

District Superintendent Report to the 2021 Maine District Assembly

Dr. Sunberg (in absentia), Pastors, Delegates, and Distinguished Guests,

It is always good when we can get together as the Maine District family. This assembly is made more special by the fact that we are together in one place and in-person. Last year, our assembly was conducted online and all the business was done by the District Advisory Committee. Thank you for your commitment to represent your local church today.

Four years ago, I introduced the theme of “ONE MORE” and was all set to reintroduce it last year. This simple, two-word phrase captured our hearts as we heard God calling us to reach one more person, disciple one more believer, start one more new group, or start one more new work. I want to return to this theme and I want to use another video to introduce it.

I need to set the stage a bit. Desmond Doss, who passed away in 2006, is the only conscientious objector to receive the Medal of Honor for his actions in World War II...in particular for his bravery in saving the lives of 75 soldiers during the Battle of Okinawa. Though he wouldn't carry a gun, he was no coward and volunteered to serve as a medic in the Army. The movie, *Hacksaw Ridge*, portrayed the true story of Doss' bravery and this clip is a mix from both the movie and a documentary. The connection to our theme will be obvious.

[VIDEO – 4:15]

“Lord, help me to get ONE MORE!” Could we make that part of our prayer every day for the next year? Could we say it together right now? “Lord, help me to get ONE MORE!” Amen! People are dying without Christ all around us. You may be their only hope of rescue. I believe God will honor this prayer and help each of us to get ONE MORE someday, somehow, this year.

ACCOUNTABILITY

For the past four years, we have used seven denominational metrics to help us measure ministry effectiveness. Perhaps, some of them are not as relevant as they once were, but I'll put the numbers up on the screen. Three numbers stand out to me and show how we have engaged the mission of Christ this past year.

First, we had more people worshipping with us than ever before and that's because Covid forced us to offer a variety of worship experiences from broadcasting our service to our parking lot, getting our service on cable TV, recording the service for download to someone's computer, and live streaming using Facebook and YouTube. Most of our pastors tell me that these worship alternatives will continue after seeing how far the congregation's outreach extends through these means.

Second, the financial stewardship of our congregations is outstanding. Despite the shutdown of nearly all public gatherings, including the church, our folks were faithful to keep giving their tithes and offerings. Most of our churches reported receiving as much or more in contributions than they did last year.

Finally and most importantly, the shutdown did not shutdown ministry and outreach. More people came to know Christ this year than last year. Of all the numbers, I believe this one is the one that makes God smile. Every time the Kingdom of God increases by ONE MORE all of heaven rejoices.

Retrospective

One of the benefits of this past year is the time we've had to rethink about how we do the mission of Christ. "We've never done it that way before" wasn't an option. We had to come up with new ways to be the Church. In our visits to each church on our district, we heard the stories of outreach and blessing.

One of our small church pastors reported doubling their attendance with their Facebook online service. Another pastor reported that they had received more financial contributions than ever before because of the increased generosity of the congregation and extra gifts that came from people who were watching the service online. Another pastor told how the congregation collected essential items like water, diapers, and yes, toilet paper to give to their community neighbors who were in need. Another pastor told how they were able to start vibrant and active small online groups when past attempts at in-person groups had been disappointing. Worship was challenging and, at the same time, exciting as pastors and lay leaders came together to try new things like I've already mentioned.

The thought occurred to me as I kept hearing these stories that the devil miscalculated again. He thought the mission of Christ died on the cross with Him but he found out how wrong he was in three days. He keeps trying and, most recently, he tried by striking simultaneously on three fronts: political, social, and physical. The devil even made some progress, it seemed, as Christ's Church showed signs of division, unrest, and loss of vision for our true calling and mission.

If the devil was celebrating, he celebrated too early. I don't know about everywhere else, but God's Church in Maine, touched as we were by all the devil tried to do, is emerging stronger than ever. We are more optimistic about our potential to grow the Kingdom than ever. We are hearing about more people called into ministry than ever. If we were stuck in some kind of rut and content to doing the same old thing in the same old way, this year has changed all that.

Missional Initiatives

District leadership saw what was happening in the local congregation and we wanted to get in on it. In terms of missional initiatives, this has been our most aggressive year yet.

Starting last year and continuing with more investment this year, the District Advisory Board created the District Missional Initiative Fund. We set aside money to partner with local churches that are trying to do something significant for God. In the last two years, we have joined a local congregation who partnered with another congregation to help support a pastor. We have given grants to congregations who committed to a lengthy process of re-evaluating their missional effectiveness. We have given help with housing so a congregation could call a pastor. And we have also helped in some emergency situations. We have been slow in developing a formal process, but it is the intention of the District Advisory Board to create a process by which any local congregation may apply for a grant to advance your mission in your community.

We also wanted a way that every congregation could benefit from all that God has done for us this past year. District revenue is the best it has ever been because you were incredibly faithful to support the

district allocations and we received a better-than-normal return on our investments because of a robust stock market. To that end, the District Assembly Finance Committee, led by our district treasurer, Dr. Jeff Cook, proposed and approved a one-year initiative to lower the district allocations by almost 5% from 17.79% to 13% for this coming year. This includes the District Sunday School, District Missions, and District Youth leadership who gave up their entire budget to help make this happen. This one-year initiative comes with a catch. We are encouraging every local pastor and board to pray about using the money that would have gone to allocations for some kind of missional outreach. Next year, at district assembly, we will be asking you to share a story of how this money was used to increase the Kingdom of God by ONE MORE.

Since a number of our congregations plan to continue online ministry and want to do it well, our District Church Planting and Revitalization Committee, is offering practical training in how to livestream your services. There is a flyer about this training in the delegate packets. I should also mention that there is information in your packets about a number of ways we are reaching out to help strengthen your local ministry.

You might think that is more than enough; but, we aren't done yet. We still believe that God's Kingdom grows through both strengthening local congregations AND planting new congregations. This year, we registered two new starts. To be fair, we dropped four registered works that are no longer active. In the future, we will start new works with better support in place and with a strong plan for methodically moving each toward becoming an fully-organized congregation. We will do this with our two newest works and with the one or two others that are being considered. We continue to work with Bucksport as that congregation moves closer to becoming officially organized.

Are we done with initiatives? No. There are two more and they are related. First, we announced two years ago that Faith Works, Augusta First's compassionate ministry, was becoming a district compassionate ministry center and would be administrated by our District NMI. We got off to a slow start but things picked up quickly this year. A building in Strong was donated and is becoming the home base for Faith Works. We are forming the board of directors and we would like some of you to be on it. Please let John Mark Evans or Cindy Quinlan know if you would be interested in serving as a volunteer board member, helping with the building renovations, or sharing resources between your compassionate ministry center and the district's.

Secondly, our compassionate ministry includes disaster response. District Disaster Response director, Wally Staples, has been trying to help people in need from the back of his own vehicle...bringing water, tools, heaters, and whatever else people might need when hurricanes, extended cold, destructive winds, and other emergencies affected the lives of Mainers. We dreamed of having a trailer that could be stocked with emergency supplies, ready to respond whenever and wherever a disaster occurred in Maine. With the help of Nazarene Compassionate Ministry, that dream has become a reality. We have not one, but two trailers, to use for disaster response and for tools and materials needed for district work & witness projects.

Personal

I want to wind this report down with a personal note from Glenda and me. We came four years ago and you immediately accepted us as part of your district family...even if we were "from away" and didn't add and subtract our "r"s when speaking. I was asked to lead our district in accomplishing five things: develop a mission and vision that we could all embrace; build community; enhance our communication;

be available and accessible; and, improve our financial management and transparency. With God's help, we have seen each of those goals achieved and we continue to work to make them better. I'm very proud of our district leaders, all our clergy, and our local lay leaders who have done the work necessary to see all this accomplished.

With that said, I am announcing my retirement, effective one year from now. Glenda and I have spent significant time in prayer and conversation about this. We've consulted with Dr. Sunberg and we believe that this is the right thing to do and the right time. We are starting to experience some relatively minor health issues that are slowing us down. Our loss of Joshua was not only an emotional struggle but it made us realize the importance of being near our grandchildren and to help them grow spiritually.

We will be here for the next year and we will work as hard as ever. We plan to visit each church again in-person...a sort of farewell tour...to express our appreciation and love for each of you. You have impacted our lives more than we can ever say. Thank you for the privilege you have given us to serve you and all our Maine District family.

Conclusion:

I need to close and I want to return to our theme of ONE MORE. God is calling us all to a greater commitment to growing His Kingdom...not for the numbers we can report; but for the people we can reach with the lifesaving offer of Jesus Christ. A few verses from an old song captures our theme well.

Throw Out the Lifeline

Throw out the lifeline across the dark wave;
There is a brother [or sister, or neighbor or friend] whom someone should save;
Somebody's brother! Oh, who then will dare
To throw out the lifeline, his peril to share?

Throw out the lifeline with hand quick and strong:
Why do you tarry, why linger so long?
See! he is sinking; oh, hasten today
And out with the life boat! Away, then, away!

Jesus is able! To you who are driv'n
Farther and farther from God and from Heav'n,
Helpless and hopeless, o'erwhelmed by the wave,
We throw out the lifeline—'tis, "Jesus can save."

Refrain:

Throw out the lifeline! Throw out the lifeline!
Someone is drifting away;
Throw out the lifeline! Throw out the lifeline!
Someone is sinking today.

That song was written Edwin Smith Ufford, who was born at Newark, NJ, on Feb. 10, 1851. Interestingly, he was educated at Bates Theological Seminary here in Maine and married a lady from Appleton, Maine. In 1878 he became a Baptist preacher, and the following year began serving at the First Baptist Church in Portland, ME. After Portland and while pastoring in Westwood, MA, Ufford often visited Nantucket Beach, a particularly dangerous coastal area, where many ships had been destroyed on the rocks.

The local lifesaving station at Point Allerton had a Lyle gun to shoot out a lifeline to ships in need. In 1886, while they were watching a lifesaving drill and could see some of the previous wrecks, a friend of Ufford recounted a scene, reported in the Boston Globe, where a schooner was being tossed in a storm. The lifeline was shot out several times until finally it reached the vessel and enabled the men to haul the ship to safety. So he went home and wrote the words to this song.

Maine District family, Ufford went home with an image in his head. I want you to go home with mission in your heart. A mission to throw out the lifeline to reach and save ONE MORE.

Respectfully submitted,
Dr. Stephen Dillman
District Superintendent