concern and heartbreak for Jesus. Not only was he concerned about their eternal destination, he was concerned about their brokenness. He sees not merely who they are and the shape they are in, but how they got there. And, let me remind you that when others see a shepherd boy, Jesus sees a King. When Gideon sees himself as small and weak, God sees him as a Mighty Warrior. When Jesus looks compassionately upon his neighbors, he sees their best selves and desires to birth it in them. He sees in them the Imago Dei.

One of the reasons we are blind to the presence of our neighbors is because we are indifferent to their brokenness, and detached from their potential.

We must begin by looking with intent, with purpose, with concern. Perhaps we are called to enter into their suffering.

But not only do we need to look. We need to act. **THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL.**

The harvest is plentiful. Fewer people are affiliated with, acquainted with, or attending our churches, and every other church in South Carolina, than ever before. Over half of the people who live around you, who work in your department, who attend your class, claim no church, and no church claims them. But that is a secondary issue. The primary issue is that they are unbelievers. There are more and more people who could be accurately described as the least, the last, and the lost. The broken, the disenfranchised, the marginalized, the suffering, the defeated and the depressed, fill our communities and our culture like never before.

BUT THE WORKERS ARE FEW. (Matthew 9:37)

Jesus says we have a worker problem. No, he doesn't. Yes, he does. Perhaps I can explain. The lost are not the problem to evangelism. The problem is the church. Or better yet, the way we do church. Some would say we don't have enough workers. And it is true we may not have enough teachers, or greeters, or choir members.

But, how many people does it take to tell someone about Jesus. How many people does it take to visit a prison, to feed a starving child, to mow a neighbor's grass, to invite someone to lunch?

You see, the issue is not really a shortage of workers. The problem is the location and job description of our laborers. Too often we want our pastors to spend most of their efforts on found people as opposed to lost people. Our boards, committees, and local church offices are aimed at the people in the church, as opposed to the people outside. Too many of our conversations are consumed with not losing people, money, or resources, as opposed to finding them.

I am trying to remind us that too much of our ministry time, dollars, and energy is inward focused instead of harvest-field focused. To focus on our neighbors is to focus on our neighborhoods. We are trying to harvest fruit by talking it to death.

I heard Dr. Graves preach a fascinating sermon 25 years ago where he said that much of the work of the church reminds him of a farmer who runs between the grange hall, the seed store, and the barn, but never takes the tractor, the plow, or the combine into the field.

Hear the Word of the Lord. We think the Bible says, "pray for laborers." But that is not what it says. Jesus said pray that the Lord will SEND OUT workers. Pray that God himself will call and release us into the harvest fields which happen to be our neighborhoods.

How might God answer such a prayer? Might he tell us to send some families to plant a new church? Might he tell us to cancel Sunday night services to visit a prison or to sit with folks at a homeless shelter? We have not because we ask not. Do we ask not because we are afraid of the answer?

I am haunted by an informal survey that Kevin Harney, author of *Organic Outreach* (Organic Outreach: **Publisher:** Zondervan (October 29, 2011) where he asked pastors what the results would be if their church neglected other aspects of their ministry like they neglect evangelism and outreach.

He asked questions like this:

How long would people attend your church if the pastor announced no more worship experiences? We are not going to sing anymore. No preaching.

How long would people attend your church if the pastor announced no more spiritual formation practices? We aren't going to pray. We aren't going to have Bible Study. No teen group, no children's church.

How long would you attend your church if the pastor announced no more fellowship activities? No more potlucks, no ball games, no men's breakfasts?

I dare say that most of you would leave any church that would go more than a few weeks without singing, or preaching, or Sunday School, or youth programs. But many churches will go weeks, months, years without reaching out into the community. We are satisfied to go months without any conversions or baptisms. How long has it been since you told someone that Jesus loves them unconditionally?

Pastors are criticized for what they wear, whether they can balance the budget, whether or not they showed up at this party or planned this activity. But they are seldom asked about evangelism. Perhaps pastors ought to hold our boards to higher standards. How many could serve on our boards if our requirements included feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, clothing the naked?

Board meeting agendas are focused on how much did we spend, how many showed up, who can drive the church van, or who can rent the building. But seldom does anyone ask – when was the last time someone got saved.

Dear friends, please hear the heart of your district leaders tonight. Neighbors are all around us. They are lost, hurting, and broken. Jesus loves them deeply. He died for them. And He is calling on us to reach out to them in love, and compassion, and in friendship.

I recently was taught a fascinating lesson by evangelist Billy Huddleston. He was preaching on the children that Jesus drew to him as a prime example of the discounted, the disenfranchised. Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell the story. (Matthew 18; Mark 9; Luke 9)

You remember the story. The disciples are arguing about their own status and importance in the kingdom of God. Jesus demonstrates exactly who is important in God's kingdom. They are those who have been left out, left behind, and left off. They are those who have been hated, have been discriminated against, have been unfairly treated. They are those upon whom the world has fallen.

Each account is a little different. In Matthew he takes the child and it says he "placed the child in the midst of them." In Luke it says that "he took the child and had him stand next to him." And in Mark it says he took the child in his arms. And in each account he says "whoever welcomes 'a neighbor' welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

Your new DS will most likely bring fresh ideas, a fresh style, new programs, a new leadership paradigm. But the Kingdom emphasis must be as old as the Bible itself. One that prioritizes evangelism and discipleship.

One that focuses on our neighbors. Your neighbors.

In a moment we will participate in the organization of a new church on our district. It is One Church, a church plant in Chester that is pastored by Rev. Matt Alexander and his wife Trina. They epitomize our theme tonight because they are a church that is focused on being Good Neighbors. In fact, much of the life of the church is lived out, not in a building, but in the neighborhood. This church was birthed with eyes set on others.

Can you see your neighbors? Will you see them? Will you stand next to them? Will you wrap your arms around them? Will you love them for their sake and not for your own? Will you pray that God will send you and others into your own personal neighborhood to be an ambassador of His grace, mercy, and love? May God sanctify us in such a way that the comfort, healing, and welfare of our neighbors is more important than our own. And may we do all that we do, in the name of, and for the sake of Jesus.

Respectfully Submitted,

Gregory D. Mason
Interim District Superintendent