

## **Report of the District Superintendent**

June 18, 2022

Dr. Schmidt, lay leaders and the pastors of the Western New York District, it is good to welcome you back together for this annual District Conference. I truly appreciate you taking the time to travel and gather for this session. This concept of churches conferencing together goes back to the church in the book of Acts. This body of churches has been holding this conference since 1861. It is a time to celebrate together, to pray together, to make decisions together - as a district of 34 congregations and part of the larger body of The Wesleyan Church. It is my hope that you will be able to return to your churches encouraged, challenged and feeling a part of a broader movement of the Holy Spirit.

Maribeth and I continue to enjoy serving you in this unique team ministry as District Superintendent and District Administrator as we complete our twelfth year in this capacity. Our family continues to grow as our oldest son, Jesse is now engaged and plans to be married in the Buffalo area this coming December. Our grandson, Calvin is now two and a half and will become a big brother, hopefully within the next few days. We will be traveling to North Carolina next week to visit our daughter Hannah and her husband Ben in anticipation of our next grandchild. Our son Ben and his wife, Annica have been married for three years now and they continue to live in Indianapolis.

### **A Challenging Year**

This has been a challenging year, not just for our churches but for our region and indeed the world. We are grieving the racially motivated shooting at Tops in Buffalo on May 14. The shooter was an 18-year-old white male who had been radicalized with racist ideas. He drove several hours to Buffalo for the purpose of killing and terrorizing as many black people as he could. Ten precious lives were lost, including Aaron Salter, the cousin of pastor Cassandra Salter-Smith. We stand today in unity with the families of those who were lost. We condemn this wickedness and the ideology that motivated it. We commit to working toward a more just society.

Also, just when we thought the pandemic was fading, new and more contagious strains emerged. The new variants are generally less harmful, but continue to infect our people. Just this week, I excused a pastor from this conference who tested positive for COVID for the first time.

In February, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought a humanitarian catastrophe both for the people of Ukraine as well as those who are continuing to be impacted by the shortage of grain caused by the conflict.

On a much lighter note, the Bills raised our city's hopes to a new level and came close to hosting the AFC championship game, leaving us to hope for another year and to contemplate how much can change in 13 seconds.

### **Transforming Culture**

If you know me, you know that my prayer and heart's desire is to see an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in a genuine movement of God that transforms our culture. I have come to realize that this is not accomplished by our own innovation or initiative, but through our being responsive to the Holy Spirit whenever and however He directs us to move. In the next few minutes, I would like to share how God is teaching and directing me in relation to our culture.

The day following the Buffalo shooting, I attended a service of lament and prayer. Many were grieving and indeed were worshipping. Politicians were making promises. One woman particularly spoke truth to me when she looked at a group of assembled religious leaders and said, "Tell your churches that ideas matter." I thought of the deranged young man and asked myself a couple of questions. I felt confident that these ideas were not being taught in our churches, but I wondered if it would be possible for a child to be raised in one of our churches and still fall prey to such wicked hatred. I wondered if we were adequately confronting the ungodly ideas that our young people are hearing and the lies they are believing.

In reading several black authors over the past two years, I have been challenged by the proposition that if I am not actively fighting against racism, then I am in some way allowing it to continue. I, like most people, do not think of myself as racist, but I continue to be confronted with attitudes that have been shaped by a racist society. One of these is the belief that as long as I am not personally harming people based on race, I could be fulfilling Christ's call to love. I am learning that when being confronted with injustice in any form, God wants us to do what is within our ability to fight for justice.

I am also learning that addressing these or other cultural issues is not a distraction from the gospel mission, but the development of a stronger and healthier gospel message. The issue of racism is not the only issue we need to confront. There are many cultural issues which often get entangled with each other.

Last fall, I was walking my grandson through his neighborhood near Chapel Hill, North Carolina, I noticed colorful yard signs at nearly every home. Unlike my neighborhood, where the yard signs promoted politicians or our favorite athletes (It took me a while to realize that someone named Allen Diggs was not running for congress). These yard signs in Chapel Hill were declaring core values. It was declaring a type of creed - what Rebecca McLaughlin calls a secular creed:

*"In this home we believe ...*

*Black Lives Matter*

*Love is Love*

*No One is Illegal*

*Women's Rights are Human Rights..."*

We tend to associate these causes with progressive politics. If you are conservative, it would be easy to dismiss them all together. But these are the topics on which we need to be discipling our people with God's truth. Some are supported by scripture and need to be reinforced from a Christian worldview. Others are not, and need to be refuted and corrected. But if we do not lovingly have the conversation, the world will continue to base their philosophy on lies and confusion.

In Acts 17, Paul engaged the Athenians, *"People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you."* (Acts 17:22-23) Paul went on to tell them about Jesus.

We can use these ideas as opportunities to explore the basis for these beliefs. For example, we may not agree with the full agenda of the Black Lives Matter organization, but we need to teach our people with the understanding that black people's lives are often not valued equally. We know as Christians that all human beings are inherently valuable as the image bearers of God, but it is not

enough to just believe that. We need to actively contradict the sinful culture of racism which denies the image of God in another person God created.

While we empower women as ones who reflect the image of God, I also believe that abortion is a sin because it denies the inherent value of an unborn baby. This is a different type of injustice that we need to confront. Holding firmly to God's truth on many of these issues may not be popular and it would be more comfortable to remain quiet. God has not called us to comfort, but to holiness. Our church forefathers were persecuted for applying the teachings of holiness to the sinful practice of slavery. Wesleyan pastors were shot at and even hanged because they spoke up on these issues. Are you willing to step out of your comfort to address unpopular topics?

Last week the CompassCare Pregnancy Center in Buffalo was destroyed by a firebomb. CompassCare is a Christian ministry that provides free health care to pregnant women so they do not feel compelled to get an abortion. They offer women support and guidance to make a different choice other than abortion. It will be unpopular to stand up for this cause, especially if the Supreme Court denies the constitutional right to have an abortion in the coming weeks.

I believe that God is love, but also that not every love is the same. The Bible is clear that we are to love our neighbors, love one another within the church, and even love our enemies. But sexual love is designed to be within the context of a lifelong covenant between a man and a woman. This issue of sexual morality is crucial because this may be where orthodox Biblical beliefs clash most with our culture's emerging sense of justice. The church is not only being dismissed, we are considered unjust and dangerous. This may be in part due to sinful attitudes and biases that have too often treated other's sins and temptations as worse than the ones we struggle with. We must hold to this truth with humility, but without contradicting God's Word.

I believe we are called to think deeply about each of these issues and actively work, with the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, to promote love, justice, and peace within our communities. Preaching the Gospel and making Disciples must include exposing the lies being whispered to our culture and confronting them with the truth of God. If we address these issues with the Spirit's anointing, God can use us to build His Kingdom as His will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

For further study, I am recommending a book by Rebecca McLaughlin entitled ***The Secular Creed***. In this short book, she addresses these concepts from a Biblical perspective and provides clarity that disentangles ideas that are bringing confusion to our society. Her thesis is that without the basis of the Biblical world-view, these causes have no rational foundation and human life is reduced to have no inherent value. I have at least one copy available for every church and will provide additional copies or e-books if you request them. These will be on a table as you exit at the end of this conference. I encourage you to read this book and find ways to dialogue within your churches about these extremely relevant issues and how we can spread the light and salt of the Gospel in all our areas of influence.

### **New Works & Transitions**

We celebrate this year's new work in East Aurora. On September 12, Revive Wesleyan launched their **East Aurora Campus** with 327 in attendance. Kevin & Becky Beers serve as co-pastors of this campus and have worked for over a year to build the core group for this new congregation. They have been averaging 190 for the year and are active in engaging with the village of East Aurora. This

is the second time Revive has launched a new congregation in a different community (South Creek in Eden). They also adopted a congregation in Springville and have congregations meeting in two unique worship spaces at their facility in Hamburg.

**Pastoral Transitions:** This year has seen an unusually high number of pastoral transitions. In August, I installed Jordan Kizewski as the pastor of **North Collins Wesleyan Church**. In August, **Rob Grimes** resigned as pastor of **Bellville Wesleyan Church**. In September, **Bill Lawson** resigned as pastor of **Brookside Wesleyan Church (Wellsville)**. **Dennis Yingling**, with his wife, Loretta are now serving as Transitional Interims at Brookside. In November, **Elijah Shamenda** resigned as pastor of **Resurgence City**. **Tim DePorter** is now serving as interim pastor at Resurgence City. **Michael Leamon** has announced his intention to retire next month. The church is currently in a search process. **Dan Jones** has also announced his resignation from **Orchard Park Wesleyan Church** in July. This church is also deep into their search process.

Bellville Wesleyan has had a rich history of serving its community since 1869. The community around Bellville, a couple of miles south of Rushford, has largely moved away from the church. When the pastor resigned, there were not enough people to continue to sustain the church. At the last meeting of the DBA, it was decided to close this church. I do want to thank the Fillmore Wesleyan Church and particularly Paul Cronk and Kim Pecora for working to support the church for the past few years.

There have also been several transitions in the district leadership team this year:

After serving as Assistant District Superintendent for six years, **Steve Dunmire** has resigned to accept a position as lead pastor of Victory Highway in the Penn York District. I am thankful for the many ways he has helped me and the district churches. He has provided me valuable support and advice and worked hard to lead the newly formed Board of Church Development and Sustainability. He has also given valuable service to North Collins Wesleyan Church, Houghton College, and Revive Wesleyan.

Also, **Kim Pecora** will be stepping down as District Treasurer. She served as Assistant Treasurer under Nadine Houghton and as Treasurer for the past six years. Kim has a heart to help churches and pastors and has been a friend and valuable part of this team. Thank you to both Kim and Steve for your service to the Lord in the WNY District.

On my recommendation, the District Board has appointed **Dan Jones** to serve as Assistant District Superintendent. Dan has chaired the District Board of Ministerial Development for two years and has been the Lead Pastor at Orchard Park Wesleyan Church for the past six years (He is resigning this position in July). He will continue to lead the District Board of Ministerial Development as well as take primary responsibility for the diverse property matters that the district deals with. I look forward to working together and ask you to welcome him and pray for him as he joins the district leadership team.

I have also asked **Todd Glendenning** to chair the Board of Church Development, overseeing the churches in the category of Developing Church. It is good to have Todd back in leadership of this board.

## Ministry Momentum

A look at our Statistical Summary (p. 37 in your packets) shows the continuing impact of the pandemic on our churches. For the year, our in-person attendance has increased by 25%, we are still  $\frac{2}{3}$  of where we were in 2020. I have observed that the later in the year, to closer

we approached pre-pandemic levels. Our salvation totals have similarly increased, but are at 65% of where we were in 2020. Our Baptisms this year are at 93% of the pre-pandemic numbers.

The financial status of our churches has continued to rise with a steady increase in offerings and total revenue. What rise we experienced in salaries was largely offset by reductions in other benefits. Our total giving to missions and outside ministries was down 5.7% even though our total expenditures was up 4%.

### ***We will celebrate every time a disciple makes a disciple, ...***

Our mission continues to be making disciples. I believe in introducing people to the transforming work of Christ is the church's primary calling. Much of the expectation of a pastor is to equip those who have followed Christ for years. This is not simply to get them to volunteer in the church, but to mobilize them to view their entire lives as Kingdom work. Our ministry is to help every believer accept the mission to make disciples in their homes, in their workplaces, in their neighborhoods. If we are going to transform our society, the team must include lay people just as much as ordained clergy. I believe it will use the gifts of men and women in every aspect of ministry. We need it to include disciples from every generation; and every ethnicity.

### ***We will celebrate... every time a church multiplies itself, ...***

While we continue to strengthen our existing churches, I am convinced that new and additional churches need to be started to reach populations that our existing churches will likely never reach. I challenge each church to either make plans to launch a church plant or support new churches. There will be sacrifice involved, but the return will be greater.

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

We are more effective in building the Kingdom of Christ when we work together. Our prayer emphasis this year involves every church partnering with another district church to pray for each other. From this base of prayer I am hopeful that God will direct us to love and support each other in ways that will mutually build up each congregation.

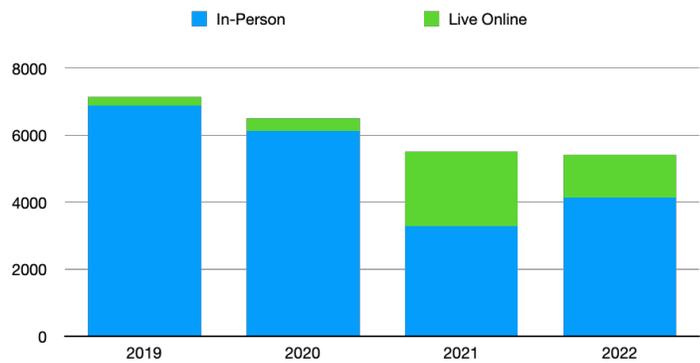
### ***We will seek Revival!***

Finally, I challenge you to pray for revival. As we seek him to do what only He can do. He will anoint all that He calls us to do.

Respectfully Submitted,



Joseph W. (Joey) Jennings  
District Superintendent



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

June 19, 2021 - Presided over 2021 District Conference to the WNY District.

July 6, 2021 - Enrolled 36 Lead Pastor in the PastorWell/Full Strength Network Membership

August 7, 2021 - Played in District Golf Tournament at Concord Crest Country Club

August 15, 2021 - Installed Jordan Kizewski as pastor of North Collins Wesleyan Church

August 25, 2021 - Signed a formal response to a lawsuit against Watermark Wesleyan and the district related to a slip and fall accident on the church property.

September - Conducted a survey of Pastors on district ministries.

September 14, 2021, Signed contract with New Church Specialties to provide a transitional interim pastor for Brookside Wesleyan Church beginning November 1, 2021.

September 18, 2021, I met with the leadership team of Eastern Hills Chinese Church to discuss partnership options.

September 22-24, 2021 - Maribeth and I attended the New Room Conference in Nashville, TN.

October 1, 2021 - I participated in the Inauguration of Wayne D. Lewis Jr. as the sixth president of Houghton College.

October 8, 2021 - I signed papers to finalize the sale of McCrae Brook Wesleyan Church and parsonage.

November 21, 2021 - I signed a contract for Eastern Hills Wesleyan Church to sell 8 acres of land.

November 16-17, 2021 - I participated in meetings with District Superintendents and the General Board to discuss upcoming memorials to the General Conference.

January 28, 2022 - I signed closing papers to sell Bellville Parsonage for \$60,000.

January 28-30 - I helped to lead the Pastors and Spouses Retreat in Niagara Falls, NY.

February 10, 2022 - Signed MOU with Revive Wesleyan Church to transfer responsibility of the church property in East Aurora to Revive. The church will reimburse the district for expenses on the property and debt that the district assumed after we closed East Aurora Wesleyan Church.

February 18, 2022 - Signed Retainer Agreement for David White to represent the WNY District & ZionQuest Fellowship in the lawsuit of Thomas F. Dick v. Greater Niagara Frontier Council, Inc. Boy Scouts of America, et al. This case precedes any insurance we have been able to find, so the district is responsible for legal fees and any judgment that may be ruled against us.

March 6-7, 2022 - I attended the District Superintendent Institute in Orlando, FL

March 8-10, 2022 - I attended the Exponential Conference in Orlando FL.

May 22-25, 2022 - I served as a Delegate to the 14th General Conference of The Wesleyan Church in St. Louis.

## **Summary of Other Duties**

- 12 Meetings with Pastoral Search Teams/Candidates
  - Orchard Park, Christ Chapel,
- 6 Meetings with District Board of Administration/Executive Committee
- 3 Meetings with Church Development Board
- 3 Meetings with District Board of Ministerial Development
- 12 Meetings with other Superintendents & General Superintendent
- 5 Meetings with Houghton College Board of Trustees/Executive Committee
- 28 Days of Vacation
- 10,362 Miles Driven on District Car (61.068 as of June 6, 2022 (traded-in))