

Dear Friends,

It is in humility I present my first report as the superintendent of the great Northwestern Ohio District Church of the Nazarene on the occasion of her golden anniversary.

1959 was the year Alaska and Hawaii gained statehood, Bonanza premiered on NBC, and the first Barbie doll was manufactured. More importantly, at least to me, was that in 1959 Joy Wilcox and Dan Kunselman married.

On this very spot in the summer of 1959 the Western Ohio District Church of the Nazarene gathered for its annual assembly. On the *third* day of the assembly (those were the good old days) a resolution was passed to form a twenty-four member commission to study the feasibility of making two districts here in Western Ohio and report back to the next district assembly with the provision that in the event of an emergency the commission had the power to act.

Soon after the assembly District Superintendent W.E. Albea decided to retire. The commission proceeded with the matter of making two districts, and on March 30, 1960 the Southwestern and Northwestern Ohio Districts were formed.

The Northwestern District received 57 churches, the Southwestern 75. Sunday School attendance in the north was 5800, to the south 8800. Membership in the north was 4400, while in the south it was 7200. While we didn't get as many people, I've been told that ours were much better looking.

Dr. Carl Clendenden was appointed by the Board of General Superintendents as Northwestern Ohio's first superintendent. Others appointed to serve in that office in the succeeding years were Drs. C.E. Shumake, James Blankenship, M.V. Scutt, and Jack Shankel.

In 1998 Dr. Larry Fairbanks was elected by the district assembly as Northwestern Ohio's sixth superintendent. This district along with Nazarenes around the world were saddened by the passing of Larry Fairbanks this past July. Dr. Fairbanks was a gracious gentleman, a perpetual learner, a caring pastor and leader, a friend to many, a loving husband, and a supportive dad. Many here can testify of a time when Dr. Fairbanks listened, prayed, supported, and offered godly counsel. While we rejoice of our eternal hope in Christ, and have deep assurance that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, we continue to pray for God's comfort and strength to be extended to Cathy, Julie, Russ, and their family.

Of course districts are not just about superintendents. Actually they are very little about superintendents. Districts are about local churches comprised primarily of genuine Christians who love God – people who work, give, pray, witness, and

support. Local churches are about pastors who care, lead, and preach. The real story of Northwestern Ohio's many successes is not primarily linked to a few recognized names, but far more so to names of persons seldom known beyond their local churches. Sunday School teachers, missions presidents, board members, musicians, youth leaders, nursery workers, quiz coaches, faithful tithers, and sacrificial givers, who faithfully and diligently served God in their corner of the world. It is these persons we remember at an occasion such as this, and give thanks to God for them.

Near the end of his second letter Paul the apostle instructed Timothy to "come before winter." On September 10, 2008 another notable Paul of the church invoked a similar injunction. I did as he directed and arrived before winter, but just barely. Within a week snow flurries were air-dancing, and for months the white stuff blanketed the ground and the roads, and turned an otherwise fine Town Car into a giant white bobsled.

From Toledo to Tipp City, from Montpelier to Mount Sterling I, like Abram, ventured through a land I did not know. And thirty days and nearly sixty pastors and churches later I knew I had a new home, a new people, many new friends, and a new mission from God. Frequently I was pleased and surprised to drive for miles alongside farms and fields to finally arrive at my next wide spot, village, town, or city to find another premiere Nazarene pastor and church. I left feeling warm, proud, and hopeful.

While I was praying and seeking counsel about this appointment I phoned the venerable Dr. Jack Shankel. Mrs. Shankel graciously received my call, and said, "You must want my husband." Seconds later Dr. Shankel's greeting to me was, "Take it, Geoff, take it." Two things were confirmed in that moment: the Nazarene grapevine is still well-connected, and Dr. Shankel is as subtle as ever.

After telling me that he and Mrs. Shankel spent ten of the happiest years of their lives here, Dr. Shankel provided me with an entertaining history lesson regarding the founding of northwestern Ohio. Now, I have not been able to document all that Dr. Shankel told me, and nothing I have read is as colorful as his descriptions, but he painted a picture of people who, if their descendants were of the same stripe, assured me I would feel at home.

He told of "old dumb Germans" (remember this is *Shankel* talking to *Kunselman*) working for "a quarter a day and a jigger of rum" to construct the Miami-Erie canal, and then persuading the federal government to sell them the Great Black Swamp. He so inspired me that I bought books, and read with interest the development of this area. I learned of people who were hard-working, creative - maybe even ingenious, odds-overcoming people. By such they provided not only for themselves, but also for the generations that would follow. So, as I drive these county roads and see those large ditches like those into which the swamp drained, and the rich soil that continues to produce harvests; as I visit Toledo, the

glass capital of the world, or drive along Lake Erie, and picture men harvesting ice to be shipped across the nation I am mindful that these people were can-do. And those are my kind of people.

Truly, one of my great surprises for me in coming here is the strength of this district. Ohio has five Nazarene districts. Of these five districts Northwestern Ohio's population base is half a million persons shy of any other. Of the seventy-two (standard) USA districts we are number fifty-five in population. Likewise as we are aware Ohio's population has not significantly increased in some years. These factors alone would provide plenty of excuses as to why a district here could not grow, if you had chosen to accept them. And yet the Church of the Nazarene has continued to grow in northwestern Ohio. Of our seventy-two US districts we are in the bottom fourth in population, but in the top quarter in Sunday morning worship attendance. Go figure. Similarly, we have one of the very finest records for general and global ministry support in our denomination. These, among many other things, are commendable, and speak well of you, of our churches, and of those who have labored before us.

So my words to you today are of congratulation and encouragement. Rather than talk about why not, you and those before you through the power of the Holy Spirit, the faithful provision of God, and cooperation with one another, just did it. And it is on that history and with that precedent we now begin our next leg of this journey.

We all acknowledge the world is *far* different than fifty years ago. Times and things are not like they used to be. Furthermore, the speed of change continues to accelerate. Thus the church must be forever and continually retooling and reinventing the manner in which we carry out our Christ-given commission. With that in mind allow me to touch on three important matters that are linked together, and useful for us to consider at a juncture like this.

The first is that of **VISION**.

It is at a juncture such as this we ask ourselves, "Why was the Church of the Nazarene birthed?" From such we ask, "Is that vision yet valid?"

You know what is coming here. Many, probably most, here have knowledge that the Church of the Nazarene's original mission was that of proclaiming the call and gracious provisions of God for His people to "be holy", and of providing a church where all persons, including, especially including, the poor would be welcomed and cared for.

We Nazarenes are incredibly optimistic. However, our optimism is not based in human ability, but in God's grace. We believe that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should and can come to repentance and faith – thus we

believe that anybody, anywhere, anytime can be genuinely, thoroughly changed, from the inside out.

Since you would be safe in assuming that I would answer the question of continued relevant vision in the affirmative allow me to share with you the opinion of another. A few years ago I had lunch with Dr. Henry Blackaby. Dr. Blackaby is the author of the best-selling and for me personally life-impacting book, Experiencing God. To be invited to eat with him was one of those God-just-made-it-happen-things. As he and I were walking following the meal, he stopped, and passionately said to me, “Geoff, the Church needs the Church of the Nazarene, and its’ teaching on holiness.” It reminded me of Bresee’s words in relation to the Christianizing of Christianity.

But it isn’t just the Church that needs the Church of the Nazarene. Our world, our torn-up world, needs *The Truth* about a better way of doing life, of being set free from the big “I”, so that we can love God completely and by His Spirit have the capacity to love our neighbor as ourselves. More than ever our world needs to know there is a cure for that which is our greatest sickness – our self-centeredness, our selfishness. Our world everyday unknowingly begs for the amazing changes the Holy Spirit can bring into one’s life, and dynamically affect the way we do life together.

I know that you already had determined which side of the question I would come out on as to the validity of *The Vision*. I only hope my reply convinces you of how strongly I believe it.

Second, it is at a time like this that we consider our **CONNECTION** to one another.

From the get-go Nazarenes decided that more could be accomplished together than separate. Many of those who came together to organize the Church of the Nazarene had already been down that independent road. They were convinced there had to be a better way.

So, *together* they built schools and colleges. Few local churches have ever built a first-class Christian university, but *together* we can and have. Just the last forty years here on this East Central Region prove that.

Not many local churches have ever organized a global, world-changing missionary enterprise, but *together* we have.

Not many local churches can provide large-scale children’s events like camps or Bible quizzing, or provide top-notch events for youth like NYC. But *together* we have.

With these things in mind please allow me to talk with you about a couple of partnership-related matters.

One is that of allocations, more commonly known as denominational budgets. As we are getting acquainted I think you need to know that it is not because I have assumed this role that I now feel obligated to support our district, regional, and general ministries. Please know that what I mention next is only an attempt to establish credibility with you. The three churches I was privileged to pastor over twenty-five years each paid all of their budgets in full every year. From Maysville, Kentucky where the first year the budgets did not amount but to a few thousand dollars, to Columbia, South Carolina where this year's budgets were a quarter of a million dollars, I, we, felt obligated to see that they were paid. In Maysville the budgets more than tripled, in Columbia they more than doubled, with a similar pattern the years in Columbus.

That doesn't mean that it was easy. There were many nights I walked the floor, and prayed, and days I stared at treasurer's reports and sat in meetings where we first sighed, and then together made plans of how to challenge our church. Most of all, God helped us. There were times that without His unexpected provisions we would have never made it.

Doing my part is important to me. I know that this has been an incredibly economically difficult year, unlike any we have known for a long time. There are churches and pastors coming to assembly for the first time in their history with budgets not fully paid, and they are chafing under such. I want you to know I feel for you. It's a shock to your system. But rather than languish in despair, let's get up, dust off ourselves, adapt to some new realities, and get going again.

For those churches that have not been regular in denominational and partnership support throughout the years, please know that I fully anticipate that beginning this year you will start a new chapter. Make full budget payment a priority. I want to help you, and will if you'll allow me. We need every church to be a partner. The reality is that if a church does not contribute its share it means other churches must make up for such. For example, we could reduce *every* church's district budget if *every* church on the district paid its budget.

I am pleased to share with you that the asking budget for district ministries this year is reduced in both actual dollars and prescribed percentage. This will be our last year under the present budget formula. We are grateful for the new simpler formula that is coming in 2010, and will result in reduced budgets for many, but let's go out on top this year.

Second, allow me to visit with you about Lighthouse Camp. A couple of years ago I was appointed as superintendent of another fine district. While trying to ascertain the Lord's direction about such I spoke with two of that district's former superintendents whom I admire. They were most complimentary of the district.

As one was extolling that district's many virtues he then paused for a moment, and then resumed by stating, "Geoff, we don't own a campground. Do you hear what I'm telling you, man?"

I knew exactly what he was telling me. Campgrounds are a hot button issue, and can make for difficult discussions even among Nazarene brothers and sisters. Camps, while capable of providing a means for tremendous good, can consume considerable energy and resources.

I decided if I were to have this role, I would not be a "Jekyll and Hyde" in regard to district camps. So please allow me share forthrightly with you my position.

Growing up I enjoyed children's camps and youth camps. Through them I came to feel a part of this big Nazarene family. As a youth I climbed the Pittsburgh district food chain until at the ripe old age of fifteen I became the grill master at camp meeting. I can fry those frozen patties with the best of them.

In my younger days I was a District Youth Camp Director, and preached at others. More recently in South Carolina there were years that our church sent a fourth of all the children attending camp on that district, with an even higher percentage of children's camp workers. In regard to camp meeting I attended several services each year, and found my way to an altar of prayer different times during such as the Lord would speak to me about me. Likewise I attended "workday" almost every year. Yet for some reason, some perceived and even portrayed me as anti-camp. And here's probably why.....

I had consistently, yet without fanfare, stated that district-owned camps can be good providing 1) that owning and operating a camp does not require a disproportionate amount of the financial resources (i.e. budgets) coming to the district from local churches, and 2) that the maintenance, operation, and development of a campground ought not be a district superintendent's primary focus. I still maintain those positions.

So here we are. Last year this assembly passed a resolution for a commission to study matters related to the camp and its potential self-funding. That has been done, and you will hear that report later today.

Camp ministry can be a contributing player in a district's overarching objectives. Camps and camp meeting can prove to be a significant spiritual and relational investment. People will be saved at camp, sanctified wholly at camp, answer God's call to full-time Christian service at camp. Pastors and laypersons alike can be spiritually and emotionally refreshed at camp meeting. Meaningful and long-lasting friendships can be made and enhanced by coming together.

At the same time both financial support and financial constraints are necessary. Thus, it is my hope, and the intent of the District Camp Board and the District

Advisory Board to reduce by about half the support the camp now receives from district budgets in the next three years, while at the same time increasing the usage and the quality of our ministry here. I ask for your support as we move forward, and as you consider what is included in the report later today.

This brings me to one last word: **Mission**

For me this is first a personal matter. The question for me is, “Why am I here?” I don’t mean, “Why am I here on earth?” I mean, “Why am I the Nazarene district superintendent in Northwestern Ohio?”

It is personal, but others have asked me that same question from a variety of perspectives. First allow me to share why I am not here:

- 1) I am not here because I missed four distinct seasons. Snow and ice and people bundled up in coats are beautiful scenes – on Christmas cards.
- 2) It’s not for money. You’ll just have to trust me on that one.
- 3) I am not here because of desire to be a district superintendent. For years Mona lived with a guy who came home from district meetings and said, “I would *never* want to be a district superintendent.” I lost all credibility with that woman last September.

So what gives?

About eighteen months ago I started feeling like I was completing the ministry the Lord had graciously given us in South Carolina. Over the years I had declined with ease some very fine invitations to other assignments. I knew I was where I needed to be, and was most happy to be there. But when this call came I felt it to be of the Lord. Confirmation, for me, has been reinforced since arrival. The way I am wired along with the opportunities and challenges presented by this specific assignment are a match, I think.

For me there has come a re-invigoration of “the juices.” I am challenged by the challenges. While I readily admit that I miss considerable portions of the pastorate there has come a sense that with God’s help this can be a dynamic place of ministry. So, for better or worse, what you see is what you get.

I have a long list of things I hope we can do and see together. But for now, please let me simply share with you “*Seven Things I Would Feel Very Good About In Five Years.*”

**1. I would feel good if after five years seventy-five percent of our churches had grown.**

I want you to know that I don’t believe worship attendance is the final, best, or ultimate sign of a church’s health, vitality, or spiritual depth. I know better. Neither

do I closely track one year up's and down's. But over time attendance at our churches can tell us some things, important things.

From 1998 until 2008 fifty-five percent of the churches of our district showed an increase in the Sunday morning worship attendance. During that period worship attendance at our churches increased from 8097 to 9504. However, from 2005 until 2009 only forty-five percent of our churches showed an increase, and the district worship attendance as a whole has decreased by about 100. Obviously we want to get this turned around. We want our churches to be reaching, to be growing – not for our sake, but for the sake of those outside the church, for Jesus' sake, for eternity's sake.

Included in this goal of seventy-five percent of our churches showing worship attendance increase over the coming five-year period are these goals:

1. That we have one church averaging 2500 or more. We are pleased that one of our denomination's largest churches in the US is on our district, and I wish to express my support of Lima Community as they continue to "find the missing."
2. That we have at least five churches averaging between 500 and 2000. We have several on the verge, and others that, I think, will surprise us in the days to come.
3. That we have six churches averaging between 300 and 500.
4. That we have twelve churches averaging between 200 and 300.

At present we have 12 churches averaging more than 200 in worship. If these goals are met we will have 24 churches averaging more than 200 in five years. 5. Furthermore, I am proposing that in addition to these increases that we have 20 churches averaging between 100-200, and that the number of churches we have averaging below 100 go from 30 to 20. While there is nothing inherently wrong with small congregations, the economic reality is that they are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. Thus, I want to help our smaller churches grow, for the sake of those outside the church first and far above all, but also that the churches themselves might have the resources necessary to sustain their viability and ministry in their respective communities.

Is it possible to set a goal of a twenty-five percent district worship attendance increase over the next five years? Wouldn't that be something? If so, based on the last five years, that would be the fastest rate of growth of any district here in the U.S. and Canada. Wouldn't that be something? Right here – Northwestern Ohio. Why not?

Of course if you were doing the math you realized that these new goals include several more churches than we now have. This leads to the second goal:

**2. I would feel very good if in five years Northwestern Ohio had five more fully-organized healthy, self-supporting churches, five more church-type missions close to being fully organized, and ten more off-site venues or**

**preaching points. This would be a total of twenty new locations of Nazarene presence and congregational life in five years.**

I am told that at our inception as a district Dr. Carl Clendenen lead an aggressive church planting campaign. From 1960 until 1973 the number of Nazarene churches in northwestern Ohio increased from 57 to 70, and eventually reached a high of 74, at least officially so, in 1985. In the last thirty years we have organized four churches that are still with us today: Jackson Center, Antwerp, Upper Valley, and this spring, Good Shepherd Church of the Nazarene in Van Wert was organized with 36 charter members. At present we have 61 officially organized churches, 59 that are actually functioning, and 2 church-type missions.

I feel very good about our opportunities for church planting in northwestern Ohio. I appreciate the renewed energy and efforts of leaders and pastors on our district in regard to such. Especially, but not exclusively, on my mind is Toledo. Almost twenty percent of our district lives within the city limits of Toledo. However, through a variety of circumstances we now only have two churches and one church-type mission in Toledo. It is a great opportunity, *and* as I am getting to know the district I am finding other communities that would do well to have a Church of the Nazarene, or another Church of the Nazarene.

**3. I would feel very good, very good, if in five years EVERY church on our district had an ongoing evangelistic children's and youth outreach ministry.** This is near to my heart. Allow me to describe one such setting here on our district where this is occurring. At Defiance every Wednesday evening there are 120 children and nearly 50 teenagers, most of whom have no other church affiliation. All of their vans go out three times to bring the children to what amounts to a hybrid Sunday School/Vacation Bible School including story time, crafts, recreation. Other churches, including some of our smaller churches, are doing similar things. Jesus said, "Bring the children to me...." The best chances for reaching persons for Christ, and shaping their futures, is while they are young.

**4. I would feel very good if during the next five years the Northwestern Ohio District became more colorful and multi-cultural.** I realize that the populace in our part of the state is predominantly white. However, there are more than 100,000 African-Americans, as well as other smaller numbers of various ethnic groups. Some of you know that the church I pastored in South Carolina was racially integrated, and increasingly so. It was a marvelous witness, and a joyous experience. It is a tragic mistake to believe that persons of color will only attend churches of color. Love, respect, warmth, and acceptance are appealing to every person regardless of ethnicity.

**5. I would feel very good if during the next five years pronounced concern for and compassion toward the hungry, the sick, the tyrannized, the**

**marginalized, the needy of our world were woven into the fabric of every local church's mission and into every district ministry.**

Yes, compassion accompanied by action and even sacrifice, is in our Nazarene DNA, but only because it is from the heart of God Himself. The needs of our world can seem overwhelming, and while we cannot do everything, we can do some things, and together...with God.... we can do more than we might otherwise imagine. While in this setting I cannot adequately express myself, please know it is on my mind, and I will have more to say about it in the days to come.

**6. I would feel very good if over the next five years we baptized 3000 persons and received 3000 new Nazarenes into the membership of our churches.**

I did not realize what an audacious goal this is until I reviewed the records only to note that Northwestern Ohio has never received 600 members in a year – ever. Think of this goal. Yes, think of what it means in relation to where we are now, and what we have been doing, but please, far more than that think of what it means in terms of changed lives, changed families, and above everything else, changed eternities.

As these goals developed there was some concern on my part as to how to share them with you, lest you think that I think “doing church” is all about what we can do. I became concerned lest these goals be too small, or too narrow, so as to miss what our Lord has in mind.

In recent days I have been reading the *Acts of the Apostles* with special attention to the work of the Holy Spirit. I have noted the Spirit's work to make things happen that no person or church could have ever made happen. I have noted the Spirit opening the minds of believers to think in ways they had never thought. I have noted how the Spirit closed some doors, so He could open more strategic ones. I have noted Spirit-induced circumstances that resulted in changed minds. And so, please know that **My greatest goal is to be responsive to and in step with the Holy Spirit.** I would like nothing better than to look back in five years, and see what He has done that we had never thought about, what He has done that we could have never done. I am most sincere when I confess the words of our Lord Jesus, “*Without Me, you can do nothing.*” “Come, Holy Spirit, I, we, need you.”

With these things in mind please allow me to conclude with a story that continues:

Ten months after Mona and I were married a district superintendent called to ask if I would interview at a church on his district. We worked out a time for an

interview with the board, and he gave me directions that went like this, “When you come across the bridge there will be a tobacco barn on your left. Turn there. You will pass several more tobacco barns. When you get to the liquor store, turn right.” (Actually it was a “shoe and liquor store” but no one ever believes that.) Hence my introduction to Maysville, Kentucky.

I met the board. We talked. I asked why they had invited me. The cat came out of the bag. Some of them had done their own actuarial-like study and concluded that given the age and number of their people they had *maybe* ten years until they would have to close. Bringing in a twenty-two year old kid who had never pastored was a witness of their desperation.

The board voted. Evidently I was too desperate for some of them. If there had been one more “no” vote I wouldn’t have had to pray about it. I thought about it, talked with people I love and respect, and finally came to the conclusion that it wouldn’t be too good of an idea given that bad of a vote.

But, I didn’t get any rest about it. Finally one afternoon in prayer, I said, “*Lord, if that’s where you want me, then if they call back, I’ll go.*” I didn’t tell anyone about my prayer, and I didn’t talk with anyone else about that church. I wanted it locked tight between the Lord and me. But, as you have guessed, the phone call came. The congregation voted on me - sight unseen, and the same for me with them. The vote carried. So there we went, and there we were.

Our first Sunday morning there I was leaning on the back wall of the sanctuary during the Sunday School opening exercises. What I saw verified what I had been told. Up front they were singing “Happy Birthday” and passing out pencils. It was all a little overwhelming to me. Before realizing that I was speaking I heard myself exhale, “O God, what have I done?” It was a sick, but sincere prayer. Fortunately no one else heard it.

But you know what? Those people decided to love us and give me a chance. We did a few things a little differently. And people started getting saved – I mean really saved, saved like only God can save people. It was amazing! The church grew like a weed – fast and without good explanation of how.

Mona and I have been gone from there for twenty-two years. Since then they have been blessed with pastors who actually knew what they were doing. They bought thirteen acres of premium property, and constructed a new building.

Recently one of the men “saved” during the time we were there called the office here. He’s a manager for the big Emerson plant there. Opening question: “Where the heck is St. Marys, Uh-hi-uh (Ohio)?” I thought that was a little pretentious for a guy from Maysville, Kentucky. I told him.

“That’s a little flat over there, isn’t it?”

“Just a little.”

We talked about families, about the economy, and about golf. He is responsible for getting me hooked on that humiliating habit.

Then I asked, "How's the church doing?"

He replied, "Pretty good..... That goin' to two services is comin' along."

"You're having two services?"

"Yea, there were some questions about having two Sunday Schools, but that's workin' out better than we thought." I could hardly believe my ears.

"How many are you havin' in each service?"

"Aw...there's about 120 or '30 in the first service."

"How many in the second?"

"Aw....'bout 230, 240. Not every week, but a good bit."

You mean you're running 340, 350 on Sunday mornings?"

"Yea, not every week, but a good bit. Shoot, I stood at the door last Sunday morning and there must have been 50 or 60 people I didn't even know comin' in." (I didn't know there were that many in the whole county he didn't know.)

"That's incredible, John."

"Yea... got these home groups goin', too. Must be 10 or 11 of them. Every night of the week, except Friday. I think there's five on Sunday nights.... Of course, the teens are at the church on Sunday nights, them and the children and their parents."

"Whaddayamean?"

"Well we have this service especially for children on Sunday nights, and the parents are supposed to come with them. I stood at the back the other night, and counted 150 children and parents in there."

"On Sunday night?! Man, that's great!"

"Yea, it's somethin'. It's a little hard for some of the older folks; course I'm gettin' to be one of those anymore. Sometimes we do things that don't always seem like the old Nazarene church, but you know, I see all these people comin' in with all their needs, and, well.....that's what matters."

We chatted a few more moments and then said our good-byes. I hung up the phone... sat there in silence, and wiped the tears out of my eyes. The words of the Spirit to Ezekiel ran my mind, "*Son of man, can these bones live again?*"

And the servant and I whispered together, "*O Lord, you know.*"

**Thank you** for the warm and gracious manner in which you have received Mona and me. We are grateful the Lord has brought us to northwestern Ohio.

In humility and yet considerable confidence I submit to you that  
***Together... With God... We Can.***

Geoffrey Kunselman  
June 10, 2009