

Report of the District Superintendent

June 17, 2023

Thank you for the continued opportunity to serve the churches of this district as your superintendent. This year, I conclude my 13th year in this position and am enjoying the diverse challenges of the work. Partnering with you to advance Christ's church in Western New York is an honor. By far, the best part of this job is building relationships with pastors, lay leaders, ministerial students, and new believers throughout the thirty-six congregations of our district. I appreciate you and love serving on this team as we work together to advance the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Paul wrapped up his letter to the Thessalonians with this prayer,

**"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.
May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it." - 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24**

The work of God in the church is to thoroughly sanctify us or make us holy. Other ways of describing this are to be made whole, made new, or restored to full health. This year, I have emphasized the importance of leading our churches toward health. In our monthly LDJ meetings, we studied the book, *A Church Called Tov, Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing*. "Tov" is the Hebrew word used for goodness and points us to a biblical understanding of healthy culture. We aim to develop a Christlike culture that encourages grace, justice, and service. As we cultivate this healthy culture, we will have a more significant long-term impact for the Kingdom. Health will lead to producing fruit. Healthy fruit will reproduce. God calls every believer to make disciples who will, in turn, make disciples.

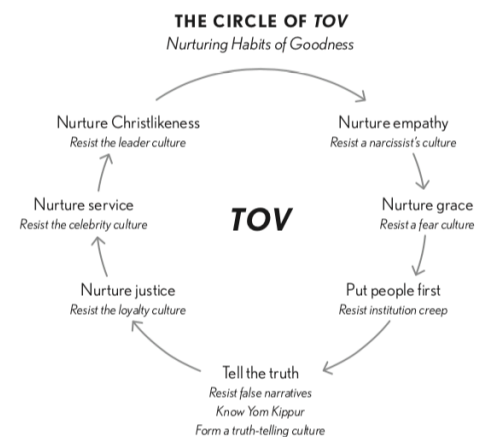
As we look at the fruit of this past year, we have reported 214 new believers and 150 individuals who have been baptized. While both numbers are below our levels before the pandemic, we celebrate these new believers and pray for more.

A New Cultural Landscape

In a year when I had looked forward to sharing that the pandemic was finally behind us, I caught the virus last fall while attending the New Room Conference in Tennessee. Thankfully, my symptoms were not long-lasting. I reluctantly shared it with Maribeth as we drove home, but we recovered fully. As the crisis recedes and we return to normalcy, I see several lingering effects on our churches. Here are a few notable dynamics:

- **In-person worship attendance has been partially restored** (7.6% increase this year, but still down 35% from 2019);
- **Most churches are continuing to stream their services online** and find this to be a valuable way to connect with some who are unable to attend (17.5% of live attendance is now online);
- **Most of our churches have experienced a decline in giving**, even those which saw an increase through the pandemic (71% of churches experienced a decline in Tithes & Offerings, and Total Revenue is down 14.5%). With expenses generally increasing, many churches are finding that the only place to make cuts is in salary. Currently, about 1/3 of our lead pastors are bi-vocational or have additional income other than from the church.

A few other observations are difficult to quantify but are common as I meet with boards and pastors.



- **There seems to be a lower level of trust in all institutions, including churches.**

There are many reasons for this: multiple scandals, political alliances, the arrogance of some prominent leaders, and arguments about unimportant issues. This impacts the church's influence on our communities. This may be a factor in the decline in revenue.

- **We are quick to label others as enemies based on whether they agree or disagree with us on various issues.**

We see this in almost every sphere of our society. It is impacting our churches. This has resulted in conflict between members and could be part of the reason we are producing significantly less fruit.

- **We are ministering in a climate of rapidly changing morality.**

Secular culture's values of justice and inclusion are colliding with the church's values of personal holiness and the authority of scripture. While it is expected that the church will accommodate the new morals, we do not believe we have the right to change our sense of morality. God created us and knows best how we should live. Through the Bible and the Spirit, we follow His teachings and example, regardless of how countercultural this may be. Because of this, many people we hope to reach now consider Christ's followers dangerous and bigoted because we do not condone and affirm this new understanding of morality.

Just before Easter, a teenage girl in one of our churches became a follower of Jesus, praying with her pastor and a woman in the church. After making this decision, one of her first questions was, "Does this mean I have to leave my LGBT community?" Coming from a difficult family situation, she had identified with one of the initials and had been welcomed into a community that celebrated her differentness. I fully believe that Jesus is the answer to her deepest needs, but as she goes into her community, she will speak to hurting people who feel excluded from the church. The temptation might be to soften our stance to seem less harsh. The loving response is to advocate for the health and holiness that God wants to produce in each of us.

- **Race continues to have a significant impact on people's daily life.**

This year, I have met monthly with a handful of pastors and district leaders to have informal discussions on ways that racism is still affecting our churches. The meetings were robust and fascinating. As I dialogue with people of color, I realize the numerous ways in which the enduring sin of racism still impacts their lives. I would recommend that you provide opportunities for these discussions in your church. The impact of race will vary widely from rural, suburban, or urban churches. A few of our pastors are intentionally creating partnerships with district churches with diverse ethnic experiences. Not having these discussions would be to assume incorrectly that race is no longer a problem.

Our history as Wesleyans instructs us on the importance of race as we emerged as a denomination out of solid opposition to slavery. John Wesley preached boldly against slavery. One of his last writings was to William Wilberforce, encouraging him in his efforts to outlaw slavery in England. The first Methodist Discipline in America strongly condemned slavery and prohibited any member from owning another human being. However, this was quickly criticized, and a practical call for a more gradual elimination of slavery caused the Methodist leaders to soften the outright prohibition. One Methodist superintendent named Orange Scott became convinced that the practice was wicked and needed to be ended immediately. He purchased subscriptions to William Lloyd Garrison's newsletter, *The Liberator*, for every pastor in his district. He spoke forcefully against slavery at the 1836 General Conference but was largely ridiculed. Instead, the conference passed a resolution condemning the abolitionists. After the meeting, the bishop gave Scott an ultimatum - stop preaching against slavery or lose his position as superintendent. He refused and was immediately sent to one of the smallest churches in the conference.

Scott and a few other Methodist pastors, including Fillmore Wesleyan's Luther Lee, decided to leave the Methodist Episcopal Church and start the Wesleyan Methodist Connection. They believed it would be a sin to remain in a church that betrayed its antislavery heritage. The Wesleyan Methodists worked for twenty years to change the nation's conscience. On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that everyone in Confederate territory would immediately be free. But as long as parts were under Confederate control, this proclamation could not be enforced. It was not until June 19, 1865, that Union troops arrived in Galveston Bay, Texas. The army announced that the more than 250,000 enslaved black people in the state were free by executive decree. This day came to be known as "Juneteenth" by the newly freed people in Texas. This is a relatively new holiday for most of us, but I imagine early Wesleyans here in Western New York were part of this original celebration.

- **Our culture is eager for revival.**

Despite society's general suspicion of the church, there has been a fascination with the February revival at Asbury University in Kentucky. Reports of the revival went viral on social media. On February 15, #asburyrevival had over 24 million views on TikTok, which increased to 63 million by February 18. Students from 22 schools visited, alongside groups from Singapore and Africa. The university had to reserve places in the auditorium for students 25 and younger, as approximately 15,000 people/per day were waiting in lines to experience the outpouring. The fascination was not to any celebrity of human orchestrated production but to an authentic experience of the presence of God.

My prayer for our churches is for God to send an extraordinary sense of His presence so that individuals would experience deep peace and victory over their struggle with sin. I pray that broken relationships will be restored and that barriers that have paralyzed churches will be broken. I also pray that this work of the Spirit will spread into your community, drawing people to seek Christ to satisfy that which they most hunger for. I pray for this outpouring to be an example that would spread beyond your community to those throughout Western New York, our nation, and beyond.

District Highlights

Refresh - In July, the district family gathered at Houghton for several days of fellowship, worship, games, and challenging discussions. Zach Coffin was our speaker for our evening sessions. I am grateful to Matthew and Katie Rose for assuming leadership of this valuable ministry for us.

This summer, we will gather again from **July 30 - August 4** with Mark Wilson as our guest speaker.

Ordination - In October, the district gathered to affirm the gifts and graces for ministry and to ordain four pastors: Trevor Kaufman, Joshua Mason, Joshua Rutherford, and Andrew Sherman.

We also recognized various ministers for significant years of service, including recognizing Paul Shea for 50 years of service to The Wesleyan Church. We will be presenting Paul with his 50-year medallion at the end of this conference. This year's ordination service is scheduled for **Sunday, October 22, at 6:00 pm**.

The Gathering - In January, we had approximately 70 people attend The Gathering Wesleyan Clergy Conference in Orlando. In addition to great messages and worship, Maribeth and I enjoyed taking many of our pastors out for a meal. This winter, we plan to hold our Pastors/Spouses Retreat. Please let me know if you would like to be on the planning team for this event.

Pastoral Transitions

I believe a vital responsibility of a superintendent is to help churches through the transition of pastoral leadership. Last summer, two churches completed the process:

- In June, Orchard Park Wesleyan called **Rob Engler** to be their next pastor.
- In August, Christ Chapel Wesleyan Church called **Anson Miller**.

Brookside Wesleyan entered into an intentional interim season and was blessed by the ministry of Dennis and Loretta Yingling through December and Eric Norris for the remainder of the year. These interims prepared the church well and have proven to be just what the church needed. This past Sunday, they had 100 people in attendance and celebrated two baptisms. In May, the church called **Monty Ader** to be their next pastor. He will begin his ministry in July.

Fillmore Wesleyan Church has also entered an intentional interim season, with Toni James serving since September. They have recently begun their pastoral search. The intentional interim model and TIPS (Transitional Interim Pastoral Services) have proven effective for several churches (also The Vine & Fellowship). This ministry honestly assesses where the church is and what it needs to begin working on during the interim season, then provides an experienced pastor to guide the process of addressing the most critical needs.

Implementing Changes in Church Polity

In May 2022, just before our last District Conference, The Wesleyan Church held its 14th General Conference. This year, we have begun implementing some changes to church polity. Here are some of the more significant changes:

Multiplication Fund & Church Assessments - A strategic change was approved to increase the funding of new churches by adding 1% of income and reducing the percentage allotted to districts, the general church, and educational institutions. This change was approved to simplify the base from which assessments are calculated. The assessment is now 10% of the Tithes and Offerings rather than a more complicated formula. The result will be more money remaining in the local churches and the district designating more money for church planting.

Pastoral Votes - Before, a church could vote on three types of pastoral calls - initial two-year, four-year, and extended. The new policy will make every congregational vote, in essence, an extended call. I will continue to review the call of the pastor with the board as I have before. The board can send the decision to the congregation or vote to continue the pastor's service. This will likely result in fewer congregational votes, but churches that want to continue this practice may still elect to have them.

Local Church Trustees - In the former policy, there was a Local Board of Administration and a Board of Trustees. The trustees occasionally were called upon for legal matters but were primarily tasked with maintaining the property. With the new policy, the Local Board of Administration serves as the church's Board of Trustees for legal purposes. If a church chooses, they may designate certain members of the LBA to serve as Trustees as a subcommittee. If the LBA members are not directly responsible for the property, a church may and should appoint another committee to maintain the property.

Permanent Licensed Minister - In the former policy, a pastor or assistant pastor preparing for ordination could be a licensed minister for up to seven years but was expected to complete the ordination process in that time frame. The new policy establishes a new category, primarily for an assistant pastor to remain a licensed minister indefinitely.

The Gift of Tongues - The conference recommended a less restrictive, revised statement on the spiritual gift of tongues. While the District Conferences overwhelmingly approved the new statement last summer, we await the General Conferences of the Philippines and the Caribbean to approve the changes.

Houghton University Board

I was asked to chair the Houghton University Board of Trustees in October. I have served on the board since 2011. This is in high alignment with my role as superintendent. From the start, part of my role was to help build a stronger connection between Houghton and district churches. The role of chair involves leading the board for our three meetings, additional committee meetings, regular calls with President Lewis, and representing the board for some public events.

Dr. Wayne Lewis has done an excellent job of clearly articulating the value of a Christ-centered, academically strenuous education. We live in a time when students can receive a degree for free from various government-funded schools. Most of the public or private options are not only secular but are often hostile toward Christian thought. It is becoming increasingly important for the next generation of church leaders, both lay and clergy, to have a Christ-centered university education. We are blessed to have Houghton University within our district. There are five excellent Wesleyan universities in our network to offer this option to our youth.

Final Thoughts

Maribeth and I were blessed with the arrival of our second grandson, **Leland James Murphy**, last June (born to our daughter Hannah and Ben Murphy). Calvin and Leland continue to be rays of joy through daily snaps, video calls, and occasional visits to or from North Carolina. Our family also welcomed a new daughter as our son Jesse married Brenna Dimmig on December 10. Jesse and Brenna have recently purchased a house in Hamburg, and we enjoy having them nearby. Ben and his wife, Anni, live in Indianapolis, where Ben works as a graphic designer. Last summer, **Maribeth** graduated with her master's degree in Worship Studies from the Webber Institute of Worship Studies. In addition to serving as the District Administrator, she enjoys serving in the worship ministry at Revive's Bayview Campus and teaches an online worship course for Kingswood University.

Finally, I want to thank several who have helped me tremendously this past year.

Dan Jones is doing a great job as Assistant District Superintendent taking on various responsibilities, including chairing the District Board of Ministerial Development and taking a hands-on role in several property matters. I greatly appreciate his reliable support and hard work.

We have four DBA members who are completing their service this year. Thank you to Barb Hauck (who has served since 2021), Ruth Strand (2016), Jun Zhuang (2014), and Robin George. They have all served well, and they will be missed.

But allow me to express deep appreciation to a friend who has served this district for the past 35 years!

Robin George was first elected district secretary in 1988. He serves on the DBA, the Executive Committee, and the DBMD in this role. He has served for the complete terms of Vaughn Drummonds, Neil Koppen, and myself. He has recorded minutes for each district conference and all but one DBA Meeting in this span. This is more than 200 meetings. He is known for taking detailed minutes, providing a rich history of district deliberations that undoubtedly contain over 1,000 pages. He is always cheerful and loves to bring humor to each meeting. Robin would give me an intentionally embarrassing presentation at our DBA dinner every Christmas. With it, he would write a unique poem for the occasion. Robin, on behalf of the Western New York District. Thank you for your extraordinary service. At the end of the conference, I have prepared my own personalized poem and look forward to roasting you with it.

With love and fervent prayers,

Joseph W. Jennings

Official Acts of the District Superintendent

Chaired five meetings of the District Board of Administration;
Led 8 Leadership Development Gatherings for District Pastors; two evening sessions for bi-vocational pastors.
Met with various Local Boards of Administration - 23 meetings;
18 Meetings with Pastoral Search Teams - Orchard Park, Christ Chapel, Brookside, Fillmore;
Preached for 15 of our churches/campuses, Visited an additional 11 churches;
80 Individual meetings with WNY Pastors; 15 individual meetings with District Leaders;
Meetings with other superintendents/Wesleyan leaders - 14 meetings;
Participated in 4 sessions of the DBMD to interview 35 ministerial students/licensed ministers;
Chaired two meetings of the Houghton University Board of Trustees, monthly meetings of the Executive Committee;
Vacation days: 29 days;
Miles Traveled with District Car: 8,403;
June 6, 2022, Purchased for the district a 2022 Subaru CrossTrek (Traded in 2017 Ford Fusion);
June 18, 2022 - Signed Promissory Note for Hillside Wesleyan Church for a five-year loan;
July 17-22, 2022 - Participated in Refresh Family Camp;
July 29, 2022 - Signed Change in Terms of Loan for Eastern Hills Wesleyan Church;
August 11, 2022 - Attended funeral service for Rev. Carol Schweigart in Wellsville;
August 21, 2022 - Led Christ Chapel Wesleyan Church LCC to call Anson Miller;
August 28, 2022 - Installed Anson Miller as pastor of Christ Chapel Wesleyan Church;
September 21, 2022 - Attended New Room Conference in Murfreesboro, Tennessee;
October 2, 2023 - Installed Rob Engler as Pastor of Orchard Park Wesleyan Church;
October 9, 2022 - Participated in Mortgage burning ceremony at Higgins Wesleyan Church;
October 23, 2022 - Participated in the celebration of the purchase of the Church Building at Anchor;
October 23, 2022 - Led Service of Ordination and Recognition in Hamburg, NY;
November 28, 2022 - Preached for Houghton University Chapel;
January 3-6, 2023 - Attended The Gathering Wesleyan Clergy Conference in Orlando, Florida;
January 6-7, 2023 - Attended Wesleyan Board of Trustees Conference in Orlando, Florida;
March 6, 2023 - Attended Wesleyan DS Institute in Orlando, Florida;
March 7-9, 2023 - Attended Exponential Conference in Orlando, Florida;
April 19, 2023 - Chaired meeting of the District Nominating Committee;
April 23, 2023 - Attended DS Roundtable in Nashville, Tennessee;
April 29, 2023 - Coordinated Service of Prayer for Healing at Eastern Hills;
May 3, 2023 - Chaired meeting of the District Action Committee;
May 13, 2023 - Chaired meeting of the District Executive Committee/Budget Committee;

Official Acts Related to Property

Signed necessary papers for Anchor Church to purchase the building at 310 Starin Avenue, Buffalo NY
Signed documents required to sell the Bellville Church building and 5 acres of land in Caneadea, NY
Signed necessary documents to sell land on Centerville Road, Houghton, NY
0.18 acres of vacant land (11/08/22); 56 acres of vacant land (5/31/23) in process
Signed necessary papers for East Leon Wesleyan Church to sell their Parsonage
Signed necessary papers for Revive Wesleyan to sell 9.99 acres of vacant land in Springville, NY
Signed necessary papers for Revive Wesleyan to sell a house on Bayview Road, Hamburg, NY