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**Questions for an Episcopal Nominee from the Southeastern Jurisdictional Committee on
Episcopacy**

1. How do you reflect a life and ministry rooted in Wesleyan theology, spirituality and practice?

Asbury's Timothy Tennent defined prevenient grace as "all the ways in which God's grace comes into our lives prior to conversion." My memoir, *Struck from Behind*, shares my memories of the ways God was active in my life before I was aware, or even asked about God. Various events and relationships conspired to catch me by surprise during college and I wound up believing in Jesus and in seminary. At the church where I'd been dragged there was an Episcopal priest, who was fixated on John Wesley of all people, and took a personal interest in me, asking me if I had thought of going into the ministry when such a thing had never crossed my mind.

All that is nothing but grace, incredible good fortune. I am a great debtor to so many people. Without a church background, I chose Methodism for its obsession with grace, ecumenical spirit, love of learning, and passion for social justice. More importantly, United Methodist individuals cared about me and made me feel at home.

I married into an ultra-Methodist family, and I have found that the intersection of high church formality and an evangelical creativity feeds my soul, as does our eucharistic life and habits of spiritual disciplines. I'm always taken aback by the way God uses my brokenness, a testament to the healing power of grace.

2. Describe your record of pastoral fruitfulness in the local church. (For example, increase in worship attendance, professions of faith, small groups, missional engagement, social justice, etc.)

It has been a privilege for me to be part of four congregations that have been seriously engaged in missional outreach and growth in the worshipful life. I could point to big numbers: in 12 years the Davidson church grew from 400 to 3300 members (3000+ joining, 1200+ by profession of faith), and Myers Park UMC has moved from 3700 to 5300 (3000+ joining, 1300+ by profession of faith). But I like other barometers that measure deepening intimacy with God: in 12 years at Myers Park, Ash Wednesday attendance has gone from 50 to 600, and Good Friday from 75 to 650. Small groups have multiplied and flourished, as have local and worldwide mission endeavors.

My preaching and approach seem to connect well with the unchurched, those hurt by the church, and young adults, which have made up the cutting edge of growth in all my parishes. I am persuaded that people are drawn to a church because of the compelling message of the gospel (more than the style of presentation), the hospitality of the people, and relevant engagement with real issues.

It has been fun for my congregations to forge significant relationships with synagogues and mosques, and political and business leaders. Racial reconciliation has been pivotal and a great pleasure in my life's work. The Davidson and Myers Park Churches are the known as the key leaders in all efforts in their communities to address poverty and injustice. Newspapers have been

generous to feature my op-eds and have treated me as the go-to guy when questions of religion arise. I've learned a lot from being involved in multiple capital campaigns and building projects, and take some pride in that the three churches I have exited have all done well and even better after my departure.

3. How have you demonstrated the spiritual gift of leadership? (For example, give examples of ministry context where spiritual leaders were discovered, developed, and deployed for a Kingdom task)

I think the greatest honor any of us clergy can receive is to be asked to lay hands on someone at ordination. Over the years, at multiple annual conferences, I have laid hands on more than two dozen women and men I have mentored, taught or hired. Every day I invest time in young clergy, just catching up with them, talking about books, listening, exploring. Several of the associate pastors I've enjoyed working with have gone on to become senior pastors in some significant churches, and I never stop cultivating those relationships. That's not me leading so much as mirroring back to such gifted people their own giftedness and passion.

At Davidson and Myers Park, I've had lots of people with natural abilities; the challenge there it to help them realize it isn't just brains and professional savvy the church needs, but an attentiveness to the movement of God's Spirit, a holy wisdom that discerns and follows. At my first two parishes, I had virtually no one who had such self-confidence; in some ways it was easier and more rewarding to sit with them and help them see how God had gifted them to join hands with others and embody God's Kingdom. I have tried to lead by example, and by circling people up to share and dream.

In some ways, I've found that the two essential marks of solid spiritual leadership are gratitude and transparency, and I would hope to bring those two marvels into an annual conference. No one gets thanked nearly enough. And if we trust people by being open and honest, and never dissembling, together we will go somewhere. Leadership only happens when there has been robust disagreement among trusted friends before a common decision is embraced.

4. How have you demonstrated a willingness to be held accountable for results and an ability to hold others accountable, with grace, for their results (staff or volunteers)?

In parish ministry, there is an inevitable daily accountability to the people. You have to be accessible, and responsive, and their unofficial evaluations are obvious, and important. I try to imagine being accountable to God, which I am – and I find this daunting and yet liberating. Of course I've been held accountable by Staff Parish Committees, and now by our staff structure. We use the Lencioni pyramid of a cohesive team, whose non-negotiable is “embrace accountability,” without which results won't happen.

I have had supervisory responsibility for many people, and have found no one-size-fits-all way to go about it. But seriousness in understanding what we're about, where we're going, and a clarity that if we aren't going there together there will be a straightforward process to deal with it: people desperately want and need this in their work, especially when it is embroidered with a lot of praise and gratitude. I have fired people, even highly popular but problematical staff members, and have always taken the high road and borne the pain of the Church family that just can't be privy to everything.

The laity are far harder to hold accountable, as it's hard to find your leverage; most laity cherish the notion that they can do whatever they wish with impunity. But I have had hard conversations with dysfunctional officers, gossips, and toxic underminers. It's hard, I dread doing it – but to dilly-dally, to be sweet, only makes things worse.

5. Describe your track record of doing the “right thing” in difficult situations.

In my first parish, I reported my suspicion of child abuse in the face of a very angry family – with whom I eventually reconciled. When the first Gulf War broke out, a few of us in my church organized a peace vigil, and wound up threatened by neighbors. In the past year I've wound up partnering with African-American clergy in our city to work on things like peace in the wake of a verdict exonerating a white police officer in the killing of a black man, and school resegregation issues in our public schools. Many of my op-eds have taken controversial stands in our community, as I've tried to be a voice of the voiceless. This kind of social justice work is hard work – but I can't say I feel courageous or am braced to suffer for a cause. It just seems right, even fun to me.

Within my congregations, despite my deep commitment to transparency, we have had to keep certain personnel complexities confidential, bearing the confusion and even anger of church people. Being on the cutting edge of justice issues sometimes arouses discomfort and annoyance within a church family; I've tried to find creative ways to keep everyone listening and together, but it's difficult. I wish I had a perfect track record for always doing the right thing – but sometimes there is uncertainty, you just don't know, or the right thing touches off its own carnage that leaves wrong things in the debris.

6. What has been your exposure to the Annual, Jurisdictional and General Conference? (For example, cabinet experience, service on a committee, board or agency, etc).

I've served as a delegate to three General Conferences and seven Jurisdictional Conferences. Currently I am on our Board of Ordained Ministry, and over time have chaired several committees for our annual conference. As a trustee of a Methodist University and on the Board of Visitors of Duke Divinity School, I've been involved in our denomination's institutional life. At many conference events and for other annual conferences, I've preached, taught and led workshops on preaching, worship, ethics, and leadership, and have done the same at several of our Methodist universities. I admire and love our connection, the best feature of which would be the gracious gift of friendship won over years of working together for the cause of Methodism.

7. Based upon your experience, how do you relate to the global United Methodist Church communion? (For example, boards and agencies, publishing, short-term mission teams, UMVIM, UMCOR, etc.)

It has been a great joy for me to represent the UMC in some crucial theological and ecclesiastical labors. Bishop Walter Klaiber and I were chosen by the World Methodist Council to meet with Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed theologians to develop our Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. And right now I am part of the conversations on full communion between the Episcopal Church and the UMC.

Known for my wanderlust, I have travelled many places in ministry, including mission endeavors in several countries (Brazil, Lithuania, Haiti, etc.). I've gotten to preach at ordination services in

Liberia and Haiti, and have led young clergy and many laity on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Turkey, and Italy. Early in my ministry I got to be a delegate to the World Methodist Council in Nairobi, and later was part of the Council in Brighton.

My second term on the General Board of Church and Society has just ended, and I have published a great deal of denominational curriculum and a variety of resource materials in addition to my books, several of which have been translated into other languages to reach Methodists elsewhere.

My congregations have enjoyed sustained and supportive interactions with quite a few missionaries. In the wake of national disasters we've led relief efforts and connected well with our agencies involved. I care deeply about and appreciate the global church, and count many pastors, laity, bishops and missionaries abroad as treasured friends.

8. What is your response to these “hot topics” in the United Methodist Church? Please limit your responses to two paragraphs for each topic.

For years, I have thought and even suggested to a couple of bishops that, instead of debating the hot issues during a conference, we actually educate our people, so they might hear thoughtful, faithful presentations on differing sides, so we could then learn why others believe as they believe, and then we would model how to listen with empathy and disagree with generous hearts.

a. Human sexuality

My record is long and public on this: I've spearheaded efforts to find ways we might stay together as a church and embrace our irresolvable differences on homosexuality. Faithful, smart, wise United Methodists disagree on their interpretations of Scripture and visions of holiness. I grieve when our process results in a winner-take-all (for either 'side'), as we are all doing our best and are treasured members of Christ's body even in our inability to come to definitive agreement.

When I think of the possibility of some group seceding from our union, I have said that I could think of reasons to split off and exit the denomination: for instance, if we said Jesus was merely human, or that you are saved by good works instead of grace. Disagreement on lifestyle doesn't rise to that core doctrinal level, in my view. At the same time, we can't just say Let's focus on the core things and ignore this issue – for it's not an issue, it's real people who are seeking God and need our church.

The world is watching us – not so much to see if we get it right and know whom to condemn and whom to celebrate, but to see how we disagree, and whom we can welcome with genuine hospitality. The Pope is right: the church's longtime focus on what he calls “pelvic issue” overemphasizes the church's judgmental aspect, which turns outsiders away, and underemphasizes our welcome and glad embrace of all people.

I have complained a few times about the question, Will the bishop uphold the *Discipline*? – as this usually is code for Will the bishop enforce paragraph 161F on homosexuality? There is much more in our *Discipline* that deserves focused episcopal attention. We clergy, the bishops and the laity all have an accountability to the *Discipline* – and because of this, I wonder: does God intend the book to be used as a weapon of punishment, or as a constructive way to pursue our mission together? Is it punitive? or couldn't it be life-giving?

b. Local church closures and establishing new faith communities

Every church closure makes me sad. A beautiful book, with stories of love, marriage, dreams, fears, sorrow, laughter, prayer, and mission, gets slammed shut. I love to stumble across stories of near-death congregations that discover a clever angle, some little green growth valiantly popping up through a crack in the cement, and new life happens.

Then there are the intentional, creative, new church beginnings that launch boldly and with local quirks. My daughter started an alternative worship service and community within her large, staid downtown church, and the joyful vitality of *Roots Revival* is a delight, and a model for many in our region. Sharon UMC around the corner from me is redeveloping its entire site in tandem with business development that will result in a very different but wonderfully adaptive church in a place we need church.

Even old shuttered churches warm my heart though. The building is a mute witness to daring Methodists who sacrificed to build the place, and who now rest in the cemetery in the back yard: God is still glorified by their testimony. And occasionally I find myself in a restaurant or art gallery that used to be a church. It's sad in one way – but then I think God grins, as the very architecture, now part of the very world we hope to reach, is a lingering witness to God's strange goodness.

c. Next generation leaders

From my teaching at Duke Divinity School, and through mentoring and hiring young clergy, I am giddily optimistic about the church's future. We have fantastic, humble, holy, creative leaders in the pipeline. It falls to the bishop to be sure they are encouraged and enabled to use their wealth of gifts and passions; my own Bishop Larry Goodpaster has admirably committed time each month to befriending our young clergy. Church will look different; there won't be the old timey career ladder. But the young clergy I know don't even care. They are full of zeal to serve God and change the world outside the walls of the church.

d. Impending death tsunami (Dr. Lovett Weems)

Whether United Methodism is dying or not, United Methodists are dying. The statistics are chilling – but I can't help but remember that the death tsunami is a lot of individual deaths, and deaths of lovely and beloved people. "Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his saints" (Psalm 116). Human history has been wave after wave of death, but history marches on. We grieve, we cope with smaller numbers, just as families do. There once were 34 Howells in my extended family, but we're down to 22 now. We still love, we still take pride in our humble heritage. Christians are the people who don't need to get freaked out by death. Our beginning, after all, was in a cemetery. Yes, we will have fewer churches and mostly likely fewer United Methodists. But it is God's Church, and God isn't done yet.

e. Guaranteed appointment for clergy

The impetus behind the idea of ending guaranteed appointment is understandable. It seems to me we have provisions in the *Discipline* to deal with underfunctioning clergy, if cabinets and bishops could find bold ways to be honest, courageous and firm. A pendulum swing toward unguaranteed

appointments would worry me. We have this sad tendency to blame the clergy when anything goes wrong in a parish, which is a vexing problem in itself. Clergy need some security in order to be free, and less jittery. If a pastor is always looking over her shoulder in fear of being nixed by the conference, then aggressive, courageous ministry won't happen. Our goal shouldn't be to rout out ineffective clergy, but to encourage, bolster and empower our clergy.

f. Term episcopacy

The shift to term episcopacy feels like it will come to be. I can only imagine that a bishop re-entering parish life might be awkward to place. The idea that the bishop is really just a pastor on a temporary assignment though is appealing to me. On our staff at Myers Park, my status is something like the ideal for the *princeps* in the Roman Republic: first among equals. Our senior staff are part of a team of equals; within that group, I have just a little more power than any of the rest, a power utilized sparingly and judiciously if at all. The bishop doesn't take on some aura of advanced holiness or newfound status. The bishop is a pastor among equals, but with a peculiar role, a humbling responsibility within that body of equals. Term episcopacy fits neatly with this understanding.

g. The World-Wide Nature of the Church: Global Book of Discipline/ Global Structure

We live simultaneously with this marvelous gift that is the worldwide church and with the holy tension of trying to communicate across language and social divides and to make structures and processes work. There's no choice but to just sit with this situation. Theologically we are a global church, not because we choose to be, but because we just are global in God's eyes. At the core of the gospel message, and in our inescapable mission to be Christ's Body on earth, we couldn't dream of being more than just the one Body we are. The mechanics are complicated, and no book can keep everyone organized and functioning in faithful ways. Our wisest leaders will need to figure out how to be the global church theologically and missionally but allow space for widely divergent and culturally mandated ways of pursuing those ends.