

Report of the District Superintendent

June 15, 2019

For 158 consecutive summers, the Wesleyan churches in Western New York have conferenced with every church and nearly every pastor. This gathering of God's people is important and has often been a pivotal occasion for our community. Though not nearly as grand as the festivals of the Israelites or the councils of the early church, this is a similar opportunity for us to seek God's help and direction. So while I know that giving up a Saturday in June is a sacrifice, I pray that this modern day festival of the church will be beneficial for Christ's work in Western New York.

The purposes of biblical festivals varied greatly. Sometimes they were occasions to celebrate what God had done. Other times God's people sought His deliverance against an overwhelming enemy. There were times when they gathered to hear a revelation from the Lord. In the New Testament, we see gatherings to select leaders or decide on difficult issues facing the church. And there are a few occasions in which the church gathered to send out those whom God had called to special service. It may be reaching too high to expect all of these, but many of these elements are incorporated into the design for this meeting.

Vision

I would like to start by focusing on vision for the direction for our church and throughout the day spend time in prayer asking God to empower the church to fulfill this vision. God called me to this role as superintendent at a conference in 2010. I believe I was placed in this position, in part to promote revival in the church of Western New York. While it is tempting to get discouraged when revival does not come, I continue to pray for this extraordinary work of God's Spirit in these crucial times. It seems that conditions are rapidly developing in our culture that both make survival of the church more difficult, and at the same time should draw us to Him for guidance.

The church began as a dynamic movement and is intended to be a life-giving force in the world. But movements have a tendency to unwittingly become institutionalized. As they move beyond the fresh outpouring of God's Spirit, the heat from the fire cools and the next generation of the church becomes imperceptibly different. We gradually become more and more like an institution and less like the transforming presence of God in our community.

Jesus came as a fresh expression of God's presence into a religious culture that had become rigid. The religious leaders could not understand why Jesus and His disciples were not honoring the traditions and rules they had established. While the Pharisees were careful to abide by the rules of fasting, Jesus was eating and drinking with sinners. When questioned, Jesus spoke these words,

***"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment.
Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse.***

And no one pours new wine into old wineskins.

***Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined.
No, they pour new wine into new wineskins."***

Mark 2:21-22

Admittedly, I have little experience with wine and even less with wineskins. But with this illustration, Jesus is teaching us that there are two parts of His movement. The first is the wine, the essence of the movement. Jesus is new wine, bringing new life, a new heart, a new song, a new covenant, new hope. The second element is the wineskin, the pliable vessel which contains the wine and enables it to be poured out to those who are thirsty. It is practical in that it is necessary, but it is secondary to the wine. Wineskins are completely useless without wine.

For us, the wineskins are the structures, the traditions which surround the presence of Christ. It includes this conference, our buildings, all of our committees, districts and denominations. These are useful only if they contain the life-giving substance of God's Spirit. You can say structures are man-made, but they are necessary to support to the work of God. Jesus does not condemn these skins, but speaks of their limited shelf-life. The presence of God is continually new. From time to time we have to replace the structures of the church or Jesus' fresh wine, continually fermenting, will burst the skins.

A fresh fire from God is the only hope for the church today. But this will be disruptive, especially if it is poured into inflexible systems in our churches. We must be willing to surrender our structure, our comfort, our positions of influence and say to God, we will do anything you ask so that your Spirit can move among us.

Trusting God to Provide

We need change. But many of these changes will be very uncomfortable and undoubtedly, some of us will look for reasons to keep the status quo. More and more, I am hearing prophetic voices skillfully describing why the church needs to change. The influence of our churches has plateaued in the past decade. Buffalo continues to be ranked among the top Post-Christian Cities in the US. Our effort to lead nonbelievers to faith in Christ is not keeping up with the population growth of our communities. With those who do make commitments, we struggle to disciple them into fully surrendered followers of Christ.

But just describing the problem facing the church is a simple task, which is becoming easier each year. Knowing what to change requires direction from God. For not every change is from God. There are many human solutions offered which are equally ineffective and could even lead us further away from God. Once we realize our need, there is an urge to impatiently find something to make it right. The transforming and filling work is God's. We must trust him and call out to him for help.

At Pastor Fred Moore's funeral service last month, his son, Steve, told a story from when Fred and Blanche were pastoring their first church, a small church near Bradford. They had a couple of young boys and Fred had gone back to school at Houghton College. Fred was continually feeling the pressure of providing for his family. One evening, he remembered feeling this angst while he was driving from Houghton to a midweek Bible Study at his church. Then, the car in front of him hit a deer. Fred pulled over to make sure everyone was okay. The driver was fine, the deer was not.

The man from the other car looked at the deer and said to Fred, "I don't want it, but if you do, open your trunk and I'll help you put it in." Fred knew what to do with a deer, and he knew how much his young family could use the meat. But he also knew that it wasn't legal to take a deer like that. You needed to get the Game Commission involved and he didn't have time to do that and make it to the midweek service on time. So, he said no thank you and went on his way.

After the Bible Study was over, the host family told him that the people in the church had prepared to give him a pounding. He didn't know exactly what they meant, but they were saying it so nicely, he figured it couldn't be as bad as it sounded. They could see the confusion on his face, so they said, "No, a pounding is when the people of the church give their pastor a pound of beans and a pound of sugar, a bound of butter and a pound of all sorts of things."

They started bringing out bag after bag of food. And they filled up the back seat of the car. Then one of the men said, "Pastor, we have more. I need you to open your trunk."

When Fred opened the trunk of his car, the Holy Spirit spoke to him with the question, "What would you have told these people if you had an illegal deer in there?" Through that experience, God taught Fred, "You don't have to take shortcuts in life because you are afraid you will not have enough. Because I will take care of you."

If we fail to trust God to provide in all situations, we take it upon ourselves to act. If we do that which seems right in our own eyes, justifying that it is for a good cause, we gradually veer from God's standard of holiness. Whenever we take shortcuts, or compromise our integrity in any way, we demonstrate a lack of trust in God. We will all be tempted to compromise our integrity to be more relevant to the culture. We may be tempted to lie or exaggerate to make ourselves seem better, or gossip to tear someone else down. But God is saying to us, "You don't have to take these shortcuts. I will take care of you."

Recently, The Wesleyan Church of Hamburg went through a name change to become Watermark Wesleyan Church. As they are expanding to different communities, they needed a name that did not identify with just one town. For a large church, the process is both cumbersome and expensive with websites, signage and many other forms of branding. They went through the process to find a name that reflected the church and their community and chose Watermark Wesleyan Church. Pastor Ken

Nash shared the significance of the name last June at our conference. Most of us have gradually adjusted to saying Watermark rather than Hamburg.

However, shortly after the name was introduced to the congregation, and the new website was up and running, a church in Texas contacted the church and the district. They informed us that when their church, Watermark Community Church, chose the name of their church 25 years ago, they had the word "Watermark" federally trademarked. The leaders of the church envisioned themselves reaching across the country with curricula and conferences similar to a Willow Creek or a Saddleback. They chose a unique name because they did not want people confusing them with other churches. It makes sense, but I honestly did not know this was a thing for churches. This may be why we are hearing such unique church names lately such as 12 Stone or Love Chapel Hill.

The other Watermark was not unkind, but they were persistent. They took seriously the Bible's directive to not take your brother to court and let us know they would not sue us over the name. But they appealed to the church to do the right thing. It would have been possible to ignore their protests and continue on. However as Pastor Ken worked through this with his board, they decided to act out of integrity and comply with the trademark and begin again the process of choosing a new name. I imagine some will make light of this decision, but this was a courageous decision to trust God. It will cost them money and has the potential to bring confusion in their community. It was done simply because this is God's church and we cannot compromise our integrity at any cost.

Disciples Making Disciples

While we trust for God to provide, this does not mean we wait idly for something to happen. We have been called to go and make disciples. Regardless of all else that a church is doing, we must not neglect this primary call. The church exists to rescue those who do not know the good news of Jesus. As churches start to decline, two things almost always happen. First, there are people who find fault with the pastor. Second, they pull their limited resources and energy toward the ministries to those within the church. This is the opposite of what we need to be doing. We need to realize that it is everyone's calling to be witnesses and to make disciples.

Some have suggested that in many churches there has been an informal social contract whereby pastors primarily do the work of the church in exchange for faithful laity supporting them with regular attendance and tithes. The people in these churches are happy to oblige and the pastor relishes the role of beloved champion. But, this is clearly not a biblical model of the church. There must be a shift in thinking where every disciple is in the ministry of making disciples.

It is this philosophy which is expressed in The Wesleyan Church's vision statement,

*"Celebrating every time a disciple makes a disciple
and a church multiplies itself
until The Wesleyan Church has a transforming presence in every zip code."*

If we do not emphasize the importance of every disciple becoming involved in the making of disciples, our pastors will wear themselves out and the work of the church will slowly die.

In the past few years, I have seen the rising influence of the Exponential movement. Their conferences are selling out and they are speaking with a prophetic voice to the church. On the surface, it is about multiplication or planting new churches. But as I understand it more, it is about transforming the structure and roles of the church such that the making of new disciples is such an integral part of the church that all believers are involved in sharing their faith and raising up new disciples. The growth of new converts grows exponentially. Once this is happening in the church, the planting of new congregations will be a necessary and healthy expression of this new growth. This year, Dr. Schmidt and I, along with more than 20 other superintendents will form a cohort, meeting quarterly with the leaders of the Exponential movement and processing what it looks like to lead a network of churches through the different shifts to become a movement.

A Renewed Call to Partnership

We must stop thinking of ourselves as 37 congregational churches who agree on the same doctrine and occasionally meet together. Instead, we are a conjoined network of churches that are banding together to accomplish the great commission. Three years ago, I shared my vision to see every

church engage in a partnership relationship with at least one other church. We have determined not to start any new churches unless there is an existing church willing to sponsor the new congregation. We are beginning to see the effects of greater partnership:

Orchard Park Wesleyan Church sent their Assistant Pastor, Elijah Shamenda and 28 people from their church to plant a church in the city of Buffalo. Resurgence City Church is still working under Orchard Park's board and their finances are handled through Orchard Park's office. This administrative support alone has taken a burden off of the church planting team, allowing them to concentrate on building up the congregation in the city.

Hess Road Wesleyan Church has continued the partnership with the **Lockport Wesleyan Church**. This summer, with Matthew Rose's selection as the new pastor at Hess Road, they are imagining an even greater alignment with the possibility of a reimagined Lockport Church becoming an extension of the Hess Road Church.

Watermark Wesleyan Church continues to expand its ministry through partnerships and satellite campuses. Their South Creek Campus started in 2014. If it were a stand-alone congregation, it would now be the fourth largest church in our district. Their Bayview Campus, a congregation which meets in their chapel would be the 14th largest church in the district. They are now preparing to partner with Springville Crossing Church to establish their fourth campus, which launches in October.

Valley Wesleyan Church in Canaseraga has made itself available to pursue a partnership with a larger Wesleyan church nearby with the hope of it becoming a renewed satellite ministry. This is somewhat experimental, but this may be a great way in which a small church in a declining community can transform themselves into new wineskins.

Bellville Wesleyan Church continues to benefit from the administrative and financial partnership with **Fillmore Wesleyan Church**. In essence, Paul Cronk is the treasurer for both churches. With this partnership and Pastor Rob Grimes leadership, the church doubled in its first year and had a 15% growth this past year.

A Call to Prayer

More than anything, our churches need to be transformed by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, an explosion of love, a transformation into a movement of God. We prepare by making ourselves ready, obedient, and humble. Then we need to pray. Today we will celebrate ways in which God has worked, we will elect new leaders. But throughout the day, I would like to call the church to prayer. I may call on some of you to come to a mic and pray for an area of ministry which was just reported to us. I hope this conference is remembered as the year the conference kept on praying. And I pray that God would move in extraordinary ways among his church in the coming year - to do among us everything He desires to do.

Working with Pastors

In January, eighty two pastors and spouses attended **The Gathering**, The Wesleyan Church's conference for clergy. This is held every four years and provides inspiration, renewed relationships across the denomination and a respite from the cold weather in January.

We held eight **Leadership Development** meetings this past year. This regular gathering of 50-60 pastors is a unique opportunity to develop community among our pastors. This year we focused on identifying our core values and ways in which the church must change to face the challenges of our current context.

Working with Churches in Transition. One of my more strategic tasks is working with churches once they enter into a season of pastoral change. This year, I knew at the beginning of the year that I would be working with Hess Road Wesleyan Church and The Vine Wesleyan Church. After walking with the Hess Road Search Team in a thorough search process, they recommended Matthew Rose, who has served as their Assistant Pastor for sixteen years. The Vine had a year of intentional interim, which proved to be helpful for the congregation and board. Tomorrow, I will celebrate with the church by installing Jason Argo as Lead Pastor.

More recently, I have begun the discussion with **Valley Wesleyan Church**. As they pursue this unknown future, Bill Lawson has agreed to serve as their interim pastor.

In May, Neil Koppen announced his resignation from **Fellowship Wesleyan Church**. After serving as District Superintendent for ten years and nine years at Fellowship, he will be missed. The LBA at Fellowship has also agreed to enter into a year of intentional interim, working with New Church Specialties and interim pastor Dick Emery.

Celebrations and Goals

As I looked over the year end stats, there are many areas to celebrate.

We had a significant increase in the number of Salvations (426, +15%) and Baptisms (267, +31%), but we experienced a decrease in our average worship attendance (6,891, -181 -2.6%).

We started a new church (Resurgence City) bringing our number of churches to 37. Yet even with the churches we have planted, our attendance is almost exactly the same as it was at the end of my first year as your superintendent in 2011.

Again, every church in the district paid 100% of their USF/EIF assessment.

In the coming year:

I would like to see at least half of our churches engaged in some type of partnership arrangement whether through starting a new campus or partnering with another church to become more effective for the Kingdom. This is a goal I shared at the beginning of this term in 2016.

I plan to call a Prayer and Fasting Retreat for pastors and lay leaders together to seek a fresh movement of God's Spirit among us.

I would like to meet with each pastor and board for a vision & prayer session to consider ways God may be leading them to expand ministry in their area.

I am praying to see every church experience a celebration of Baptism this church year. I grieve that six of our churches did not report either a salvation or a baptism this past year.

Greater Accountability

One additional facet of my ministry this year has been an increased network of accountability.

For several years, I have a monthly call with General Superintendent, Wayne Schmidt. This is helpful to hear updates from the broader church and to hear his heart for the church. This year, Dr. Schmidt has encouraged the five superintendents in the Northeast to also call monthly to support each other and hold one another accountable to shared goals and measurements.

I continue to report quarterly with the District Board. I feel their support, but also appreciate the times when they challenge me.

The final layer of accountability is a Personal Accountability Group which I started in October. Also through Zoom, I meet each Monday evening with four men who have known me since we formed an accountability group as freshmen at Houghton College.

Support Team

I work with a great team of leaders. This year, we have experienced transition in the leadership of both our Children and Youth ministries as **Chris Claassen** accepted a position in Indiana and **Tom Neary** will be planting a church in Georgia. **Steve Johnson** has worked to support those who are planting churches. **Robin Schara** has faced several health challenges this year, but is working to get every church involved with our partnership in Haiti. I am thankful for **Kristen Sanasith** and her Women's Ministry team who have led several excellent events this year. It is great to have **Steve & Ruth Strand** work with the church in Buffalo and help suburban and rural churches connect in meaningful ways with ministries in the city. I am thankful for our treasurer **Kim Pecora**, along with **Jun Zhuang** and **Shannon Kedge** for their work handling the district's finances. **Robin George** has been the District Secretary since the first moon walk and continues to serve the district with excellence and humor. I continue to value the excellent support from **Steve Dunmire**, who is continuing to serve as Assistant

District Superintendent. He leads the Church Development Board, serves on the DBA and DBMD as well as stepping in at other times I call on him for help.

I could not do this without my wife **Maribeth** by my side. She and **Tammy Dunmire** have handled the hundreds of details involved in putting on this conference. Throughout the year, Maribeth works hard behind the scenes to make things run smoothly and she prays fervently for your pastors, the pastors' spouses and our churches. This has been a difficult season of loss as we grieved the death of Maribeth's mother in April. One of God's blessings has been that we have been able to be near her mom and dad through this extended illness for the past five years.

We are looking ahead to a season of joy. We will gain a new daughter-in-law as Ben is getting married in two weeks! Our daughter Hannah is pregnant and we anticipate the birth of our first grandchild in September. I can't wait to see what else God has in store for all of us!

With love and fervent prayers,

Joseph W. Jennings

Official Acts

- July 19, 2018 - Signed documents for Orchard Park Wesleyan cell tower lease
- September 21, 2018 - Signed agreement between The Vine and Depew related to the church's parking lot.
- November 21, 2018 - Signed District Health Insurance contract with Independent Health
- January 15, 2019 - Signed Document for Eastern Hills to rescind an easement with Windsor Ridge Partners.
- May 10, 2019 - Authorized transfer of funds at Valley Wesleyan Church from Auxiliary to General Savings
- May 29, 2019 - Signed contract for Watermark Wesleyan Church to purchase property in Springville
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Summary of Work

- Presided at Ordination Service for Mindy Lowe (June)
- Participated in Refresh Family Camp at Houghton (July)
- Preached at 80th Anniversary Celebration at McCrae Brook (July)
- Attended 175th Anniversary Celebration at Fillmore Wesleyan Church (August)
- Attended Call and Response Conference at Northeastern Seminary (October)
- Presided at District Service of Ordination & Recognition (October)
- Attended The Gathering: Wesleyan Pastor's Conference in Orlando (January)
- Attended Wesleyan District Superintendent Institute in Orlando (January)
- Chaired 5 meetings of the District Board of Administration & 1 Executive Committee meeting,
- Participated in 4 Funeral Service for District Pastors,
- Led 8 Leadership Development Gatherings for District Pastors,
- Chaired 3 meetings of the DBMD to interview 35 ministerial students, and licensed ministers
- Worked through pastoral transitions at The Vine Wesleyan Church, Hess Road Wesleyan Church, and began the process at Valley Wesleyan Church and Fellowship Wesleyan Church,
- Led 14 meetings with various Search Teams,
- Participated in 2 meetings of the Houghton College Board of Trustees (October, April) and 5 meetings of the Houghton College Executive Committee,
- Had approximately 75 meetings with District Pastors for coaching, counseling or mentoring.
- Had approximately 20 individual meetings with District Leaders,
- Met with most local boards in connection with my annual visit plus 16 additional LBA meetings,
- Preached for more than 30 of our churches/campuses,
- Had 22 Meetings/Zoom Calls with Denominational Leaders/Other Superintendents.
- Miles Driven with District Car: 15,318 (23,102 to 38,420)