

## **Report of the District Superintendent**

June 19, 2021

Dr. Schmidt, lay leaders and pastors of the Western New York District, it is replenishing to my soul to welcome you back together for this annual District Conference. Our forefathers began this conference in 1861 as the Lockport Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Churches. This conference had met annually for 158 consecutive years. So, after a worldwide pandemic that kept us from meeting last June, it is incredibly good to see and greet you for this our 160<sup>th</sup> conference gathering.

When you consider the possible circumstances that could put a stop to such a historic run of gatherings, history may imagine a more catastrophic year. This year has been bizarre and would be hard to describe to someone who had not experienced it. The oddity of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it affected people with such a wide range of severity. For many of us, the impact was in seeking to prevent the disease from spreading, especially to the most vulnerable. The vast majority of those who contracted the virus had only mild symptoms. But this was offset by those whose bodies reacted violently to the virus, taking the lives of 3.8 million people worldwide, 600,000 people in the US, and 2,840 lives in the nine counties of our district. This number included two of our pastors and numerous congregants.

For Maribeth and me, we were already accustomed to working from home, so we did not have to adjust as much as most people. But we did have to learn to work 100% from home during the shut-down having all our district meetings on Zoom rather than in person. Instead of traveling to churches, we dropped in online to worship services around the district and sometimes several in one day. I am immensely proud of our pastors and churches who pivoted so quickly to a new way of doing worship. Another effect of the pandemic for us was the unexpected blessing of having our daughter, son-in-law, and our one-year-old grandson living with us for eight months as the four adults worked full-time jobs from home and we each took turns enjoying our time with young Calvin.

We have all learned ways to connect with people either virtually or occasionally outdoors. As the vaccines have become available and the number of cases has decreased, we have been able to gather again in person. But the impact of months of isolation is still heavy on us. Unfortunately, I perceive that many have become less gracious and more suspicious of those with different perspectives. This has been a year where political divisions have strained our communities and deep racial tensions have been uncovered. The various responses to the pandemic have also formed what sometimes seems like enemy camps that have divided churches. Pastors are reporting that for much of the year, people visiting their churches were more interested in the church's mask policy than any other factor.

When doing marriage counseling, I learned Gary Chapman's theory that a person's "love tank" affects the way each spouse responds to each other when under stress. This year, with limited fellowship and corporate worship opportunities, it is as though our collective "love tank" is running on fumes. So, in stressful situations, many have responded in anger. While we need to be considerate of those who are still vulnerable, I encourage you to do as much as possible to meet the spiritual and emotional needs that have been neglected for more than a year.

The strain on pastors is also showing. Several who have always demonstrated a strong constitution have confessed to me that they are weary and need to recharge. We will be proposing one change to make pastors' vacations more flexible, and the DBA has approved to provide a pastor from each church with a subscription to PastorWell, a ministry network that covers coaching and the cost of counseling for pastors and their families. In the coming weeks, pastors will be enrolled and learn about the available benefits.

## **Opportunities for Impact**

Amid the challenges, I have heard of amazing ways that churches are serving those in their community. Nila McIntyre, an assistant pastor at Hillside Wesleyan Church in Olean, went to work to help seniors in her church and community to navigate the red tape to get vaccines when they first became available. She helped more than 20 people get a vaccine.

One advantage of streaming our services online is we can reach people who would have previously refused to come in our buildings. A 25-year veteran police officer started watching Levant Wesleyan's worship services this year. When the church implemented a Deep Discipleship ministry in which three men, or three women meet weekly to discuss and follow through on the sermon, the officer decided to join one of these triads. He has become open to hearing the Spirit's voice in his life. Just recently, he asked for a study Bible and the triad is now guiding him through scripture.

There are dozens of other stories that could be told. May God continue to provide a heart to love those in our communities as we share the love of Christ.

## **Transitions**

In addition to the lock down, several of our churches faced the additional stress of a pastoral change. **Fellowship Wesleyan Church** benefitted from an interim year under the leadership of Dick Emery. In September, they called David Schutte, who was serving as a campus pastor at a United Methodist Church in Florida. While the candidating process was aided by Zoom calls, the in-person candidating was complicated by the required time of self-isolation. David was installed in November and is helping the church navigate the regathering process with an energy that is contagious.

In January, **Watermark Wesleyan Church** learned that Ken Nash was resigning. Ken has served the church well since 2016 and has also served as a coach to other pastors. The pandemic combined with the care for a special-needs child had strained the dynamics of his home to the point that he felt they needed to move back to Michigan to be near family. The board, anticipating the transition had surveyed the congregation and met with me and a transition consultant. It was decided that it would be wise to proceed with an internal candidate. They eventually selected Paul Gartley, who has served on staff at the church for 15 years and has proven an effective leader in a variety of positions at the church. He began as Lead Pastor in March.

Another loss to our district was when Justin Leininger resigned as pastor of **North Collins Wesleyan Church**, again to be nearer to family in Pennsylvania. Justin has also served North Collins since 2016. He has provided intuitive leadership and has seen the church grow, even through this past year. He is leaving the church in great shape for the transition. The board has recommended Jordan Kizewski to be the next pastor. He and his and his fiancé, Clair will be candidating at the church this weekend.

There are also two churches that have closed their ministry.

### East Aurora Wesleyan Church

In December of 2019, after several years of conversations, the DBA prayerfully made the decision to make a pastoral change at East Aurora Wesleyan Church. This resulted in the lay leadership stepping down and the decision was made to close the church. After having the property appraised, the DBA has decided to keep the building for a future work in East Aurora.

### McCrae Brook Wesleyan Church

In January, Pastors Dale and Pam Argot resigned from McCrae Brook Wesleyan Church to accept a pastoral position in Delaware. I had made some initial plans to provide a new pastor and partner with Hillside Wesleyan Church in Olean. However, in meeting with the board, I learned that a variety of

factors had depleted the congregation and their capacity to continue. As we talked and prayed, it became clear to all of us that we needed to close the church. The families that are still active in the church indicated that they would likely attend Hillside Wesleyan Church in Olean (15-20 minutes away). So, after the recommendation of the DBA Executive Committee, we decided to close the church and I led a final service at the church on May 23. Resources from the church are being distributed to nearby churches and funds from the sale of the property will go to help plant new churches in the district.

### **New President at Houghton College**

President Shirley Mullen has served as President of Houghton College since 2007. In the fall, she announced that she would retire at the end of this academic year. She has led the college strategically through a challenging season for Christian Higher Education. It has been an honor for me to serve under her leadership on Houghton's Board of Trustees. I have been amazed at her thoroughness and energy. She has led the college through this pandemic in a way that has been a model for other universities. In the past few months, she has further impressed me as she has worked diligently through the end of her term and has now passed the baton to Dr. Wayne Lewis.

I served on the Presidential Search Team as we prayerfully sought someone to assume the challenging task of replacing Dr. Mullen and leading the college in this next season. I passionately believe that Christian universities are the best way for our young adult children to continue being disciplined during some pivotal years. Houghton is not only facing the financial challenges of competing with less expensive state universities, but also a declining number of high school graduates in the northeast. Houghton, and other universities that hold to an orthodox Biblical ethic are fighting for their right to exist in a culture that is increasingly bold in enforcing compliance with its worldview. The search team reviewed a great pool of qualified candidates, and with the Board of Trustees have enthusiastically selected Dr. Wayne Lewis to be the next president. I look forward to introducing Dr. Lewis to you later at this conference. I believe God has uniquely equipped him and called him to Houghton. Just this week, he began his tenure as the sixth President of Houghton College. My request for each of you is that you add his name to your prayer list.

### **Moving Forward**

It is dangerous to try to predict where we will go from here, but I believe the turmoil of this year is ushering us into a new season for the church. If we are going to change, we should be intentional about making changes that align with our values. The emphasis must be on the fulfillment of the Great Commission. We must put into practice Christ's call that we make disciples of all nations. A church that prides itself in its holy practices but is doing nothing to reach out to the community of people around them with the gospel, enjoys hearing Christ's words, but is not putting them into practice.

Dr. Schmidt has a vision statement to keep us focused on two key activities. First, he states that,

***"We will celebrate every time a disciple makes a disciple."***

This emphasizes the importance of every disciple in our churches being equipped and realizing that the mandate to make disciples applies to them. For too long, we have acted as though paid professionals who are seminary trained are the only ones who can make disciples.

A key to implementing this is to intentionally include every disciple in this work. Dr. Schmidt has talked about this as a Kingdom Force--people from every walk of life equipped to carry on the work of the church. It includes lay people just as much as ordained clergy. It includes men and women in every aspect of ministry; every generation; and every ethnicity.

***“We will celebrate... every time a church multiplies itself.”***

While we seek to make our churches welcoming and missional, we recognize that starting new groups helps us reach every segment of our community. If we can catch the vision of a Kingdom Force discipling people who will in turn make disciples, the church’s impact will grow exponentially. Then our focus needs to be on communities without vibrant churches. You will likely find equipped people from other communities that are worshipping with you. Empower them to dream about a new church in their own community. The goal is that discipleship will be enhanced by starting new churches. Sending out disciples after we have invested so much into them may sting in the short term, but our goal is not to build larger churches. It is to make more disciples.

Watermark has implemented this principle by establishing campuses, first in Eden (South Creek). Then they partnered with a church in Springville to establish another campus. They now have identified a leader and a core group of people in their congregation who live in East Aurora. This fall, they plan to launch a new campus in the village of East Aurora under the leadership of Kevin & Becky Beers.

Several years ago, the Wesleyan Church of Orchard Park sent Elijah Shamenda to start a new church in the city of Buffalo. While Resurgence City still has the administrative support of the Orchard Park board and staff, Elijah and this church are discipling young people in the city who would likely have never been reached an established church. COVID has caused more caution among this demographic than most, so Elijah is working to bolster this ministry in a new location they acquired last fall.

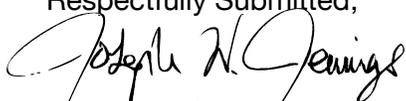
***We will do this in partnership.***

Not every church may be ready to plant a new church or a campus, but I believe every church should be partnering with others to accomplish the work of the kingdom beyond their congregation. One of the misconceptions of the church is that we are autonomous congregations who simply serve the same Master. The Bible describes the church as a body of interdependent parts. When we work in partnership, we can start new works such as the refugee community that is being reached by Yoshua Bashizi and Mission of Christ Wesleyan Church. Or we can support missional churches like Grace Community on Buffalo’s West Side or the Cattaraugus Wesleyan Indian Chapel on the Cattaraugus Reservation. When we work together, we are building the Kingdom of Christ.

As I mentioned earlier, this year we have struggled with division. I am calling on the church to transcend political labels and racial divisions among us and work toward biblical unity. Today is the celebration of the full implementation of the Emancipation Proclamation, a holiday that is known as Juneteenth. I imagine at our first conference in 1861, the emancipation of the African slaves would have been near the top of their agenda. It seems unimaginable that this principle would have been controversial, but many of the people in the newly formed Wesleyan Methodist Connection had worked diligently to abolish slavery. Many of the preachers had left or been expelled from their former churches because of their uncompromising position on the issue. Missionaries to southern states were even hanged because of this work.

There are some things that we should be willing to die for. But let us not allow small symbolic things to separate us from our brothers and sisters. Let us learn how to work together in unity under the banner of Christ and together make disciples of all nations.

Respectfully Submitted,

  
Joseph W. (Joey) Jennings

## **Official Acts of the District Superintendent: 2020-21**

June 22, 2020 - Signed documents pertaining to the petition to New York State to sell 5 acres of property in Lancaster belonging to The Vine Wesleyan Church.

June 27, 2020 - Worked with Eastern Hills to present a district online worship service.

July 2020 - Responded to multiple emails related to concerns of language a pastor used while preaching a sermon on racism.

August 2, 2020 - Officiated a Service of Validation of Ordination for Jon Horton, who is transferring in from the Free Methodist Church.

August 9, 2020 - Installed Bill Lawson as pastor of Brookside Wesleyan Church.

August 12, 2020 - Authorized (with support of Executive Committee) a short-term loan to The Vine Wesleyan Church to assist with their payment to WIF for land that is being sold in Lancaster. It is to be paid back within this church year from proceeds on the sale of the land.

August 13-14, 2020 - Attended Exponential Cohort Online

August 16 - Installed the new Local Board of Administration for Anchor Church, which has just been reclassified as an established church.

August 5, 2020 - Authorized (with support of Executive Committee) the replacement of the Combination Boiler for the District Parsonage.

August 5, 2020 - Reviewed and supported a new lease by Resurgence City Church to lease space at 1048 Niagara Street in Buffalo.

October 11, 2020 - Attended celebration of Eastern Hills Wesleyan Church's 40th anniversary.

November 8, 2021 - Installed David Schutte as pastor of Fellowship Wesleyan Church.

December 11, 2020 - Accepted bid for RAM Forest Products to harvest timber on district land in Allegany County.

December 22, 2020 - Signed a Memorandum of Understanding for Watermark to use the church building in East Aurora for initial weekly meetings of a campus core group for January - May, 2021.

February 11, 2021 - Signed documents to dissolve Springville Crossing and transfer the two pieces of their property to Watermark Wesleyan Church & WNY District.

February 25-26 - Attended District Superintendents meeting in St. Louis with General Superintendent Wayne Schmidt.

March 5, 2021 - Signed documents for The Vine Wesleyan Church to sell house and land in Lancaster. Proceeds from the sale will be applied to the church's loan with WIF.

March 7, 2021 - Installed Paul Gartley as pastor of Watermark Wesleyan Church.

March 13, 2021 - Attended the funeral service for Rev. Art Lazewski.

March 26, 2021 - Signed/Supported Statement from North American District Superintendents affirming that our practice continues to be in alignment with the traditional teachings of The Wesleyan Church on multiple social issues.

April 16, 2021 - Petitioned Wesleyan Investment Foundation to reconsider the calculation of profit on the sale of land on behalf of The Vine Wesleyan Church.

May 14, 2021, Appealed the denial of life Insurance for a pastor who died from COVID. Claim was reconsidered and approved on May 28, 2021.

May 19, 2021 - Signed a Memorandum of Understanding for Watermark to use the church building in East Aurora (May 2021 - June 2022) to establish a satellite campus. Also signed an MOU to support the campus with Church Planning Grants in exchange for a commitment that Watermark will give a percentage of offerings from the campus to Church Planting through the district.

May 23, 2021 - Conducted final worship service at McCrae Brook Wesleyan Church.

May 27, 2021 - Signed a lease agreement for the parsonage at 27 Maple Road in East Aurora.

#### Summary of Other Duties

- 54 Individual meetings with pastors
- 22 Individual meetings with District Leaders
- 6 Individual Meetings with Ministerial Students
- 12 Monthly Leadership Development Meetings with pastors
- 6 Group Zoom calls with pastors
- 24 times preaching or attending worship services at district churches
- 19 Meetings with Local Boards of Administration
- 24 Meetings with Pastoral Search Teams/Candidates
  - Fellowship (9), Watermark (5), North Collins (10)
- 11 Meetings related to the East Aurora Church (Transition/Vision Team)
- 6 Meetings with District Board of Administration (2 in person)
- 4 Meetings with Church Development Board
- 3 Meetings with District Board of Ministerial Development
- 5 Meetings pertaining to new credentialing process for the denomination
- 24 Meetings with other Superintendents & General Superintendent
- 22 Meetings with the Houghton College Presidential Search Team
- 17 Meetings with Houghton College Board of Trustees/Executive Committee
- 20 Days of Vacation
- 4,705 Miles Driven on District Car (50,706 as of May 31, 2021)
-