

Biographical Sketch for Sharon G. Austin
Florida Conference 2022 Episcopal Nominee
#BeUMC

Sharon G. Austin was selected as the Florida Conference Episcopal nominee in 2020 and was recently affirmed as the Florida Conference Episcopal nominee for the 2022 Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference. Her pronouns are she/her/hers. She has been a clergywoman for over 40 years and has celebrated twenty-five years in The United Methodist Church. When she decided to transfer to The United Methodist Church, she described the transfer of orders as a leading of the 'Holy Spirit.'

She has served as the Conference Director of Connectional and Justice since 2013. She has served five Cross-Racial/Cross-Cultural Appointments: including appointments to three local churches, and later as a District Superintendent (of the former South-Central District). She had oversight of a complex district comprised of ninety churches and missions in rural, suburban, and urban communities. She has served on a host of District and Conference leadership teams and, as Director of Connectional and Justice Ministries, serves as an officer of the Florida Annual Conference. She also serves on numerous Southeastern Jurisdictional and General Church boards, agencies, and committees (refer to Episcopal Questions #6 and #7 for a more robust listing). She has represented the Florida Annual Conference at General and Southeastern Jurisdictional Conferences in 2012, 2016, and General Conference 2019 and elected to serve at General Conference 2020. Last year, she served as Co-interim District Superintendent of the Gulf Central District simultaneously while serving as Director of Connectional and Justice Ministries.

She was born in 1955 and is a native of Jamaica, New York, who grew up during the Civil Rights Movement. She was baptized in the Congregational Church and raised in Lutheran Churches on Long Island, New York. Her parents (who met and married in NY) were native Floridians with North and South Carolina and Baptist and A.M.E. roots. She was actively involved in her neighborhoods, churches, schools, girl scout troops, and dance classes. The culturally diverse membership of these organizations significantly informed her passion for and expectation of diversity and inclusion. The family later moved to Florida and joined the Baptist church of her grandparents. Every place and denomination in which she worshipped, she experienced the power of God, the love of Jesus Christ, and the movement of the Holy Spirit! Her father responded to a call to ministry, as had Austins before him.

She is *now* a proud sexagenarian who realizes that when decades of experience are needed, little if anything else can suffice. Her ecumenical exposure, ordination in two denominations, serving in a denomination that represented a split primarily over social justice issues, ministry of care and healing in several chaplaincy settings, history of 'firsts,' continued advocacy and activism for justice and inclusion, saturation in and commitment to The United Methodist Church and abiding faith in the Kingdom work of inclusion uniquely qualify her for leadership. People in Austin's personal life and professional associations have spoken into her life and ministry over the years. The Spirit's nudging has prompted her toward listening and now responding to the call to offer herself as an Episcopal leader of The United Methodist Church.

Austin fondly and frequently says, “every clergyperson was once a layperson.” As a child and teenager, she was an active layperson, teaching Sunday School at age 16 and responding to her call to ministry in 1975 while a student at Berry College in Mt. Berry, GA. She was attracted to the ministry of a young United Methodist campus chaplain who influenced the course of her future vocation. He invited her to join the chapel choir and serve as a chapel assistant. Her call to ministry grew louder in contrast to the Baptist Church’s exclusive boundaries, which grew more stringent. Her home pastor never acknowledged her call to ordained ministry. She was also attracted to a tall, smart guy with an ‘afro,’ and they later married. Their chaplain later officiated their wedding, invited her to preach at the College Chapel, and remained a friend and confidante until his untimely death. Austin earned a bachelor’s degree in Psychology with a double minor in Religion and Philosophy. She later attended Candler School of Theology, Atlanta, GA (and as a National Baptist) on the recommendation of her chaplain and Religion and Philosophy Department faculty. She was a founding member of Candler’s Baptist Studies Program. She was inducted into Omicron Delta Kappa in Seminary (a National Leadership Honor Society).

She joined Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church while in seminary (which was dually aligned with the Progressive National and American Baptist Conventions). When Austin graduated from Candler in 1977 with a Master of Divinity degree, only one previous class included an African-American woman. She was later licensed and ordained by Ebenezer Baptist Church, becoming the first woman to be ordained in the congregation’s 95-year history. Notably, the late Martin Luther King, Sr. was among those who served on her ordination council. She was later ‘called’ to serve as the first woman to join the pastoral staff.

Austin has served as a clinical chaplain for a women’s prison, completed 8.5 units of Clinical Pastoral Education in several hospitals, served as adjunct faculty at the Interdenominational Theological Center (The I.T.C.) and Candler School of Theology, and served as a hospice chaplain. Following her move to FL, she attended and graduated from the Barry University Doctor of Ministry program in Miami, FL.

Over the years, she has experienced many ‘firsts’ and received numerous accolades and awards from civic groups and sororities. Among her civic engagement has been membership on the board of Planned Parenthood, a Domestic Violence Shelter board, and law enforcement Citizens Advisory Boards. She has been quoted in newspapers and magazines and appeared on “Good Morning, America.” Her broad ecumenical exposure uniquely positions her to reach out and connect with people and populations across a broad spectrum. Her extensive international travel defines her as a ‘global citizen.’

She enjoys traveling and eating unusual and locally sourced foods, cooking favorite foods for family gatherings, reading, gardening, and dancing (explained by some as the reason she is no longer Baptist)! She is married to Michael Holliday (retired). They are the proud and grateful parents of four gainfully employed children; three daughters, Erin, Genise, and Desiree, and one son, Nicholas (sometimes affectionately referred to as ‘the critics’). Nicholas and Nerli are parents to sons Collin, a toddler, and Dillon, an infant, who are a joy!