

14 May 2021

Dear Pastors and Leaders,

### **Reflections on the Post-Pandemic Church**

A little more than a year ago, the world was confronted with a global pandemic unlike any other in more than a century. There were many unknowns and uncertainties about how the virus would spread and affect people. It forced us to change the way we live, work, behave, and gather. We learned new terms such as “social distancing,” “herd immunity,” “super-spreader,” and “shelter-in-place.” We added practices to the life of the church such as quarantining, mask-wearing, disinfecting surfaces, sanitizing our hands, and learning to Zoom. Healthcare systems were strained, industries suffered, millions of jobs were terminated, and social unrest was heightened. Children were forced to attend classes online, families were isolated, and loved ones passed away.

Like so many others, the Church of the Nazarene has felt the impact of COVID-19 in significant ways. However, amid great challenges we are reminded again of the words of Jesus, “I will build my church” (Matt 16:18). Protestant reformer Theodore Beza once said, “It belongs to the church of God to receive blows rather than to inflict them—but, she is an anvil that has worn out many hammers.” Even as the Church received the blows of the virus, we have been reminded that God is faithful and the Church is resilient.

In light of these realities, the Board of General Superintendents has prayerfully reflected on the characteristics of a post-pandemic Church. While some things have clearly changed and will likely never be the same again, we also recognize things that were first perceived as obstacles, by God’s grace, have become opportunities and open doors for our mission to be refined and renewed. Whatever else may be true, this year has reaffirmed the eternal truth that the Church is not a building—the Church is a people. The Church is wherever the people of God are, individually and collectively.

The question has been raised regarding the Church’s “reengagement” in a post-pandemic world. We believe it is important to preface any discussion of reengagement

by saying that while the pandemic may have restricted our gatherings, it has not “closed the Church.” We are not “reopening the Church” because the Church has not been closed in any sense. Indeed, the Church has creatively adapted in many ways to accomplish our mission of making Christlike disciples in the nations. The Holy Spirit has faithfully led our pastors, superintendents, mission leaders, and laity to innovation and adaptation that have catapulted many Nazarene congregations to clarify their core values and ministries by looking beyond “traditional” ministries that are tied to physical buildings. What were first seen as *disruptions* have been turned into *dispersions* for the glory of God.

### **The Regathering of God’s People**

As COVID-19 restrictions are relaxing in various places, we believe the questions of reengagement pertain primarily to the *koinonia* of person-to-person worship, discipleship, and fellowship. The indicators for when to regather person-to-person activities should be based on a balance of the local church context, respective health department guidelines, and the directives of local legalities. When assessing how to regather in person-to-person worship, discipleship, and fellowship, the following considerations may serve as helpful guidelines rather than prescriptive approaches:

- Consider the witness of the church in the community. A premature or delayed reengagement may lead to unintended consequences that could hinder the witness of the church in the community.
- Consider the vulnerable in the congregation and the community. While governmental authorities may relax restrictions concerning physical distancing, local congregations should consider the impact of gathering on the vulnerable populations to whom they minister. This includes but is not limited to the wearing of masks, maintaining some social distancing requirements, providing adequate sanitizing of public spaces, and other safety measures that may prevent the spread of the virus.
- Consider the importance of our polity. We encourage pastors and church boards to work together toward the timing and best practices of regathering. District superintendents may also offer helpful guidance as it relates to the district context.
- Consider developing a plan to regather. Local church leadership should prayerfully consider the next steps and communicate the plan to the congregation clearly and pastorally.

As the Church moves into the post-pandemic stage, it is important to remain missionally focused. It would be easy to slip back into previous practices, only emphasizing the locally-gathered congregation. While such emphasis is important, we must keep the missional framework of the Church of the Nazarene in mind as we think about the re-gathering of the flock, the healing of the flock, and serving those yet unreached.

### **We are Christian**

In a world of ever-increasing secularism and biblical illiteracy, the Church is faced with an incredible opportunity to articulate the Christian faith. The pandemic has left many in society without hope and searching for answers. The rise of secular humanism has resulted in a world filled with anxiety and fear, leaving people to believe that they must be their own personal savior. This has only been magnified by the pandemic. Providing clear Christian teaching from the Word of God is a way to express the hope in Christ to a distressed society.

### **We are Holiness**

Love of God and love of neighbor is the simplest way to define the holy life. In a post-pandemic world, as churches begin to regather, we see an increased need to focus on discipleship. The pandemic revealed some of the weaknesses within the life of the Church, including the possibility of an overemphasis on the gathered worship experience to the detriment of holistic discipleship (teaching, fellowship, service). As a holiness people, we believe that we are called to a deeper walk with Jesus Christ, expressed by loving God with our whole heart, soul, strength, and mind. This is both a crisis and a process, and the Church must foster opportunities for greater accountability and discipleship throughout the *Journey of Grace*. Ultimately, love for God overflows into loving our neighbors. The polarization of society has the potential to damage the life and witness of the Church. Only when we embrace the life of holiness can we intentionally bridge the divide that society often creates. Holiness people stand in the gap, reaching out to one another over the divide united by God's holy love.

We celebrate that our churches have reflected God's love to their communities throughout the pandemic and encourage these activities to continue. Whether feeding the hungry, providing healthcare for the sick, or educating children, the post-pandemic Church must remain actively engaged in revealing God's love to local communities. As we contemplate the regathering of the Church, we believe it is vital to give intentional emphasis to our youth and children who, studies have revealed, lacked engagement during the pandemic.

## **We are Missional**

The overflow of God's love helps us to be a missional church that is inviting people to know and experience new life in Christ. Missional expressions for many of our churches will be both physical and digital in nature. With God's help, thriving churches can have powerful in-person expressions and meaningful and robust online ministry. A hybrid model of both can serve to strengthen outreach and discipleship. The reach of local churches can now stretch beyond the bounds of the church building, the community, or even the city in which they are located. A church in one city may discover that they are ministering to people thousands of miles (kilometers) away, possibly even in another country. At the same time, we will continue to engage cross-culturally through the Global Missions enterprise of the church. Opportunities remain for people to respond to the call to serve as missionaries in cross-cultural settings. Technology simply opens up new avenues and methodologies for taking the gospel into far-reaching corners of our world.

To help guide the various forms of missional engagement, the Board of General Superintendents reaffirms the "Definition of a Church<sup>1</sup>":

Any group that meets regularly for spiritual nurture, worship, or instruction, with an identified leader and aligned with the message and mission of the Church of the Nazarene may be recognized as a church and reported as such for district and general church statistics

## **The Value of Being Interconnected**

The pandemic has highlighted the value of being an interconnected global family. The worldwide network of the Church of the Nazarene prepared us for an instantaneous response of support and care. From local to district, from district to field, from field to region, we were reminded of the importance of our systems that are easily taken for granted. We really do need each other.

We witnessed churches with greater resources partnering with those more challenged by the crisis. When one generation felt overwhelmed by the need to embrace technology, the younger members of the church stepped up and took on leadership roles, becoming allies with the older generation. We discovered anew what can be accomplished through these relational connections, and we are better as a result.

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<sup>1</sup> December 8, 2015, *Church of the Nazarene Rulings Book*

## Looking Ahead

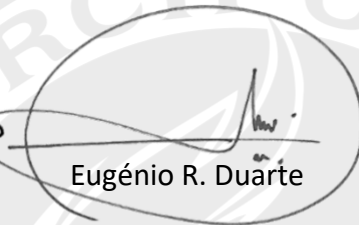
While hopeful signs are emerging to indicate that the storm of the pandemic is subsiding, our ultimate confidence is in our unchanging, all-powerful, holy, and good God. The Lord Jesus has led and blessed His Bride in persecution, calamity, poverty, and plague. Therefore, we do not fear the future. The way forward may look different than the past, but the One who is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” remains the same.

Grace and peace to you all,

Board of General Superintendents



Filimão M. Chambo



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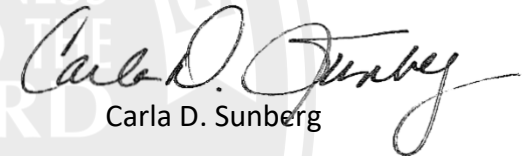
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