

Report of the District Superintendent

June 13, 2026

Dr. Dunn, pastors, and delegates of the 2026 annual District Conference of the Western New York District, thank you for giving up part of a beautiful Saturday to advance the work of Christ's church. I pray that we can soak in all that God is doing within the district in the next few hours.

Let me begin by welcoming Jim Dunn and his wife, Wendy, to Western New York. This is my 16th year as superintendent, and although I am a native of the Carolinas, I have grown to love the people of this district deeply. As this is your first time at our conference and the first for many of our delegates, I would like to begin my report with a brief overview of the Western New York District.

We are 120 pastors, educators, chaplains, and missionaries, plus approximately 3,000 lay members. We are collectively discipling more than 4,500 people. Almost 7,000 attend one of our services on any given Sunday. On high Sundays, such as Easter or Christmas, attendance surges to more than 8,200. We are 37 congregations, ranging in size from 15 to over 1,000. Our largest church is Revive Wesleyan, which has five campuses with attendance ranging from 124 to 1,063. Eastern Hills Church is our second-largest, and Houghton Wesleyan Church is our third-largest. One third of our churches average under 50 in attendance. Another third are between 50 and 120, and the final third averages over 120.

Our churches include six in Buffalo, nine in nearby suburbs, and 22 in small towns or rural areas across eight counties. Of these, one is in Pennsylvania, another is on the Cattaraugus Reservation of the Seneca Indians, and one serves an African immigrant community and worships in Swahili for nearly three hours every Sunday afternoon. Geographically, we are the smallest of The Wesleyan Church's 22 districts, with all churches within a two-hour drive of this location, depending on the weather.

With some of our churches dating back to the 1840's, the Western New York District was previously known as the Lockport Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection. We grew out of the Rochester Conference in 1861. Allow me to share one historical anecdote. In our early years, a farmer named Willard Houghton had a passion for revival and emphasized teaching the Bible to children and youth. He was not a pastor, but wherever he went, when he saw a group of children, he handed out decorated, handwritten Scripture cards and invited them and their parents to Sunday school. He started 12 Sunday schools within a 20-mile radius of his farm, some of which probably became churches. In the early days of our denomination, the church encouraged every conference or district to start a school for Christian training. When a denominational official from Syracuse spent a weekend with him in Short Track, he challenged Willard to start Houghton Seminary, which he did in 1883. We proudly claim Houghton University as a key part of our ministry to this region and to The Wesleyan Church. The district has had four superintendents since the merger: Dan Heinz, Vaughn Drumunds, Neil Koppen, and I have served in this role since 2010.

While a few of our churches date back to the 19th century, most were planted in the 20th century, and 10 have begun in this century. We celebrate the birth of three new works this year:

Redeem Church launched in Cheektowaga, led by Nathan Nedopak and supported by The Vine Wesleyan Church. Nathan and Jenny come to us from the Greenhouse Network, a Wesleyan church-planting network, and have as a key part of their vision the planting of other churches from Redeem Church.

Jim Wanke responded to God's call to plant a church in his hometown of Wyoming, NY. He and Betty joined Fillmore Wesleyan Church, which has embraced his vision and established **Wyoming Wesleyan Fellowship** as a mission of FWC.

Corey Neiman also started **Recovery Church**, a mission of Eastern Hills WC and Redeem Church. They minister primarily to people who struggle with addiction and to their families. They meet on Friday evenings and also meet in Cheektowaga. Later this morning, I will ask each of these pioneers to share highlights from this past year.

My Role as District Superintendent

As I said, I have served as District Superintendent for 16 years, following 19 years as a lead pastor at a church in North Carolina. I am continually learning what the role entails. I do not always do them well, but I am realizing that my role as District Superintendent has four priorities that I consider most important:

1. Support Churches going through Pastoral transitions;
2. Mentor pastors in their first few years as a lead pastor;
3. Create a healthy district culture that supports pastors and encourages churches and pastors to support each other.
4. Cast a vision that pushes pastors to think beyond the local congregation to engage in evangelism and start new works.

Here is a brief description of how I served in these areas this year.

Support Churches going through Pastoral transitions

I have worked with six churches that have undergone pastoral transitions. For some of our churches, we are guiding them through a yearlong review and renewal process, partnering with NextStep Church Services to provide an intentional interim pastor to address identified needs and prepare them for their new pastor.

Christ Chapel Wesleyan - Josh Rutherford began serving as pastor of Christ Chapel church last summer, following a yearlong interim. I am pleased to have Josh back in our district and believe he is the right leader for Christ Chapel at this time.

Houghton Wesleyan Church appointed Randy Craker as interim pastor last August. He was the perfect person to lead the church following Wes Oden's retirement. After an extensive pastoral search, the church recently called **Bill & Kristen Allen** to serve as co-pastors. Bill and Kristen come to us from the United Methodist Church. Houghton is Bill's home church, as his parents were on the Houghton faculty. As graduates of Houghton and Asbury Theological Seminary, both Kristen and Bill fully align with The Wesleyan Church. I am excited for them to begin on August 1 and to join our district.

Paul Palmer is retiring as pastor after serving **Oakland Wesleyan Church** for 23 years. I am working with the board to bring in an interim pastor to begin this summer.

I appointed **Bruce Ellis** as interim pastor at **East Leon Wesleyan Church**. He is also the pastor of Forestville Wesleyan Church. Bruce, his wife, Patty, and Dylan Hawkins are working with both congregations to build vision and stability within this small congregation.

In August, I appointed **Julia Hotchkiss** to serve as pastor at **Peace Wesleyan Church**, and she began in September. Julia was raised at our Higgins Church, attended Houghton, and graduated from Asbury Seminary last Spring. I am encouraged and praying that Julia's vision will inspire growth and positive change within the congregation.

Following David Schutte's December resignation, Fellowship Wesleyan Church conducted a thorough pastoral search that culminated in the call of **Juwan Vázquez Moore**, who has served Fellowship for the

past five years as Student Pastor and Family Life Pastor. Juwan began this spring, and I am excited to see how God will continue to use him at Fellowship. I also want to express my appreciation to David for his Christlike leadership and service during this transition.

Mentor pastors in their first few years as a lead pastor

I've been told that working with churches to find the right pastor is my most critical role. Mentoring pastors is the part I enjoy most. I generally try to meet monthly with new pastors during their first year, especially if it is their first time serving as lead pastor. I have 12 mentoring topics covering leading board meetings, sermon preparation habits, and healthy weekly rhythms. I am currently meeting with eight young or new pastors.

Create a healthy district culture that supports pastors and churches in supporting one another. Culture is established slowly, in part by recruiting the right pastors and mentoring new pastors. It is also modeled well by well-established pastors. We are blessed to gather regularly for LDJ meetings, and I often see pastors serving one another. Pastoring can sometimes feel like a lonely calling. We are always around other people, but expectations make it difficult to become close to all but a few. We need a district where even a solo pastor of a small church can feel part of a team. I love seeing churches help other churches, pastors reach out to pastors who are hurting, and celebrate each other's wins without jealousy. I cannot take credit for the culture we have created, but if I were a young pastor, this is the district culture I would hope to serve in.

Cast a vision for evangelism and new works. I have pastored a local church and, before that, served on a local church board. There is a perceived responsibility to protect that local church. We may even resist something that would be good for Christ's work in our community if it threatens what we are doing. In a similar way, we tend to be acutely aware of the needs of people already in the congregation and resist efforts to reach out to people outside the church. Part of my role is to cast a vision and to push against these tendencies. We are to be about building Christ's church, not our local expression of it. We are to forsake our own interests and go and seek the lost sheep.

In the district, this often involves challenging churches to start new works and to come alongside them as they obey God's call. We have worked this year to support both new works and existing churches. We are encouraging direct support of multiplication efforts and are seeing helpful partnerships develop.

One of the grants the district began last year is the New Initiatives Grants. We had six churches receive \$3,000, and the congregation matched this with at least \$2,000 to start new ways to reach their communities. Rather than me telling their stories, today there will be several testimonies about how God is working through some of these initiatives.

Transition at Wesleyan Headquarters

This has been a turbulent few months for our denomination. In March, the General Board took the unprecedented step of placing the General Superintendent and an Executive Director on a leave of absence. While I do not know everything that happened, I have been given an appropriate level of detail, and I am confident there was no sexual immorality and no inappropriate financial gain. The issues involved workplace behavior that was abusive or that tolerated abuse among subordinates. Though it initially seemed harsh, I support the General Board's difficult decision and am reassured that I serve in a denomination where even our top leaders are not beyond the accountability of a board of overseers.

In May, the church gathered for our quadrennial General Conference. Eight delegates, plus Wayne Lewis, attended from our district. While there were no radical changes in polity, some adjustments were made,

including clarifying our position on supporting women in ministry. The two constitutional memorials approved for the vote of district conferences are not policy changes but rather codify our stance on the sanctity of human life and establish a new statement on gender identity. Proposals to change our position on abstinence from alcohol were either declared unconstitutional or rejected by the conference. There was a significant change in the Church's leadership. We elected Jim Dunn as General Superintendent and gave him authority to propose a new organizational structure for headquarters. We elected Mike Skor as Assistant General Superintendent. While retaining the General Secretary and General Treasurer, we elected new directors for missions, church multiplication, and communications.

Transitions and Milestones

Two years ago, we added Charissa Belleville to work with Maribeth as our District Administrator. This year, we added Amanda Harley to help plan and coordinate meetings and events, including this conference. There will be another transition in the team this year. In April, Charissa let us know that she's resigning from her position as district administrator. She's sensing God's leading to pursue teaching within the homeschooling community. I am thankful for her caring support and her faithful sharing of the administrative weight of this office. Maribeth and I are especially appreciative that because of her, we were able to go on sabbatical together in the Spring of 2025. She will be missed when she leaves us at the end of next week. Maribeth and Amanda will take on some of Charissa's responsibilities. We will add Kim Pecora to assume insurance responsibilities and a few other duties in the new role of Business Manager.

Over the past two years, working alongside various staff members, I've been continually reminded of how much **Maribeth's** contributions enrich my ministry. She has been a faithful partner in this district ministry for these 16 years, and an incredible life partner for even longer. Just last month, we celebrated **40 years of marriage** while attending General Conference in Indiana. We often joke about who asked whom out, but in truth, I fell for her first and earnestly pursued her as a freshman at Houghton. Perhaps I was a bit forward. When that didn't work, I stepped back, trusting that if it was God's will, we would be together. Fortunately, God gradually softened her heart, and she finally asked me out in our sophomore year. I thank God for blessing us with 40 years of marriage. In July, after Refresh, our family plans to celebrate this special milestone with a vacation.

Finally, one of the greatest blessings we have at this stage of our lives is having three wonderful adult children, three amazing in-laws, and three delightful grandsons. Fridays are not only our days off but also the days we spend with George, who turned one in February. We love seeing Calvin and Leland, who live in North Carolina, and we are now enjoying the blessings of having a grandchild nearby.

Blessed to be a blessing,

Joseph W. Jennings
District Superintendent

2025-26 Official Acts of the District Superintendent:

Key Meetings and Events

- June 1, 2025 - Led Congregational Meeting at East Leon Wesleyan Church. Appointed Bruce Ellis to serve as Interim Pastor at East Leon for this conference year.
- June 14, 2025, 2025 District Conference
- June 22, 2025 - Installed Josh Rutherford as Pastor of Christ Chapel Wesleyan Church.
- July 20-25, 2025, 2025 Refresh Family Camp
- August 24, 2025 - Attended Houghton Wesleyan Church for an afternoon congregational meeting to receive the Assessment Report from NextStep Church Services.
- September 7, 2025 - Launched Redeem Church & Installed Nathan Nedopak as Pastor
- September 14, 2025 - Installed Julia Hotchkiss at Peace Wesleyan Church
- September 28, 2025 - Attended the dedication of Emmanuel Hall (Orchard Park)
- October 10, 2025 - Hosted 16 Ministry Majors from Houghton University
- October 19, 2025 - Presided over Service of Recognition and Ordination in Hamburg, NY
- February 17 - March 1, 2026 - Led District Team Retreat for Pastors & Spouses
- March 16-19, 2026, Attended Exponential Conference in Orlando
- May 17-21, 2026, Represented WNY District at Wesleyan General Conference in Marion, IN

Official Acts

- June 6, 2025 - Signed MOU with Mobilize the Church (Jon Weist & Dwight Nash) to provide coaching and training for Church Multiplication.
- July 11, 2025 - Authorized grant to ZionQuest Church to go toward deposit and transition expenses.
- August 8, 2025 - Authorized 3rd Party Payment with Christian Counseling of WNY to cover counseling services for Pastors in the district.
- January 19, 2026 - Signed contract with Honna Curtis & Boone & Briar Financial for Bookkeeping services.
- February 1, 2026 - Along with the Fellowship LBA, recommended Juwan Moore to serve as Lead Pastor of Fellowship Wesleyan Church.
- April 23, 2026 - Approved Houghton Wesleyan Church's borrowing of up to \$80,000 to complete the renovation project at the church.
- April 26, 2026 - Along with the Board of Elders, I recommended Bill & Kristen Allen to serve as Co-pastors of Houghton Wesleyan Church.

Summary of Additional Primary Duties

- 139 Individual meetings (*virtual & in-person*) with pastors;
- 5 District Board of Administration Meetings;
- 7 Leadership Development Meetings with Pastors
- 12 Meetings with Local Boards of Administration;
- 15 Meetings with Pastoral Search Teams;
- 6 Meetings with the District Board of Ministerial Development;
- 7 Other District Committee Meetings (Action, Nominating, Retreat);
- 8 Meetings with Pastoral Search Teams/Candidates;
- 33 Churches Visited (preached or gave a district update);
 - Preached at Cattaraugus Wesleyan Indian Chapel, East Leon, Fellowship, Fillmore, Hillside, Houghton, Joy Community, Little Valley, Lockport, Oakland, Orchard Park, Redeem Church, North Collins. Houghton University Chapel.
- Conducted Pastoral Reviews for the following churches
 - North Park: Jon Ward,
 - Bradford: Terri Niver
 - Higgins: Bruce Smith
 - Fillmore: Mark Harley
 - The Vine: Jason Argo
- 3 Meetings, Chaired the Houghton University Board of Trustees (*October, February, April*);
- 2 Meetings, Chaired the Wesleyan Education Council;
- 8 Meetings with Wesleyan Superintendents in the Northeast Region (*Zoom*);
- 2 Funerals.

Miscellaneous

- Miles Driven on District Car: 9,680 (38,056 on odometer as of 5/31/26);
- 17 Days of Vacation.