

CACTUS NAZARENE MINISTRY CENTER

ADDRESS TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

February, 2023

**“The City Of Cactus / The City of God”
(Jeremiah 29:4-6)**

**I am not very good at being a board chair.
This is not an attempt to gain consoling cheers from you.
It's just the truth.
I am not very good at training you
in the legalities and role responsibilities you carry,
as a board of directors.**

**I am not gifted with the political skills that board chairs normally possess.
Those skills are vitally important
in protecting and bolstering institutional strength.
I have worked to be better at it.
But it's just not in my wheelhouse really.**

**I am a pastor and preacher.
A peddler of words with a genuine love for people.
That is my gift set.
I have strong opinions about the gospel.
I have strong opinions about people.
I get heated when the gospel is misused for power.
I get heated when people are are abused for power.
Nothing much else causes the shade of my face to turn red.**

**So what I lack in political skills regarding my role,
I try and make up for with my particular voice as a pastor, and preacher.
That preacher role carries with it the role of prophet.
Not prophet as a foretelling - of predicting what is to come.
But prophet as a forth telling - of speaking what God desires to be.**

**The prophetic word is always a confronting word.
A speaking that confronts sin.
Personal sin.
Sin found in systems and structures of society,
that oppress and enslave people.**

**In the Christian faith,
a prophetic word is particularly associated
with a confrontation of a lack of love.
Any personal action or attitude,
that does not come from a place of love,
any policy, law, or system,
that multiplies hardship and burden,
on those who are already suffering,
must be confronted.**

**If I have any particular giftedness at all,
it would be that.
That's all I'm good for.**

**Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center is a picture of the kingdom of God.
Not a perfect picture.
Because it is led by folks like me and you.
But the work we do here,
the work we promote here,
brings heaven to earth.**

**Our very mission statement,
“Driven by the gospel of Jesus Christ, Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center exists
to compassionately and holistically empower all the people of Cactus”
is a prophetic word.
A word that calls us to love!
A word that calls us to share the good news of Jesus!
A word that calls us not just to be concerned with soul saving,
but a call to do the work of bringing Christlike wholeness to all of life.**

**A statement I have made countless times about Cactus,
goes like this,
“The people of Cactus are the most overlooked yet taken advantage of people,
I have ever come across.”
This is true of the immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeker from coast to coast.
We who were once the welcoming, safe-haven,
for those fleeing oppression and abuse,
have become an oppressor and abuser.**

And the abuse is not limited to one particular political party.

One of my other weaknesses is that I have no emotional attachment to the right or left.

I don't look down on those who do.

I called it a weakness, and I really do think it is.

I would be better off if I would just pick a side.

I just don't find either one appealing.

For the record, I don't find the middle appealing either.

It just becomes a hiding place to not take a stand.

That is not a Christian trait, I don't think.

When it comes to the immigrant,

the right labels them all criminals and a threat, to gain votes.

And the left claims to be their defender from the hateful right to gain votes, but nothing changes.

I have served in Cactus and followed the southern border crisis under presidents #43, #44, #45, and #46.

The southern border and the plight of the immigrant has gotten worse under presidents, 43, 44, 45, and 46.

I am not being fatalistic here.

We still need to vote our faith and our conscience.

Or maybe we need to get back to voting our faith and conscience.

But I am saying the solution has yet to be found by either party.

And what I am saying is,

this place and this ministry,

has made the plight of the immigrant easier.

And that is biblical work.

We carry on our work, not in a political vacuum.

We carry on our work despite the noise of the broken political machinery around us.

Perhaps our greatest accomplishment,

is putting names and faces to the immigrant and refugee.

Perhaps our greatest accomplishment,

is helping a culture divided over partisan politics,

see the flesh and blood humanity of our neighbor.

Perhaps our greatest work is demonstrating simple civility,

in a politically uncivil culture.

**In The Hiding Place,
Corrie ten Boom tells the story,
of trying to provide safe shelter for a Jewish mother and her baby,
they had been concealing from the Nazis.
A local pastor came into their watch shop.
They asked him if he would take the Jews into his home.
He refused.
Corrie ran and brought the little baby,
and handed the child to the pastor.
He was unmoved.
Untouched.
“We could lose our lives for harboring this Jewish child,” he said.**

**At that point Father ten Boom took the child into his arms.
He looked deeply into the baby’s eyes.
His long white beard tickled the baby’s cheek,
causing the child to smile.**

**He then looked up at the pastor and said,
“You say we could lose our lives for this child?”
“I would consider that the greatest honor that could come to my family.”**

**We don’t carry out our work under those same conditions.
But that same radical love and compassion for neighbor,
is required to do our work.
The ten Boom family
allowed the love of God and neighbor to shape their compassion,
not the hostile environment around them.
And we should remember that those neighbors were of a different culture.
And we should remember that those neighbors were of a different religion.**

**Our ethic of compassion must find its source in our God of compassion.
Sometimes the OT is pointed to as a source of harsh judgment,
and while I don’t feel the need to tame God,
we should also remember how many times the people of God in the OT,
are told, regularly instructed, to go out of their way
to show respect for the stranger.**

**In the OT, the stranger refers not just to someone you don’t know.
It is referring to someone from a different ethnic group,**

**and someone with different religious beliefs.
Leviticus 19 for example,
Do no wrong to strangers,
treat them as if they were fellow citizens,
love them as you love each other.
God then reminds them in verse 34 of their own story.
“You used to be the strangers in the land of Egypt.”**

**Care of the immigrant and refugee,
care of the stranger,
care of the pagan (someone with differing religious beliefs),
is biblical.**

**Of course it also just makes common sense as being decent humans.
Aristotle insisted that we become more fully human,
more whole,
when we learn to function as good citizens
in the diverse arena of the public square.
To get along with and care for those who are different from us.**

**This is a vital lesson for our world,
which is so torn apart by ethnic,
racial,
political,
and religious hostilities.
In a world so divided by screaming politicians trying to garner votes,
Christians are called to love all people,
on the simple basis of their God-given humanness.**

**We actually believe that,
Christians and Muslims,
Africans and Latinos,
African Americans and white Americans,
rich and poor,
democrats and republicans,
are all created in the image of God.**

**By our work of welcoming the foreigner,
and caring for the pagan (someone who holds different religious beliefs),
we are honoring the image of God.**

**If there is any people who should be sensitive to the stranger,
it should be God's people.**

**Our story, from very early on until this very day,
is one of being the stranger.**

**Our own history is one of struggling to find our way,
in a culture we don't fit in.**

**Psalm 137:4 records the struggle with a question,
"How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"**

The Lord answers our question through the prophet Jeremiah (29:4-6):

**"This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried
into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 "Build houses and settle down; plant
gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters;
find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too
may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease."**

**When we were the strangers,
the foreigners,
the immigrants,
the ones who didn't believe the way everyone else believed.
God instructed us just to keep on living.
Settle into the place and make it your home.
Find shelter,
plant some crops,
get married,
have babies,
find a way to flourish,
not just survive.**

**And then in verse 7 God gives us a very clear guiding policy.
"Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,
pray to the Lord on its behalf,
for in its welfare you will find your welfare."**

**God is telling the Israelites and us,
that neither hostility nor indifference,
is a proper way for God's people to treat their neighbors.
Even, or maybe especially,
our immigrant, pagan ones.**

**Though I have, thus far, focused on the OT,
this theme of love for the stranger is even more prevalent in the NT.
The NT letters were written to Christian people,
living in various parts of the Roman Empire.**

**These earliest followers of Jesus were wrestling with the questions of:
How do we handle the fact that we are living among pagans?
How do we handle the fact that we are living under a government that
oppresses us and others?
How do we handle the fact that we are living in this thick,
toxic mix of religion and politics?**

**Paul says, "Live peaceably with all."
"Speak evil of no one, avoid quarreling, be gentle, show courtesy to everyone."
St. Peter says it even more succinctly, "Honor everyone."
In fact, even when we need to give a defense of our convictions he says,
"Do it with gentleness and reverence."**

**I know I am preaching to the choir - as they say.
And that is what I am doing - preaching.
I am seeking to be faithful to the prophetic work to which I am called.
To which we are called.**

**I am seeking to speak forth what God desires to be.
I am cheering us on!
I am calling us to repent for the ways
we have sounded more like partisan pundits
than followers of Jesus!**

**I am creating the appropriate atmosphere,
out of which the work of God flows.
I am centering the meetings we will have,
and the business we will conduct,
in the cradle of the good news of God in Jesus Christ!**

**I am not concerned if it sounds liberal.
I am not concerned if it sounds conservative.
I am only concerned that we continue to see
the kingdom of God touch earth
through Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center.**

**That we continue to lift up the most overlooked
and yet taken advantage of people I have ever come across.**

**I am thinking that we need a song that goes with our mission.
Something we could sing, that expresses our mission and convictions.
We have Dr. John Bowling on our board.
I bet Olivet has school song.
I got to questioning what our song might be?
I thought of several, but I finally settled on one.
Perhaps I will make a motion in our meetings to follow,
that we make it official.**

Hymn by Frank Mason North (1905)

Where cross the crowded ways of life,
where sound the cries of race and clan,
above the noise of selfish strife,
we hear your voice, O Son of Man.

2 In haunts of wretchedness and need,
on shadowed thresholds fraught with fears,
from paths where hide the lures of greed,
we catch the vision of your tears.

3 From tender childhood's helplessness,
from human grief and burdened toil,
from famished souls, from sorrow's stress,
your heart has never known recoil.

4 The cup of water given for you
still holds the freshness of your grace;
yet long these multitudes to view
the sweet compassion of your face.

5 O Master, from the mountainside,
make haste to heal these hearts of pain;
among these restless throngs abide;
O tread the city's streets again;

6 Till all the world shall learn your love,
and follow where your feet have trod;
till glorious from your heaven above
shall come the city of our God.

**Through our work as a board,
through the work of Cactus Nazarene Ministry Center,
may the city of Cactus play host to the city of our God.**

**With Easter Hope,
Rev. Dr. Larry A. Dunlap Jr.
Ash Wednesday
February 22, 2023**