

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

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total response to a maximum of 5000 words.

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

I was raised in the United Methodist Church by parents that regarded a relationship with Christ that was supported by active participation in church as transformational to a child's life. I grew up in a congregation that was conscientious in its desire to live out the vows that were pledged when children were baptized. My experience of Sunday School, Confirmation, UMYF, and numerous other ministries was a means of grace that God used to form me as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Braddock Street UMC was a vital church that was active in the lives of its members as well as the larger community. I was also impacted by ministries beyond the local church such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and service camps like Mountain TOP.

Throughout my life, God's prevenient grace always moves in front of me and leads me to new experiences of Christ's love and opportunities to serve God's kingdom. God's grace continues to be operative in my life, sometimes as an experience of justifying grace which shows me the contrast between the attitudes I hold, words I say, or the actions in which I am involved, and the righteousness and deeper purpose of God's will that could be exemplified in my life if I were more surrendered to Christ. Other times I experience sanctifying grace through the means of grace found in the Christian life. I can feel the presence of Christ in spiritual practices such as weekly services of Holy Communion, Bible study, prayer, or conversation shared in my weekly Life Group. I find that reading for weekly sermon preparation, whether Bible commentaries, the work of theologians, or other sources related to relevant topics, is an important part of my ongoing spiritual practice. Generosity of time, talent, and financial resources has been transformative in my life. The discipline of the tithe, and offerings beyond the tithe, has enabled me to discover that God can be trusted in all seasons of life.

Lack of vitality in churches leads to low transformation of lives. As a pastor, I have worked with lay leaders to create church communities where people were transformed by Christ so that they could then transform the community and world in which they lived. Vitality and transformation require a methodology. Once clergy and laity help a congregation understand how to experience Christian worship and discipleship that includes small groups and other spiritual practices, and find ways to transform the community, they are willing to share Christ with others and engage in acts of compassion to the marginalized. In my current appointment at Floris UMC, we have engaged in a number of long-term ministries that have been transformative to the community and to our congregation. Our partnerships with a local Title 1 Elementary

School and the Sierra Leone Annual Conference with the Child Rescue Centre and Mercy Hospital, and our ministries to immigrants like English as a Second Language (ESL) and Grace Ministries, along with others, have enabled us to care for and serve persons who are socially vulnerable. We have found the presence of Christ in these relationships and efforts.

Mission trips are another means of grace in my life. I have participated in numerous UMVIM trips in the U.S., as well as international trips to Mexico, Cuba, Costa Rica, and Sierra Leone. Since 2002, my trips to Sierra Leone have been frequent enough to enable me to make friends and establish relationships that God has used to form my thinking about the Christian life and the mission of the church. Trips to Israel and a recent experience related to the travels of Paul bring a new dimension to my reading and study of the Bible.

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.)

I have served small, medium, and large churches in rural, small town, and suburban settings. All of these churches have demonstrated numerical growth and paid full apportionments. Vibrant worship and involvement in small groups, where people focus on biblical learning and the consideration of what it means to follow Jesus Christ as a disciple, are critical to church vitality and personal transformation.

I have been at my current appointment for 22 years. Floris UMC has grown from an average worship attendance of 400 persons in 1997 to an average of 1,364 in 2019. Worship at the Floris campus includes four Sunday services and live streaming. There are also two services at two other sites that meet in schools in nearby communities led by associate pastors. In 2019, we received 7 persons and 50 Confirmands by Professions of Faith. This is in keeping with the number of professions of faith we have experienced over the last six years.

Floris UMC has an active small group ministry. More than 68% of our worshipping congregation attends weekly small groups together. A total of 934 people were involved in small groups during the year. Other discipleship opportunities come through guest lectures by professors at Wesley Seminary and short-term studies held throughout the year.

Floris is a missional church that is highly involved in our community. Our ministry has focused on children in poverty and the needs of immigrants who are starting a new life. The many ministries of Floris, such as ESL, our partnership with Hutchison Elementary School, our food and clothing ministry, and the Floris Guest House where we host homeless guests during the winter at the church, put Floris members in touch with our

broader community, and have changed the nature of our church and discipleship over time. The Floris congregation volunteered 11,702 service hours in the community and abroad in 2019.

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)

As a pastor in the local church, I have helped people find ways to use their spiritual gifts, talents, education, and training to glorify God and expand God's Reign. The ministry of the church is primarily found in the ministry of the laity, who are abundantly equipped to do the work of ministry in its various forms. I have attempted to move people from framing the work of the church as administrative meetings where a few decisions are made, to becoming the body of Christ as we share our faith with our neighbors, help each other grow in discipleship, and serve the poor and vulnerable in our community, nation, and world. While the church will always need administrative meetings, people are far more likely to be transformed by Christ when they use their gifts to teach, serve, extend hospitality, help in the many tasks of congregational life, and utilize their expertise and education to undertake God-size visions together.

I have served churches that have histories that exceed 100 years. I have found it instructive and important to learn the creation story of these congregations, to understand the vitality they enjoyed in years past and the values that the congregation holds in the present. Understanding the past provides insights into where God is leading us in the present and future. Learning that long-term members of Floris UMC saw their church at the center of its community, so that Christ would be at the center of the community's life, I was able to work with leaders in the congregation to discern how we might do the same in our time. This led to a deeper desire to share Christ with our neighbors and bless those who were vulnerable in our multiracial, suburban context, just as the church had in years past when it was located in a homogeneous rural community. We were able to combine evangelism with mission in ways that brought vitality and relevance to both. As the church grew, we relocated our facility to a new site to accommodate an expanded congregation and ministry. Later we changed strategy and started new sites to share Christ with people in our region.

As the Lead Pastor of the church, it has been my role to both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I have called church members to generosity, so that the ministry of the church would be supported and new initiatives could bless the poor. It has been rewarding to see how many people will respond with committed and sacrificial gifts of their time, talent, and other gifts for ministry. In recent years we have worked to become a multi-cultural church that is affirming and welcoming to people in the LGBTQ community so that we can truly reflect the composition of our community. While we still have progress to make, the addition of members from Africa, South Asia, South and

Central America, along with LGBTQ persons, has made for a rich experience of Christian community.

Capable and talented people who possess a deep faith in Christ abound in the United Methodist Church. It is essential to discern a calling of God which is large enough to interest them and communicate a vision of Christ's love and the impact of God's kingdom in a manner compelling enough to engage them. The work of the pastor is to involve the congregation's leadership in the effort to discern God's call and undertake key initiatives that will be pursued in the years ahead while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the congregation's current ministry. Each year the pastor works with staff and leaders in the church to recruit those who will serve in key ministries related to evangelism, hospitality, discipleship, and outreach. This work is done in season after season of active recruitment that includes spiritual gift and strengths discovery tools, training, and service opportunities.

I have come to realize that it is only when the church truly functions as the body of Christ, where various people find the joy of serving Christ and take roles in accordance with the gifts God has distributed, will it be healthy and effective. I have found this same principle to be true working with the Southeastern Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy. As an officer for this group, I have worked with a team of others to create an assignment process that is based on the needs of the Conference being matched with the described gifts, strengths, and identified abilities of bishops.

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)?

Throughout my ministry I have reviewed metrics related to worship attendance, membership, giving, apportionment payment, and other indicators of congregational vitality. I have appreciated the advice and encouragement that I have enjoyed in these areas from colleagues, District Superintendents, and Bishops under whom I have served.

I serve a multi-staff congregation where we use a system of quarterly conversations that enable our staff to work with their ministry teams to set goals and then work to accomplish them through the year. Quarterly reviews are held to encourage staff and monitor the progress individuals and teams are making. We consider what might assist or hinder them in accomplishing their goals. The final conversation, a time of evaluation and goal setting for the coming year, holds no surprises for anyone. It serves as the culmination of the dialogue that has been ongoing in the previous months. This process yields deeper conversations that allow people to share their concerns as well as the ways their gifts are being fully utilized in ministry.

I am involved in this same evaluation system and expected to contribute to the overall health of the church and the success of our ministry. I have undergone annual 360 reviews to receive feedback related to my job performance and impact on others. Our staff offers feedback regularly through the Best Christian Workplace evaluation process. My annual goals, developed in concert with fellow staff members and the Church Council, give me and others clarity about the best use of my time and the ways I uniquely contribute to the ministry of our church. I have been blessed to enjoy coaching and participate in a peer-learning group of clergy colleagues.

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

As delineated by John Wesley, being a disciple of Christ requires doing no harm, while also doing the right thing in every way, whenever possible. As a pastor of a local church, I have worked with church leaders to do the “right thing” in each of my appointments. Some examples of doing the “right thing” in churches I have served include renewing an underutilized nursery in a church full of aging congregants so that young families would feel welcome in our first appointment, helping congregations move from an inward to an outward facing church, relocating a congregation from a six-year-old facility to a new site so that the growth of the congregation would not be inhibited by the size of an existing parking lot and sanctuary, preaching about historic and current racial oppression and prejudice, leading conversations in a large and ideologically diverse church to share how a person can be biblically faithful and affirming of LGBTQ persons, and raising the value of evangelism in the church to get people to embrace new ways to share Christ with others. Doing the right thing is not easy, but it is a requirement for Christian leaders.

The most memorable example of this, however, occurred after we started the Child Rescue Centre with the Sierra Leone Annual Conference. A large offering in 2000 funded this children’s home for war-affected orphans. By 2002, the money was about to run out and there were 40 children who were going to be back on the streets. I was in Sierra Leone that year and the despair across the war-torn country was palpable. We did not have a lot of experience raising additional funds. Pulling out of the ministry seemed like the obvious option. I learned in that moment that starting a ministry is relatively easy, but sustaining one requires a lot of diligent work. We continued to pursue God’s calling and learned to raise money through a collaborative partnership across 14 United Methodist Churches, rather than a singular Floris initiative. This partnership, along with special events and corporate donors, created a sustainable future. Helping Children Worldwide, a non-profit, was formed. Committed laity serve on the Board of Directors. We now support more than 600 children, working to give victims of child labor and trafficking a new life and keep others from becoming victims through education. In addition, Mercy Hospital opened in 2007 on the campus of the Child Rescue Centre. Mercy is the only hospital in Bo, Sierra Leone, that treats patients regardless of ability to pay and is primarily focused on maternal and child health initiatives including malaria,

HIV & AIDS, prenatal care, and nutrition. This 26-bed facility, whose primary focus is on outpatient care and village clinics, currently provides care to over 10,000 patients per year. Sustaining this ministry over the past 20 years has been the right but difficult thing to do. Our partners in Sierra Leone have taught us the power of persistence and prayer, and the joy of offering our best to God.

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 have served on and chaired a number of committees, boards and task forces in the Virginia Annual Conference including: Bishop's Initiative on Children and Poverty, the Common Table Task Force (restructuring our Annual Conference leadership), the Board of Ordained Ministry (member), All Things New (Conference plan for church development and revitalization), the Committee on Episcopacy, and the Five Talent Academy. I have been the Virginia clergy leader to General and Jurisdictional Conference five times and have served on the Southeastern Jurisdictional Committee on the Episcopacy for 12 years. I have authored books with Abingdon Press and have been a speaker at a variety of District and Conference training events in the United Methodist Church. I served on the Commission on a Way Forward and was a part of the writing team for the *One Church Plan* for the 2019 General Conference. I served as a member of the group that worked with Mr. Kenneth Feinberg to produce the *Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation and Restructuring* for the 2020 General Conference.

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.)

I have experience in the global UMC through service on the Board of Directors for the Child Rescue Centre and Mercy Hospital, led by Bishop John Yambasu in Sierra Leone, Africa. This experience has broadened my cross-cultural skills and communication and helped me better understand issues present in other parts of our worldwide communion. Multiple UMVIM trips to Africa, Cuba, Mexico, and within the United States have enabled me to experience the Methodist fellowship in other parts of the world as well.

With Abingdon Press, I have published books on church leadership with Dr. Lovett Weems, as well as small group video-based resources. Some titles include: *Bearing Fruit: Ministry with Real Results*, *Defying Gravity: Break Free From the Culture of More*, *The Generous Church, Restored: Finding Redemption in Our Mess*, *Reckless Love: Jesus' Call to Love Our Neighbor* as well others.

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

a. Human sexuality

While United Methodists share a common belief in the recognition of the worth of all persons and a desire for biblical integrity, our sociology and personal experience inform theological interpretations of human sexuality that are varied, and for many, divisive. For some, the Wesleyan model of the primacy of Scripture, when viewed through the interpretive lens of tradition, reason and experience, results in a conviction to continue the practices and assumptions of long-standing church tradition which limits sexual preference and expression to heterosexuality. For others, it is a call to intentional and full inclusion of all persons and broader expressions of marital fidelity, including same-sex marriage.

I affirm that the sexuality of gay and lesbian persons is an expression of the image of God in their lives. I have worked to change the Book of Discipline so that local churches and their pastors will be given the ability to decide whether they would offer Christian marriage to gay couples. Members of local churches have varying views on same-sex marriage, and both manage this tension and maintain their unity in Christ. I believe that our denomination can do this as well if qualified gay persons were ordained and able to serve as clergy in our denomination. Annual Conferences can be trusted with the ability to discern who should be ordained. Regardless of their viewpoint, United Methodist pastors live in the tension that is created when some members of the church feel that they or their family members are not in full community with the denomination due to issues of sexual orientation. I do not think that General Conference will be able to resolve this issue in a manner acceptable to everyone in our global church. Some level of separation will be required if these provisions in the Book of Discipline are to be changed. I believe that we can continue to spread scriptural holiness, serve with the poor and marginalized, and work for social justice despite our disagreements on human sexuality. Congregations in many places in our global connection such as the United States that fail to speak openly and provide the capacity for its congregations to both affirm and welcome LGBTQ persons in its practices may find themselves hard pressed to share the gospel of Christ with people in the larger society who affirm and love their LGBTQ family members, friends, co-workers, and colleagues. There is room in the UMC for people who hold more progressive and traditional views without forcing each other to violate our consciences. Respectful relationships with others who hold both similar and different perspectives than me have revealed that I hold a convicted humility about human sexuality. This leads me to desire greater freedom of practice without holding judgement toward those who disagree with me.

b. Local church closures and establishing new faith communities

The key issue on which our denomination should focus is the one that will be least discussed at General Conference: the vitality of the local church in areas of our global connection where it is not healthy. Clergy and lay leaders who are willing to learn new skills and who desire to share the love of Christ in new ways in their communities are necessary if we are to fulfill our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ and transform the world in the years ahead. Revitalization of the local church, along with new church development and new outcomes from the Fresh Expression movement, is an essential focus for all leaders in the United Methodist Church. UMC congregations are becoming smaller. Some have closed. As more churches close in the years ahead, strategic decisions about the use of these assets and the funds generated from their sale will be considered. New church planting will be necessary to advance God's kingdom, but it must be done in the most strategic and cost effective fashion possible. Vital congregations need to engage in church planting, adoption of existing congregations, and new forms of church, such as the Fresh Expressions movement. This should be a primary focus of our Annual Conferences.

Simultaneously, we will need to find ways to bring new life to our core ministry in existing congregations. In all settings, the coming decades will belong to laity and pastors who are entrepreneurs and evangelists, who understand that the church finds health and vitality only when it shares faith in Christ and loves its neighbor as itself. It is imperative that we attract new leaders and then find ways to engage them in ongoing training that is also a source of encouragement. Such leaders are working in a climate where people value church attendance and membership far less than those in past decades, but who remain in desperate need of the wisdom and transformation that a relationship with Christ offers. I have enjoyed working with a group of younger pastors who asked a friend and I to meet with them to share training on key ministry skills like preaching, stewardship, and leadership. Finding formal and informal ways to recruit, train, and encourage younger leaders is essential in the years ahead. There is no task more important to our worldwide denomination than the revitalization of local churches in the United States. If they fail, or suffer from continued ill health, the supportive structure of the denomination across the globe fails as well. Attracting, retaining, and deploying new and effective leaders is a key to the future.

c. Impending death tsunami (Dr. Lovett Weems)

Most United Methodists have faced the brutal facts about the average age of our members in the United States. Our General Boards and Agencies, General Conference, and every Annual Conference must understand that this is the primary work of the coming years. It must be the focus because the Methodist movement has always believed that it was primarily in the ministry of the local society, and later, the local church, that the transforming work of God's grace and Christian community occurred. The economic model of our global church relies on this vitality as well. Schools, clinics, hospital, colleges, and mission centers in our global church rely on the health of our local churches. We must resolve long-standing conflict at General Conference in order to

move our focus to these issues. Wesleyan theology is the best way to share the good news of God's love in Christ to people today. Our focus on being in ministry with the economically poor and our value on social justice are all very appealing in a society that values relevance. It is critical that we focus our energy on the renewal and health of the local church so that we can continue to offer Christ and pursue the calling of Christ in the world.

d. Guaranteed appointment for clergy

The guaranteed appointment was a way to ensure that marginalized clergy who were female or persons of color would be able to serve in ordained ministry in a time when they were unjustly denied access to local church appointments. It is a sad fact that there are still local churches who would prefer to perpetuate this injustice, but I celebrate that the majority of our congregations have embraced a more inclusive view of pastoral leadership. While we must have mechanisms to ensure the appointments of marginalized persons, the concern that many have today is that the guaranteed appointment has become a mechanism that does not allow the church to deal with ineffective and sometimes incompetent clergy who damage congregational health. It was not the intention of the guaranteed appointment to create a system of tenure for clergy like that of a University professor.

The failure of the church in this area occurs when it is unwilling to have hard but loving conversations from candidacy through appointment regarding clergy performance. Performance evaluation is required so that changes can be made, skills can be acquired, or transitions out of ordained ministry can be undertaken. Such conversations are necessary in life and work for the good of our sanctification. Ultimately they honor those who are struggling in ministry. No one is joyful when underperforming or failing in his or her vocation. Conversations and processes that lead to long-term change are worth the short-term discomfort they necessarily bring. Cabinets that are willing to have these conversations and create action plans for change are a great blessing to our connection.

e. Term episcopacy

I see the wisdom of term episcopacy and think that when Bishops retire, their membership should be that of an elder in their Annual Conference of origin. This would be an act of humility on their part that would increase the likelihood of finding community with other clergy in retirement, rather than feeling the isolation of being set aside for special service long after they retire. The cost of gathering active and retired Bishops in meetings around the globe is poor stewardship at a time when the number of retirees is equal or exceeds the number of active members of the Council of Bishops. Presiding Bishops, who would undoubtedly benefit from their counsel, could still seek the wisdom and insight of retired Bishops. However, the role of the Bishop in a rapidly changing world is the responsibility of those in active service, who need time to meet

and strategize with each other. I am also open to bishops serving a limited number of terms before returning to appointment in the local church.

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

The world is a diverse place where cultures deal with important social issues in different ways. We must define the essentials that define United Methodist theology and practice of ministry and then provide room for the church in any nation to deal with the issues that are uniquely present within it. Delegates to General Conference from countries outside of the United States routinely complain that the agenda is too focused on our issues. I believe that the key issue for the UMC in the U.S. is to focus on where future vitality will be found given the current decline of the local church in many places. I support Regional Conference legislation that defines the nature of our worldwide communion while giving United Methodists in each region of the world the opportunity to focus on relevant issues in their context. Such legislation would provide a Global Book of Discipline that would define our common theological heritage and beliefs along with essential matters of a global connection. It would also provide adaptable portions of the Book of Discipline for each region so that persons could exercise greater focus and creativity in plans to nurture the church to reach persons in unique cultural contexts.