

2026 Great Lakes Annual Conference Legislation



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Rationale (if provided)

- 1 See Strategy Team Highlight Report beginning on next page.

STRATEGY TEAM HIGHLIGHT REPORT

2025–26 Conference Year | Great Lakes Annual Conference of the Global Methodist Church

In June 2025, the Great Lakes Annual Conference of the Global Methodist Church approved a comprehensive strategic plan organized around five areas of formation. This report highlights the progress made during the 2025–26 conference year as the Strategy Team brought that plan to life across Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Activities for this first year were generously supported by Lilly Endowment Inc. through a Supporting Hoosier Churches Initiative — Stage 1 grant of \$49,900.



STRATEGY TEAM COMMISSIONED

A dedicated Strategy Team of clergy and laypersons from across all four conference states was commissioned in August 2025. The team meets monthly and operates with a dual structure: liaisons connect directly with goal champions in each strategic area, while generalists maintain a holistic view across the full plan.

Strategy Team Members: Mike Pickell, Jill Davis, Ellen Harbin, Rev. Ben Palmer, Rev. Stan Pegram, Rev. Patricia Tristan, Rev. Russel Williams, Rev. Dr. Scott Pattison (Conference Superintendent), Rev. Tyler Best (Director of Operations), and Rev. Kara Bussabarger (Director of Equipping)

STRATEGIC COACH AND CONSULTANT

The Strategy Team is guided by Dr. J.R. Briggs, founder of Kairos Partnerships, who provides monthly coaching and led the Champions Summit. J.R. brings more than 15 years of pastoral experience and has coached leaders across churches, denominations, colleges, and nonprofits. He serves as the Director of Leadership and Congregational Formation for The Ecclesia Network and teaches in graduate leadership programs at Friends University and Taylor University. He is the author of 15 books, including *The Art of Asking Questions* (InterVarsity Press, 2025), and hosts the Resilient Leaders podcast. His work bridges the gap between spiritual formation and actionable leadership, equipping hungry leaders and organizations to grow healthier and thrive.

GOAL CHAMPIONS RECRUITED AND EQUIPPED

Goal champions were identified and recruited for all Year One priority goals. Each champion leads a team of pastors, laypeople, and/or subject-matter experts focused on a specific goal. Champions participated in two preparatory equipping calls covering adaptive leadership and project management before gathering for a two-day Champions Summit.

Champions Summit — October 21–22, 2025 | Merrillville, Indiana

Champions and strategy team members gathered for an intensive summit facilitated by Dr. Briggs. The summit was built around three pillars: relationship, structure, and culture. Participants completed Working Genius assessments to strengthen team dynamics, explored frameworks for learning, unlearning, and relearning, and developed practical timelines for implementing goals. The summit set a tone of humility, collaboration, and Spirit-led intentionality that has carried forward throughout the year.

GOAL IMPLEMENTATION PLANS

Champions are developing Goal Implementation Plans (GIPs) that outline objectives, timelines, team composition, and resource needs for each Year One goal. The Strategy Team created a collaborative review process—designed as a coaching tool, not a grade—to provide thoughtful feedback and ensure alignment with the broader vision. By early 2026, the first GIPs were submitted and were undergoing review, with the team beta-testing evaluation rubrics to refine the process.

JOINT MEETINGS AND ONGOING DEVELOPMENT

Beginning in January 2026, the Strategy Team and goal champions met virtually to foster unity, improve communication, and build shared momentum. Champions reported progress, asked questions, and received encouragement from the full team. This combined meeting proved to be a meaningful way to sustain energy, maintain alignment, and strengthen the sense of shared mission.

YEAR ONE GOALS AND CHAMPIONS

The following goals were identified as Year One priorities. Each goal is led by a champion who recruits a team, develops objectives, and works with the Strategy Team to bring the goal to life.

Goal	Strategic Area	Goal Description	Champion
1.1	Cultural	Create a Cultural Playbook	Linda Depta (Laity — MI)
1.4	Cultural	Foster an Experimentation Culture	Rob Seewald (Clergy — IN)
2.1	Discipleship	Define Disciple	Michael T. Sawicki (Clergy — MI)
2.2	Discipleship	Emphasize Scriptural Holiness	Susan Roehs (Clergy — IN)
3.1	Leadership	Define Servant Leadership	Michael T. Sawicki (Clergy — MI)
3.3	Leadership	Support Those Discerning a Call	Bob Phillips (Clergy — IL)
4.1	Local Church	Define Healthy Church	Michael T. Sawicki (Clergy — MI)
4.5	Local Church	Provide Local Church Ministry Training	Jessica Graham (Clergy — WI)
5.1	Missional	Define Missional	Michael T. Sawicki (Clergy — MI)
5.4	Missional	Support Global Annual Conference Partnerships	Jessi Johnson (Clergy — MI)
5.5	Missional	Develop a Missional Connection Listing	Mark Schroeder (Laity — WI)

LILLY ENDOWMENT PARTNERSHIP

The conference was invited to participate in Lilly Endowment Inc.'s Supporting Hoosier Churches Initiative. The Stage 1 grant of \$49,900 funded the Champions Summit, team retreats, and coaching from Dr. Briggs. The conference also submitted a proposal for an \$800,000 Stage 2 capacity-building grant to fund leadership development and training, technology and assessment infrastructure, a ministerial scholarship fund, and an equipping fund for innovation and church planting, which was also awarded.

NEW YORK CITY EXPLORATION TRIP — MARCH 9–13, 2026

Several Strategy Team members traveled to New York City for a week of learning visits with churches and leaders engaged in innovative, healthy ministry. The trip provided external validation that the conference's formation-centered framework is on the right track and produced concrete action items for the year ahead.

Churches and Leaders Visited

- Tod Bolsinger (AE Sloan Leadership) — Adaptive leadership, navigating organizational change, and the courage required to lead into uncharted territory.
- Hope Church NYC — Emotionally Healthy Discipleship and the conviction that spiritual maturity requires emotional maturity.
- Journey Church NYC — Practical church systems for evangelism, assimilation, stewardship, and leadership that give pastors clear steps forward.
- New Life Fellowship, Queens — A deep dive into formation-centered ministry, multicultural leadership, and the theology of limits.
- Church of the City — Prayer-centered church culture, testimony-driven community, and what it looks like to lead from revival.

Key Themes and Takeaways

- Leader health first — Every visit reinforced the principle that healthy churches flow from healthy leaders. The conference will prioritize the formation of leaders' health, beginning with staff and expanding outward.
- Culture must be taught, not assumed — The conference's culture statement needs to become a living framework that is taught, modeled, and activated at every level.
- Prayer as culture, not an event — The team reaffirmed the opportunity to weave prayer rhythms into all conference gatherings and gave thanks for the work of our conference prayer team.
- Define the bare minimum of alignment — Clarity is needed on the core commitments that unite every Great Lakes church while allowing local contextualization.
- Celebrate what you want to replicate — A disciplined practice of collecting and sharing stories of transformation will become a priority across conference communications.

LOOKING AHEAD

As the conference enters the next phase, the Strategy Team will continue to review Goal Implementation Plans, refine collaborative processes, and onboard Year Two champions. The Emerging Ministry Fund—a dedicated resource available through the Connectional Council—stands ready to support champion-led initiatives. A follow-up retreat in November 2026 will strengthen the team and carry forward the momentum of this past foundational year.

The 2025–26 conference year laid a strong foundation. Infrastructure is in place, teams are formed, and momentum is building. God is at work in the Great Lakes Annual Conference, and we look forward to what He will do as we continue forming for the future together.