



## **What Happened at General Assembly and Why It Matters for Our Church**

Scott Dermer

A few days ago I had the privilege of attending the General Assembly (GA) and Conventions of the Church of the Nazarene in Indianapolis. GA is a global gathering of Nazarenes that happens every four years. It is a time of worship, learning, fellowship, and making decisions about the church.

Coming together on this grand scale is an important part of our Wesleyan heritage. John Wesley held that “Christian conferencing” is a means of grace. Just as we receive God’s grace when we meet together in small groups, we also receive God’s grace when we meet together as a global church family. That was certainly my experience at GA. Throughout my time in Indianapolis, the Holy Spirit worked in me—teaching me, encouraging me, and renewing me.

What happens at GA is ultimately for the benefit of the local church. Our denominational structure does not exist for itself; it exists to equip local congregations like ours. While a lot happened at GA, I would like to highlight four things that I thought were particularly significant.

### **1. A Slight but Significant Change to Article XIII on the Lord’s Supper**

#### *What Happened*

During GA, resolutions are proposed for revising our Articles of Faith. In the Church of the Nazarene, we have 16 Articles of Faith or core doctrines that give us our theological identity. We learn about these in Membership Class or Catechism Class.

One of the changes that was particularly exciting to me was a change in Article XIII on the Lord's Supper. I speak often about how when we receive the Lord's Supper we are not only remembering what Christ did for us long ago on the cross; we are also receiving Christ's very presence here and now. This notion comes out of John Wesley's understanding of the Lord's Supper as a "means of grace." A means of grace is a practice that conveys the Lord's gracious presence to us.

Article XIII now states that "the Lord's Supper is a means of grace in which Christ is present by the Spirit." It also states that "those who have faith in Christ and love for the saints are invited by Christ to participate as often as possible." If we understand the Lord's Supper as an opportunity to encounter Christ by the Spirit, it naturally follows that we should want to receive it "as often as possible."

#### *Why It Matters*

This change in the article highlights how the Lord's Supper is an incredible gift to our church. It is one of the main ways in which we encounter Christ. If we begin to see the Lord's Supper as a means of grace, as the revised article now states, we will have a deeper appreciation for the role it can play in our Christian journey.

## **2. The Election of Two New General Superintendents**

#### *What Happened*

General Superintendents in the Church of the Nazarene serve in the highest office of church leadership. They guide the global church in theology, ministries, and administration. This year two new General Superintendents were elected: Filimao Chambo and Carla Sunberg. Chambo (from Mozambique) has served as a pastor, teacher, and director of the church in the Africa region. Sunberg has served as a pastor, missionary, and president of Nazarene Theological Seminary. Some of you might recall her preaching at WGCN in 2015. Both Chambo and Sunberg are outstanding choices for General Superintendent.

#### *Why It Matters*

Chambo is the second African to be elected as GS. We have a global church, and it is good to see that reflected at the highest level of church leadership. Sunberg is the second woman to be elected as GS. I am grateful to be part of a church that has, from the start, recognized the gifts of women and ordained them for ministry. I have no doubt that Sunberg's leadership will help our denomination become more embracing of women in pastoral leadership.

Both Chambo and Sunberg are theologians. Chambo has his Ph.D. in Biblical Studies, and Sunberg has hers in Historical Theology. One of the most important tasks of this office is

giving moral and theological guidance to the church. This is one of real benefits of being part of a denomination. Each church doesn't have to make up its own mind on what it believes and why. We have leaders who can guide us on that. Both Chambo and Sunberg are well-equipped for that task. They will bring a perspective on moral and theological issues that is deeply rooted in scripture and tradition.

### **3. A Unified Statement on Human Sexuality and Marriage**

#### *What Happened*

In response to much of the confusion that exists in our culture, the General Superintendents put together a special committee of scholars and pastors to work on a new statement on human sexuality and marriage for the ethical section of our manual. The committee was led by one of my former professors, Dr. Scott Daniels. A lot of careful thought and prayer went into the statement, and it shows. The new statement is not a change in the ethical positions of our church, but rather a clarification and rewording. The new statement can be found here (the underlined section).

[http://ga2017.com/sites/default/files/resolutions/english/christian\\_action/CA-701.pdf](http://ga2017.com/sites/default/files/resolutions/english/christian_action/CA-701.pdf)

There are several aspects of the statement that I appreciate. I appreciate that it affirms the goodness of marriage *and* singleness. I appreciate that it affirms that marriage is a covenantal union between one man and one woman. I appreciate that it upholds biblical teaching that the practice of same-sex sexual intimacy is contrary to the will of God, along with extra-marital sexual relations. I appreciate that it emphasizes the church's responsibility to be a community of forgiveness and love for all people. I appreciate that it expresses confidence in the power of God's grace to bring healing to areas of human sexual brokenness. I appreciate the tone of the entire statement. The truth was spoken in love.

#### *Why It Matters*

I watched online when the new statement was read and voted upon. The assembly overwhelmingly approved it (97 percent, in fact). Even online, it was apparent that there was a collective sense of joy among the assembly with the adoption of this new statement. The church had addressed some difficult issues in unity and charity.

Sadly, this has not been the case in other denominations. As we speak, our brothers and sisters in the Methodist church, for example, are experiencing deep division over these issues. I am thankful that our church is letting scripture, and not culture, guide us on these issues, and that we are experiencing unity as we do so.

The stability and clarity that we have on these issues will help us immensely as we teach, minister, and reach out to a broken world.

#### 4. More Work on Entire Sanctification

##### *What Happened*

The doctrine of entire sanctification is central to who we are as Nazarenes. We are people who believe that, by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, we can be transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ and come to love God and our neighbor wholeheartedly. A few years ago, the General Superintendents put together a committee of scholars and pastors to work on Article X on “Entire Sanctification.” A new article was proposed at the assembly for adoption. Like the statement on human sexuality and marriage, this new article was not a change in our theological position, but a rewording and clarification. It can be read here (the underlined section).

[http://ga2017.com/sites/default/files/resolutions/english/special\\_judicial/JUD-813.pdf](http://ga2017.com/sites/default/files/resolutions/english/special_judicial/JUD-813.pdf)

Although not perfect, I thought the new article was a significant improvement. As I read it, I thought: “This will be much easier to teach in membership class!” The language was very biblical, clear, and Wesleyan. I appreciate that it affirmed that our transformation in Christlikeness begins when we come to faith and are reborn. I appreciate that it stressed how we are continually transformed in the likeness of Christ by participating in the church and the means of grace.

In a close vote, the new statement was not approved for adoption. It was referred to the General Superintendents for further discussion and study and will be revisited at the next assembly.

##### *Why It Matters*

As I saw the result of the vote, and as I listened to the debate on the floor, I realized that we have a lot of work to do on clarifying this key doctrine of ours. When it comes to entire sanctification, there is some ambiguity about what we mean. One of my goals as our pastor is to speak regularly and coherently about this topic. Our doctrine of entire sanctification is a message of hope that we have for the world. By the grace of God, we believe that we can live a life in conformity to Jesus Christ—a life of victory over sin, obedience to God, and holy love toward God and others! Let’s share that message, and let’s do so with theological clarity.

These are just a few highlights from GA. The Church of the Nazarene, like any church, is in progress. We are growing, learning, improving, and, I believe, becoming more and more the faithful church Christ has called us to be. I was grateful to be part of GA, and more importantly, to be among the people called Nazarenes.