

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

In light of the need for apostolic leadership for The United Methodist Church and in the spirit of the call for the renewal of The United Methodist Church from all corners of our church, the Southeastern Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy asks that every episcopal nominee from the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference respond in writing to these questions that will be posted on the SEJ website. We ask that each nominee send an electronic document to Anne Travis, SEJ Conference Secretary at [secretary@sejumc.org](mailto:secretary@sejumc.org) by **September 1, 2022**, for posting on the SEJ website by. Please limit your total response to a maximum of 5000 words.

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

Everything about my journey is a testimony to our Wesleyan understanding of social and personal holiness. As I reflect on my life, I see God in action through the continuous outpouring of the Spirit by the manifestation of Prevenient, Justifying and Sanctifying grace. I was born in Castro's Cuba in 1974, where we never went to church, never read the Bible. We lived with a communist ideology over our family and most importantly, over our souls. Yet, God was not left without a testimony in Cuba. Nuri, our neighbor, used to come every Sunday to our house to invite me to church. She used to take all the children in the neighborhood to church and always taught us about the importance of dedicating our lives to Christ. I remember her with so much love and appreciation for her witness. I see now how God's prevenient grace was operating in my life through her ministry.

As a young adult, God's prevenient grace continued hovering over my life. I identified myself as a scientist who only believed in what I could see, touch, or smell. I lived a life governed by unbelief, pain, and pride. Oddly enough, I thought of myself as a free, self-sufficient, educated and professionally successful man. However, I could not satisfy the emptiness of my life. Little did I know that the deepest void of my soul was about to be filled with the power of God's justifying grace. This transformational impact began on the hot summer night of August 4, 2001, at 9:30 p.m. when I received Christ as my Lord and Savior.

I came to Christ in the Peter Knox Methodist Church. The church was full of people thirsty and hungry for God. The pastor made the altar call inviting us to come to Jesus, and I surrendered! Shortly after, on December 12, 2001, I left the country to come to the United States to follow my professional dreams.

In late 2001, I moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where my sister lived. Soon after, I sought out a United Methodist home church and joined Preston Highway UMC. The church had been praying for a leader to reach the fast-growing Hispanic population. Rev. Avis O'Connor, our pastor, asked me to help teach an English class to reach the Hispanic families around the church. Then, I was asked to teach a Bible study. Later, the church asked me to preach. The need was so great that even though I had been a believer for only six months, I was preaching the gospel to the Hispanic people in Kentucky.

Finally, Sanctifying grace reaches us to help in this powerful transformational experience with Jesus. In our Wesleyan perspective, we understand our journey to perfection and sanctification as a process for most of us, where day by day we grow into the stature of Christ -- receiving

revelation of God through experience, scripture, tradition, and reason, as well as from our story, not because of our own self-merits but because of grace through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

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.)

As a pastor, I have a fire in my soul for creating spaces for transformation where the hurt and the broken find healing and hope. I have been called to establish new spaces for communities of faith that will grow to become United Methodist churches. If I were to say to you that I knew what I was doing when I planted the first church in 2002, I would be lying. Yet time and again, I was led by the Spirit to start new churches, to partner with faithful people who shared the same burden, all with the purpose of making disciples. Today, all the churches I had the privilege to plant continue making disciples for the transformation of the world.

As I shared above, out of my connection with Preston Highway UMC, a new church was born. The church grew rapidly and became the fastest-growing Hispanic church plant, as well as the first chartered Latino Church in the Conference and most likely in the SEJ in the last 20 years. The church grew to seventy members in six months. We had forty-five professions of faith, twenty-five adult baptisms and fifteen infant baptisms. By the end of 2002, the church averaged over a hundred people in worship, the majority new believers joining through professions of faith or baptism. This same group organized into new ministries, especially outreach efforts to serve the poor.

New Church Development of the Kentucky Annual Conference was committed to reaching the Latino population throughout the state. Therefore, the New Church Development office approached me once again to plant a new church in Hopkinsville, Ky., at St John UMC in June 2003. The church was planted in six months, and once again the Lord blessed us with new souls who were thirsty and hungry for Jesus. In my time there, we grew the church in four months to a hundred in attendance. Fifty-six people came to Christ, sixty-three people were baptized, ten new small groups were formed, and a new church was established. The church impacted the community at large, as we actively launched new ministries to reach the marginalized. We organized immigration services, migrant community outreach, after-school programs and food ministries. In 2003, my wife Janet passed away in a car accident as we were planting this second church in Hopkinsville. I was devastated! On October 14, 2003, at my wife's funeral at St John, the church responded with incredible love and support! We continued to grow until I was sent into a new mission field.

I was appointed in June 2004 as the senior pastor of "Fuente de Avivamiento" (Springs of Revival), in Lexington. The congregation reached 400 in worship attendance in five years, with seventy to eighty people baptized every year for those first five years. The church grew larger than I ever expected or imagined. It became the congregation with most professions of faith in the Conference for three consecutive years. I also received The Denman Evangelism Award in 2013 as a result of this blessed and fruitful work. As a result of that effort, new leaders began to emerge, and new churches were planted. We launched a second campus with sixty people in worship in this first year, and house churches were also planted around the city and beyond,

impacting Richmond, Georgetown, Springfield, and Winchester. Springs of Revival UMC was recognized as the biggest and fastest-growing Hispanic church of the Conference and the Jurisdiction.

3. What skill sets, knowledge, and abilities would you bring to the office of the bishop, UM Church, and annual conference leadership? What profound changes to "business as usual" as an annual conference do you think would be fruitful?

I believe I already have the skills and qualities to match the position description for the office of bishop. I am industrious, hardworking, an excellent team worker and collaborator, and can easily prioritize tasks to ensure that the Annual Conference's missional goals are achieved.

As a pastor and District Superintendent, I have experience working on time-sensitive projects, dealing with complex challenges, and communicating with key stakeholders. I have a track record of achievement. For example, in my last position as a local pastor, I helped local churches to increase worship attendance, professions of faith, and baptism. I have had the privilege of planting the largest Hispanic congregation in the jurisdiction and launching 70 house churches and two campuses. However, the achievements of my ministerial career are not limited to Hispanic ministry.

As a lead coach for Spiritual Leadership Inc., I led American and African American projects at all levels, including local churches, districts, and conferences, in the areas of leadership development, spiritual formation, church planting and church revitalization for fifteen years nationwide and internationally. I helped churches to go back to the mission, mobilizing districts for missional impact and bringing alignment among the Cabinet, the Conference directors, and local churches in terms of defining values, mission, discipleship systems, leadership development, self-sustainability, and vision.

I have been a national keynote speaker for Fresh Expression USA, New Room, Path 1, and others. I have not only taught but live it out by launching eleven Dinner Churches in our district, twelve covenant bands, and four city missional networks.

As a Bishop, I pledge to always listen, ask questions before I act or make assumptions, and go above and beyond expectations. I will willingly carry out duties outside my job description to help the Conference succeed.

What profound changes to "business as usual" as an annual conference do you think would be fruitful?

**Year 1:** Discovering through listening, developing relational trust, and learning the context.

**Year 2:** Creating or enhancing (where existing) a Culture of Accountability at the Cabinet and Director Levels.

**Year 3:** A Culture of Accountability at District Level Teams and leaders: Clergy: Elders, Deacons, Fulltime Local Pastors, Part time Local Pastors, Supply and Student Pastors.

**Year 4:** A Culture of Accountability at the Local Church & Laity Teams levels.

**Year 5:** Enjoy the Harvest.

The goal every year would be to develop in phases a culture of accountability that produces results at the Conference level. After all, the most influential culture is a Culture of Missional Accountability.

4. 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)

In my experience, leadership is both a gift of the Spirit and a skill. A leader needs be able to discover, develop and deploy passionate spiritual disciples into the marketplace.

**DISCOVER:** As the Lexington District Superintendent, I launched the Lexington Disciple Making Network with the purpose of creating a platform to launch all our district initiatives for Church Health, Church Collaboration, and Church Multiplication. Our first effort was to create a system to discover leaders and churches to start new dinner churches. (We ultimately launched ten). Likewise, we reorganized the district to function as one church with seventy congregations. The structure also involves the recruitment and development of four Assistants to the DS as an extension of the DS office missional work. The missional and administrative work is led by our District Operational Team (DOT). In turn, our DOT leads supervise our twelve Covenant Band leaders. In short, all our seventy clergy are connected and meeting together in twelve covenant bands around the district: American, African and African American, bi-vocational and Hispanic.

The other area of attention has been the discovery and development of young leaders; a District Youth Team was formed and launched reaching a hundred youth in attendance. We see our large churches as sponsors of medium and small congregations. Our Large Church pastors' band meets monthly to organize efforts to collaborate with other congregations. In 2020, we set a goal to join with New Church Development and our large membership churches to launch multi-sites for the large membership churches. I have also led the district on fulfilling our mission covenant to the district and the conference, with a 99% success rate.

**DEVELOP:** I pursued a Master in Leadership to harness the gift of leadership I have received from the Lord. I graduated in 2011 with tools to take my leadership skills to the next level. The education has helped me to lead with a team rather than being a solo heroic leader. In twenty years of active ministry, I had intentionally developed leaders inside and outside the local church to send into the mission field to plant three UM churches.

**DEPLOY:** Many of these leaders have become ministry leaders as Elders, Deacons, Local Pastors, and church planters. These leaders have understood the importance of community impact and church growth. In this new season of my ministry, the Lexington Disciple Making Network I founded has become our missional outpost to deploy our seventy churches into the community.

5. How have you demonstrated a willingness to be held accountable for results and demonstrated an ability to hold others accountable, with grace, for their results (staff or volunteers)? Describe your track record of doing the “right thing” in difficult situations.

Accountability levels the field for us all to hold each other accountable for our behaviors regardless of titles, positional leadership, or ministry experience. I have practiced accountability, not only in my own leadership development, but in the process of developing cross-cultural staff, non-paid staff, and volunteers. As a District Superintendent our goal is to grow our district number of churches 10% in four years from seventy to seventy-seven churches through practicing Church Health, Church Collaboration and Church Multiplication. This mission requires spiritual accountabilities such as the practice of our Wesleyan means of grace: weekly worship, the reading of Scriptures, partaking the sacraments, daily prayer, weekly fasting, Christian conferencing, and participating and creating discipleship bands. As I shared earlier, I am part of these discipleship groups, where each week I report my spiritual development. I belong to four covenant bands that hold me accountable for spiritual and professional growth: Bishop, Cabinet, our District Team, and the Spiritual Leadership Inc. Lead Team.

Missional Accountability: I arrived at the conclusion that there is not such a thing as discipleship and leadership development without accountability. To this end, a personal development plan (PDP) and a ministry action plan (MAP) need to be in place for every ministry leader and church we serve. This has been a critical part of my role as a DS and has allowed us to build the infrastructure to accomplish our mission. For example, our first goal during my first year was for every clergy member to have a PDP, and we did so through accountability and follow-up done by our covenant band leaders at our leadership bands. I was able to confirm the success during appointment consultations. We now turn to the second phase of our plan for every church to have a working Ministry Action Plan.

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

As an ordained Elder in the Kentucky Annual Conference, I remember the words of my Bishop as he prayed over me, to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. “Iosmar, take authority as an Elder to preach the Word of God, to administer the Holy Sacraments and to order the life of the Church.” For me as an Elder, doing the right thing in difficult situations is a matter of integrity as I live out my calling in the world. I must confess that this doesn’t come naturally, especially with people dear to my heart. Therefore, I have worked hard under the leadership of many spiritual directors on developing strong boundaries to build my character as a leader. I don’t go into difficult situations with a Messiah Complex trying to save the day or allow co-dependency to rob me from making the right decision at the right time.

As a local pastor I have been in difficult situations “seventy times seven.” An example of doing the right thing was the decision in 2015 to exit one of my associate pastors who had helped me tremendously in growing the church. I sent him to start our second campus in another city nearby. The church was established, and disciples were being made, but he also got involved in a sexual affair with a church member there. I invited him to a private meeting and confronted him in love. It was a very sad outcome for everyone, but especially for that pastoral family and

the congregation. I kept walking with them by offering counseling and pastoral care, but also holding to my decision of exiting him from ministry.

As a new District Superintendent, I realized that one of our leading African American churches was in steep decline. The church had an unhealthy pastoral environment, as well as toxic member relationships. Together with Bishop Fairley, we met with the leadership and began a partnership with a coach from SBC 21 (Strengthening the Black Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) to help the appointed interim pastor to lead effectively and prepare the way for the new pastor in a year. The 18-month process has been hard because a core group of people who led the church into their current decline left the church after verbally attacking me and the interim pastor in our meetings. Throughout this period, I chose to be a non-anxious presence. I kept pressing forward by listening, asking questions, and building consensus. At present, the new lay leadership in place is leading the church forward, while working as a team. Worship attendance has increased by 40% and new discipleship groups have been formed that meet weekly outside Sunday worship.

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

As a District Superintendent I have been exposed to our Conference in a whole new way compared to my local church pastor days. To be effective, I began my work doing a lot of surveys, peer-to-peer interviews, on-site consultations, and I met with every church SPRC team to gain an understanding of the culture of my district. I met with our Conference staff to discuss polices, structures, alignment, legal administrative processes for all type of cases of personnel and church management. In fact, the implementation of the appointment process itself taught me a lot about the ministry life of our Annual Conference and the internal culture of our churches.

During my twenty years of ministry in the Kentucky Conference, I have served as a bridge between cultures, serving as an ambassador for the silenced. In similar manner, I was a member of our New Church Development Lead Team for many years. I have served in our Annual Conference Nomination Team. I am also the Cabinet Representative to the Board of Ordained Ministry. In addition, I have served with the Board of Laity and the Conference Board of Trustees.

I founded The Hispanic Christian Academy in partnership with United Theological Seminary and the Kentucky Annual Conference. Today, this Academy is training leaders nationwide.

Regarding General Conference, I was privileged to serve as a Kentucky Conference Delegate in 2016, 2019 and 2020. I have led church revitalization, church planting across the Conference, and worked on Cabinet-level projects in Western North Carolina, Great Plains, Florida, Kansas, Central Texas, and Northwest Texas Conferences. Also, I have led projects dealing with leadership development, disciple-making systems, and conference alignment. I have been a Spiritual Leadership Inc. coach for more than 12 years. I also have been exposed to a myriad of Hispanic-Latino projects at the district and local church level in partnership with Path 1, working with the California-Nevada, Mountain Sky, and Northern Illinois Conferences.

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

I am a proud United Methodist who considers himself a leader with a global exposure, not because I am great, but because the UMC is great! My relationship with our key global United Methodist agencies shaped my leadership worldview to understand the work and culture of other conferences globally. In my passion to follow my missionary zeal, I have grown tremendously on developing cultural competency by serving the UMC around the world in short-term mission work teams in Korea (twice), Dominican Republic (four times), Canada, Colombia, Kenya, Cuba, and Vietnam.

Vietnam: In 2010 in partnership with West Ohio Conference, I traveled to Vietnam in a short-term mission trip. I witnessed one of the most successful church-planting movements that has produced 120 churches in ten years.

Cuba: In 2014 In partnership with the Methodist Church in Cuba, and Bishop Rev. Ricardo Pereira, I had the privilege to train 600 missionaries and pastoral families to go back and plant and re-mission churches. It was epic!

Publications: I have published a book with the GBOD, [Viral Multiplication of Hispanic Churches.](#)

8. How do you encourage the development of future lay and clergy leaders?

#### **Laitly and Clergy Encouragement System:**

I developed over the years systems to bring up new lay leaders for today and tomorrow's generations of church planters, who in turn will become laity and clergy to serve the church according to their calling, gifts, and graces. I consistently encourage the implementation of four basic steps to help church members and clergy to be part of the UMC missional movement and reach their potential in the Lord.

**Training:** We recognize the great diversity of contexts and needs in the UMC, where local churches have contextual needs. That is why we need to provide holistic trainings in various areas and make the necessary arrangements so that others can be trained and become trainers in crucial areas of churches' needs.

**Coaching:** Using the Coaching method, we can create a growth interaction in which the coach (advisor) helps to draw out the ideas, wisdom and plans that already exist in the mind and heart of the person being coached. This conversation contains questions and allows the trainee to cultivate their answers, which leads to making a series of ministry action plans. In summary, we ensure the advancement and growth of each person in the process.

**Mentoring:** In contrast to the Coaching method, mentoring allows an interaction of modeling, accompanying, and providing instruction. Both methods have the same goal in mind: to facilitate growth and the realization of each person's plans.

**Accountability:** We believe in the biblical teaching of mutual accountability in Christ. Accountability for ministry and personal goals will help us not only grow personally but accomplish what Christ has called us to do for His glory. By interacting with this leadership system, one can expect pastoral care, training, coaching, mentoring, and accountability.

9. What is your response to these topics in the United Methodist Church? Please limit your responses to two paragraphs for each topic.
- a. Human sexuality

As a District Superintendent, I am called to serve and lead all our churches with integrity and justice regardless of their positions on human sexuality. I understand the episcopacy as an office that calls presiding Elders to be Bishops for the whole Church –regardless of where we are theologically or contextually.

As a covenant person and an ordained Elder, I vowed to abide and uphold the Book of Discipline today and in the future with integrity and compassion. Despite personal convictions, I know the Church needs Bishops and leaders who honor the Discipline. We don't call ourselves. God calls us through the Church to serve the Church. As I anticipate the future, I know that the BOD most likely would change at GC 2024 or later to honor the United States context. Under that scenario, I will remain United Methodist and serve alongside all elected Bishops and church leaders to continue assisting the Church in the glorious mission of making disciples for the transformation of the world.

That said, I value accepting people with love and genuineness regardless of views or identities. I can put an arm around a person with a different perspective on any issue and love them as my own. For example, I came to the United States from Cuba, a country where the state government is oppressive and controlling. I left my country behind in pain, which I still feel to this day. Despite that, I refused to deny my faith. I refuse to surrender the freedom to voice my thoughts in all areas of life; in short, it is a matter of principle to me. In the words of John Wesley, "Never dream of forcing men into the ways of God. Think yourself, and let think. Use no constraints in matters of religion." It is my value and conviction not to impose onto others what was imposed onto me and not to deny others the same freedom I risked my life to get here in my new home. In conclusion, I know firsthand the pain, frustration, degradation, and invalidation that comes from a totalitarian culture, a culture where an elite dictate what other people groups should or should not do or think; a culture where the few (whoever they might be) enforce how the many shall act and live. As a disciple of Christ, I believe that all people are created equal. As a Bishop for the whole Church, I am called to respect people for who they are, as persons of worth and sacred to God.

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- b. Local church closures and establishing new faith communities

Let me be clear: My ecclesiology does not allow my mind to rest with the reality that local churches are closing at an alarming rate. Hear me well, every time any church is closed or sold, my heart aches profoundly. In the name of Christ, I celebrate the ministry of every church anywhere that has closed. At the same time, I am passionate about planting new faith

communities, even as we are closing others. The Church of Christ is never dead, never closed; it might be asleep, but never dead. I have hope because I believe that The United Methodist Church is alive, and for that, I honor all clergy and laity everywhere in our UM connection for our 250-year history of faithfulness and making disciples for the transformation of the world.

c. Next generations leaders

I believe that to be truly missional, we must find ways to intentionally impact the next three generations. The pioneer generation that founded Methodism inherited a movement that led them to be disciples with consistency, integrity, and character. I am convinced that it is not possible to think about future generations without investing in the present one. We have all witnessed many discipleship plans offered by our conferences to our local churches, but it is not and never has been about the plan, but rather the people. I propose to continue that focus by planting disciple-making churches for the transformation of the world. Let's stop trying to figure out the next plan and let's start moving into active disciple-making with the present generation to produce the next wave of passionate spiritual leaders.

d. Guaranteed appointment for clergy

The Book of Discipline "assures" appointment. Considering that reality, I want to clarify that guaranteed appointments and itinerancy are not only to address clergy ineffectiveness or job security; its purpose is to guarantee that every UM church in the connection has a pastor to preach the word and care for the flock. Guaranteed appointment has allowed clergy who disagree with Bishops to have an appointment and for women and ethnic minorities to have a place to serve. As a District Superintendent, I have led many conversations with our congregations to create awareness and acceptance of clergy from all walks of life, races, gender, and color.

I believe that we need to have more conversations around this issue to make sure we are addressing it from all angles. This is an adaptive issue, which means that no one person has the answer. The appointment process has progressed and needs to continue to evolve to address the present challenge. We need to come together and revise our present values, behaviors, results, and actions, in contrast with the desired culture, values, behaviors and results we might prefer.

10. What do they see as the greatest challenge for the UMC? What are the greatest opportunities?

I acknowledge my limitation to determine our most significant challenge and opportunity as The United Methodist Church. However, with the guidance of the Spirit I will aim to identify some challenges and opportunities from the perspective of a missionary to this beautiful land I now call home.

**I believe that where there is challenge, there is also opportunity:**

**Greatest UMC Challenges and Opportunities:**

**C:** The deadly combination of shallow leadership and a shallow leadership pool. On shallow leadership, Ron Edmondson explains that it refers to leaders who think their ideas will be everyone's ideas. Leaders who assume they already know the answer pretend to care when they don't and refuse to make decisions that put the church first.

**O:** Create a culture of missional accountability and organic systems for disciple- and leadership-making to ensure practical church politics.

**C:** The deadly disaffiliation hurricane impacted the UMC between 2022 and December 2023.

**O:** We should remain committed to helping congregations and clergy find the space in which they may minister in healthy ways. It is out of our health that we can provide the loving care that our world needs.

**C:** The challenge of systemic racism, inequality, and diversity: Women's wide acceptance and honor in leadership continues to be an issue at the local church level.

**O:** Create processes that provide walk-alongside experiences in local churches where the identification, training, and mentoring of a diverse set of leaders will set the stage for a healthy future.

**C:** The great divorce between uniform orthodoxy, orthopraxis, and gracious behavior.

**O:** Creating a culture of trust where no church or clergy member may fear or feel pressure to minister in ways alien to their consciences.