

District Superintendent's Report to 2024 District Conference

Thank you Dr. Schmidt, honored delegates, and friends, for joining us today for the 2024 Crossroads District Conference.

What a year! This was the year that Indiana enjoyed a total solar eclipse and the Fever drafted Caitlin Clark. It was also the year I took a sabbatical that didn't go as planned but was still very much appreciated. Then, in March, Sherry and I celebrated our 40th wedding anniversary. What a year!

Our theme for the past year was "God is on the Move" and we see the evidence of that as we gather today. Let me set the table by reminding you of the challenge we made as we were coming out of the pandemic. We rolled out the "1-2-3" challenge in 2022. The call was for every pastor to lead their church in going into one new place (reaching a new zip code, a new neighborhood, a new school, a new people group) and to growing two new leaders (developing new disciple-makers) in these three years.

When we raised that challenge, we were still emerging from the pandemic (and weeks of church lockdowns) so percentage gains were fairly easy. But, we have rebounded from 8,495 to 12,426 in the past three years, a gain of 46%. **That's more than 3900 people added in three years.** Some of those were returning members, but I continue to hear stories of many first-time guests who have now become faithful followers of Christ.

Attendance is one helpful measure but we can learn from a variety of discipleship metrics. Consider that just five years ago, 2019, we averaged 13,371 in worship attendance with 603 baptisms, a ratio of 4.5:100. In other words, for every 100 in worship, we baptized just under 5 new believers. This year, **we averaged 12,426 with 884 baptisms, a ratio of 7:100.** That's a 55% increase in moving people from professions of faith to obeying the Lord's command to be baptized. What is your ratio?

Worship attendance does matter. Praise the Lord that **66% of our churches grew** this year. Larger churches, smaller churches, city churches, and country churches grew last year. Our worship attendance of 12,426 is now within 1,000 (945) of where we were before the pandemic.

If you look closely, you'll see that 15 of the local churches that reported to conference just 5 years ago have since closed their doors. Church closings are not inevitable but the sad reality is that churches who drift from making disciples to maintaining the status quo will not survive.

Just a gentle reminder that district boards don't close churches. Churches close themselves by making a series of decisions over time that are motivated more by nostalgia and their internal preferences than by the Great Commission. **Our mission is not preserving our grandparents' church. Our mission is becoming the church that God can use to reach our grandchildren.**

Sadly, 20 of our churches reported no baptisms last year. Eight of our churches reported both zero baptisms and zero professions of faith. As many as 15 more churches are likely to close their doors in the next 5 years unless they make dramatic course corrections in their ministry.

Church planting is not optional. Three new churches planted per year is just barely a replacement rate. We need to believe, pray, give and work toward planting 6 to 10 new churches every year. The most effective strategy is when churches plant churches. We have open doors. We have training and coaching. We have financial support with every church re-investing their 1% multiplication fund. Join in prayer that the Lord of the Harvest will send out laborers. Ask God what part He is calling you and your church to play in the multiplication mission.

*** Prayer requests and funding opportunities:

1. Exit Church in Anderson w/ Caraballo's
2. Fountain Square project with Vaughn's
3. And Monday night, I'll be in LaPorte to meet with potential church planters.

Another discipleship metric we can track is the number of people who are expressing their awareness of God's calling to minister. When we launched the Crossroads District in 2016, we prayed that God would use us to see 1000 people answer God's call in 10 years. With gratitude to God, you were able to report that **168 responded this year**, up from 156 last year. Eight years into our journey together, 916 people have affirmed that calling of God. Let's take a look at some of those stories. (VIDEO)

I hope you caught the recurring theme of pastors fanning into flame the glowing embers of God's call? Preach on the call, share your testimony of God calling you, meet with each person who is open to exploring that calling, and encourage them as they take their first steps to answering God's call.

If you'll look in your delegate packet, you'll find a booklet from our friends at Mobilize the Church. Look at page 7 and you'll find a QR code that will link you to a free course called "Live Sent." Share that with everyone you can. And take one more step. **Please keep an active list of these individuals that you can share with our District Board of Ministerial Development.** Dr. Carla Working and her team are uniquely positioned to help people answer God's call.

While you're in that booklet, let me extend an invitation. Ten pastors have the opportunity today to sign up for a discipleship mobilizers' cohort that Dr. Jon Wiest will be leading this year. That online learning cohort has a normal registration fee of \$500 per pastor but, through the generosity of a sponsor, that experience is free for the first 10 pastors who sign up today.

Dr. Chris Williams will lead new two cohorts this year in addition to the "women in ministry" cohort that Rev. Carla Working leads and the two cohorts that Pastor Matthew Trexler leads. I'm also excited to announce that Pastor Michael Colaw has agreed to host an event next spring for interns, residents, and ministry leaders under 30 years of age. We invest in leadership development because when leaders get better, everyone is blessed!

Thank you again to the many pastors who accepted that 1-2-3 challenge of going 1 new place and growing 2 new disciple makers over these 3 years. We celebrate the growth at large churches like The River (+273) and at College Wesleyan Church (+100). Those two churches alone accounted for 37% of our district's attendance growth last year.

We're thankful for the way they set the pace and for the generous ways they resource our shared mission. In fact, our four largest churches, The River, College, LifeSpring, and Indy Trinity all grew in attendance and all reached 100% of their USF goal this year. Together they contributed 28% of the funding that supported Wesleyan denominational ministries, Indiana

Wesleyan University, and our own district ministries. We are grateful for their leadership example and their generosity.

On that same note, as a team, we achieved 97.6% of our budgeted contributions. That's a powerful statement of support for what we're striving to accomplish together. More than 80% of our churches contributed 100% and only 15 churches didn't reach 90%.

FYI: Of the \$1.6 million you gave this year the largest portion (\$573,778) went to the Educational Institutions Fund (EIF), including IWU.

But it's not just large churches that are growing here in our district. Old churches, new churches, urban churches and rural churches are growing.

If you read the weekly team update, and I hope you do, you've heard about what God is doing in **Albion Wesleyan Church**. Last year alone, they grew by 30% to 67 in worship attendance with 12 baptisms (30% more than the previous year). I love Pastor Sam and Eric's story. When he first came to Albion, Pastor Sam worked a part-time job driving prisoners to their work release program. Eric, a convicted meth dealer, was one of those prisoners. Pastor Sam played Christian music in the van and shared his faith. God was working in Eric's heart and Pastor Sam stayed in touch after Eric was released from prison. This spring, Pastor Sam had the privilege of baptizing Eric as a new brother in Christ!

One of our newest churches is **CrossRoads Church** in Union City. Planted and launching just before the pandemic in September 2019, they will celebrate their first five years of ministry this fall. Led by Pastor John and Beth Hannan, this young church has moved outside their walls to partner with their city in feeding the hungry and caring for the vulnerable. Along with Pastor Randy Yaryan and Winchester Wesleyan, CrossRoads responded immediately to families impacted by the recent tornadoes. With the generous support of churches across our district, essential needs were met. CrossRoads Church grew by 28% this year and baptized 12 new believers!

We also celebrate growth in our **Hispanic churches**. For example, the Casa Network led by Pastor Claudia Ruiz Wilson out of the Casa del Alfarero in Richmond, with support from Pastor Paul VanCise and our

Bryant Church, began an outreach into Portland last year. Rev. Joe Schmidt, Assistant Pastor at Bryant, brought his missionary experience in Central America as part of the team developing this new ministry called Casa de Esperanza. The Sunday afternoon services in Portland average 15-20 with a group of 40 being served by this new campus. Last year, more than 200 people gathered each week in one of the three locations of the Casa Network.

And I can't fail to mention growth in our **urban churches**. **The Bridge**, planted back in 2018, moved into a new neighborhood in Mishawaka. Their leadership team participated in the Next Level planning workshop that Dr. Chris Williams leads. The Bridge committed to an outreach initiative that would "bless their block." They spell block "BLOC" for "bringing love outside church." In addition to their immediate neighborhood, the church accepted the city's challenge to take responsibility for a nearby community park. And God has blessed their faith-filled efforts. Average worship attendance has nearly tripled last year from 36 to 100 and they baptized approximately 70 new believers last year. Now, with young leaders they've mentored, Pastor Terry and Lennaire are praying about planting a church near Fountain Square in Indianapolis.

God is on the move!

One last word from a pastor to pastors. Keep yourself "pure and holy" in the love of Christ for the sake of God's Kingdom. The moral failure of ministers like Robert Morris, Tony Evans, and Ravi Zacharias grab the headlines. But don't forget that our own ministerial family has two fewer leaders today because of sinful choices that wrecked their marriages and ruined their ministries. Churches, especially new believers, are devastated by these moral failures.

I still remember the evening when the young minister and his wife from a neighboring church came to the door of our parsonage to see my father. The wife was in tears. The husband's jaw was set. She begged him to stay with her and their little children. He refused to repent. He left his wife and his ministry to go back to working on a fishing boat and to marry the volunteer youth worker with whom he had committed adultery. That church which had been thriving has never really thrived again. My teenaged faith was shaken as I watched. And his heartbroken family still carries those scars to this day.

If the statistics are accurate, there is at least one minister in this room right now who is just a few wrong decisions away from a shipwreck. Please, for the love of God, your family and your church, stop. Turn around. Flee from evil. Get on your knees. Get a counselor. Get an accountability partner. Get rest for your soul. Pursue what is good. We are called “to a holy life” 2 Timothy 1:9

Before I close, I want to say thank you to God, our gracious Father. He alone deserves the honor, glory, and power!

On this side of Heaven, my deepest appreciation goes to Sherry, my best friend and the best grandmother ever. Our first 40 years of marriage have been amazing. I am so proud of you as you begin your new chapter as a professor at Taylor University.

Thank you to District Administrator Michael Wood, Assistant DS Dr. Chris Williams, Secretary Dr. Craig Thurmon, Treasurer Rev. Matthew Trexler, DBMD Chair Rev. Carla Working, and our faithful DBA members. Welcome and thanks to Darah Martin, as she serves Dr. Williams at Lakeview and also supports Michael Wood in our district office.

Special thanks also to our Circuit Riders for serving us so well again this year: Rev. Neftali Lopez, Rev. Mark Atkinson, and Dr. David Smith. And I’ve save the best for last. Dr. Jim Lo, our beloved brother in Christ, fervent prayer warrior and faithful follower of Jesus. We will miss you but we will continue to be inspired by your example and count on your prayers.

In closing, remember that you are called. Called to salvation, to holiness, to unity, called to make disciples. We are called to a mission that matters for eternity. The souls of 3 million lost people in our mission field hang in the balance.

The Apostle Paul reminds us all in Ephesians 4:16 that in Christ, “the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, GROWS and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. “

In your delegate packet, you received a gift. In the case marked “Called” is a multi-tool. If you’ll take that out, you’ll see that there are many parts and

functions all in that one tool. Carry it as a simple reminder of the powerful truth that you called to play your part in growing and building the church.

Paul made the point that apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:12) are called to equip, prepare, and train the saints. But all of us, all the people of God, are called to do the work of ministry. All of us have a part to play. We can all make disciples using our spiritual gifts, our strengths, and our opportunities. We can all help in planting new churches. **Many gifts. One mission. We are called.**

May God empower us to carry on His mission and reach our generation with the Gospel. Let's answer His call by going into new places (a new school, a new neighborhood, a new community group, or new zip code) and growing new leaders until Jesus returns.

May God help us all to "...live a life worthy of the calling you have received!" - Ephesians 4:1

Your servant in Christ,
Mark Gorveatte