

## **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?**

I was raised in the United Methodist Church by parents who believed a relationship with Christ was essential. Our congregation conscientiously lived 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 moves in front of me and leads me to new experiences of Christ's love and opportunities to serve God's kingdom. Justifying grace shows me the contrast between my attitudes, words, or actions, and the righteousness and deeper purpose of God's will that could be exemplified in my life. I experience sanctifying grace through the spiritual practices of our Wesleyan Christian tradition such as Holy Communion, Bible study, silence, worship, contemplative prayer, and conversation shared in my weekly Life Group. I find that study related to weekly sermon preparation and book writing 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 my wife Karen and me to discover that God can be trusted in all seasons of life.

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 live. Christ is the center of vital churches. The Holy Spirit is sought as a guide to the church and its members in such churches. Vitality and transformation require a methodology. Floris UMC, where I serve, invites people to engage in weekly practices of worship, service, discipleship in small groups, sharing their faith with others, and generosity. We enjoy over 30 partnerships that include a nearby Elementary School with one of the highest free and reduced lunch populations in our county, the Sierra Leone Annual Conference where we support the Child Reintegration Centre and Mercy Hospital, and our ministries to immigrants like English to Speakers of Other Languages and Grace Ministries, along with others. Each of these partnerships has enabled us to care for and serve with persons who are vulnerable. We have found the presence of Christ in these relationships and efforts. During the pandemic, our ministries innovated to new models to continue to serve our community and congregation.

**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 these churches have demonstrated numerical growth and paid full apportionments. Vibrant worship and involvement in small groups, where people learn the Bible and 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 25 years. Floris UMC has grown from an average worship attendance of 400 persons in 1997 to over 1,400 in 2020. Since the pandemic, our registered online and in-person attendance is about 1100 persons. We are launching new experiments in discipleship and worship to see how to reach people in a world that is undergoing great social transformation. We are a multi-site congregation. There are also two services at two other sites that meet in schools in nearby communities led by associate pastors. I am pleased to see new members joining our church, many of whom are attracted by our "One Church for All" logo, developed to communicate that persons of all races, identities, orientations, and abilities are welcomed and accepted.

Floris UMC has an active small group ministry. More than 60% of our worshipping congregation attends weekly small groups together. Other discipleship opportunities come through guest lectures by professors at Wesley Seminary and short-term studies held throughout the year. Our work in the local community is noted in the questions above.

**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?**

Communication and the ability to bring diverse people together around shared mission, beliefs, and values are skills I offer that co-workers and church members identify as helpful. I lead best in teams where many contribute their insights and spiritual gifts. I would far prefer to be a part of the Jerusalem Council in Acts, where the disciples had to discern and work together, than to be Moses who comes down from the mountain carrying the wisdom of God alone. It is important for Jurisdictional delegates to understand that our future will depend on finding leaders who focus on "we" instead of "me". There is no individual who will have the skill sets, knowledge, and abilities to lead the church out of this time of division and decline and reset its focus and ministry. We will have to do that together as the lay and clergy members of churches and conferences. It is possible to find leaders who want to build healthy relationships and

practices amongst those who want their church to be vital and serve the great commission and great commandment. Only when we draw out the gifts and insights of the many will we begin to flourish.

A reset of focus and ministry will require us to reinvest in our commitment to our doctrine and distinctive Wesleyan theology as found in the first four sections of The Book of Discipline. These foundations need to be taught in our local churches. The last year has demonstrated how little our laity understand the security of their church's doctrine and theology. Some laity listen to falsehoods told about their denomination because they lack foundational knowledge of our doctrine, theology, and practices. New life in our congregations and conferences will be found in a fresh discovery of the calling of Jesus Christ to receive the Holy Spirit, which will remind us of all Jesus has said and call out the spiritual gifts to advance our ministry. We must create new systems of support for leaders and churches who want to find new ways to reach people in their communities with the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ and grow deeper in their discipleship. In the coming years, we will need to consider new platforms of technology to reach the world. At the same time, we must learn how our members want to experience congregational life that helps them live out the Christian faith in an increasingly complex world. We will have to listen well to both our members and people in our communities to develop strategies that will enable people to experience a vital Christian community.

I have served churches of every size, from 35 to 1,400 in worship, which gives me a unique base of experience in the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs. I have served on the Commission on a Way Forward which required me to learn and understand the way our denominational boards, agencies, central, jurisdictional, and annual conferences interface with our local churches across the world. I served on the Protocol team which offered legislation to the 2020 General Conference to resolve our denominational impasse.

Through these experiences I have developed a capacity to learn, synthesize large amounts of information, and work with teams to create new opportunities and resolve complex problems. There are very few experiences that truly prepare a person to be a Bishop. The best predictor of a person who will ably serve in that role will not be their past vocational experience, but whether they demonstrate a capacity to learn, lead efforts to successful outcomes, and manage conflict in ways that are functional with positive conclusions. Serving a large, multi-site church has enabled me to lead an organization with over 60 full and part-time employees and over 3,500 members. I understand the importance of systems for communication, human resources, management, and leadership in a complex organization. It has given me ample opportunity to face and manage conflict over a variety of topics, from the relocation of the facility to issues of diversity, race, and inclusion of all persons in the life of the congregation. Conflict is an experience God uses to sanctify us. I have learned from the

pressures of conflict in the church and understand the behaviors and qualities of character that must be present in a leader to allow the church to prevail in such times.

**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)**

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. It's about ministry rather than meetings. When people share their faith with their neighbors, help each other grow in discipleship, and serve the poor and vulnerable in our community, nation, and world, faith is vital. 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. My sermons focus on how to live out our faith in the daily spaces of life: home, vocation, and community. These are the places where our members spend most of their time and have the greatest influence and impact.

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. In learning that long-term members of Floris UMC experienced their church at the center of its community so that Christ would be at the center of the community's life in the past, 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 the community was homogeneous and rural. 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 also affirming and welcoming to LGBTQ persons so that we can truly reflect the composition of our community. The addition of members from Africa, South Asia, and South and Central America, along with LGBTQ persons, has made for a rich experience of Christian community.

I have written books on church leadership with Dr. Lovett Weems along with articles in various publications. This practice has enabled me to thoughtfully consider how leadership works in the church.

My Clifton Strengths include Maximizer, Learner, Arranger, Achiever and Communicator.

**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.**

Throughout my ministry I have reviewed and met metrics related to worship attendance, membership, giving, apportionment payment, and other indicators of congregational vitality expected by the denomination.

I serve a multi-staff congregation where we use a performance management system that includes 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 to our Management Team through the Best Christian Workplace evaluation process. This enables our managers to understand the needs of the larger staff and improve our work culture. Annual goals, developed in concert with fellow staff members and the Church Council, give me and others clarity about the best use of time and the way each of us uniquely contributes to the ministry of our church. I have been blessed to enjoy coaching and participate in a peer-learning group of clergy colleagues.

As a pastor of a local church, I have worked with church leaders to do the “right thing” in each of my appointments. In my first appointment after seminary, we renovated an underutilized nursery in a church full of aging congregants so that young families would feel welcomed. In the second, we moved from an inward to an outward facing orientation, which led to the growth of the church and its ministry. At Floris UMC we relocated from a facility that was only six years old 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. In my 25-year tenure, I have preached and taught about historic and current

racial oppression and prejudice, led conversations about ways to be biblically faithful and affirm LGBTQ persons, and raised the value of evangelism in the church to get people to embrace new ways to share Christ with others. I have been so clear on values of inclusion, anti-racism and other important social issues that we have both lost and gained members as a result. Doing the right thing is not easy, but it is a requirement for Christian leaders.

The most memorable example of doing the right thing occurred after we started the Child Rescue Centre (CRC) in Bo, Sierra Leone, with Rev. John Yambasu (at that time) and 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 15 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 to work in concert with the leadership of the Sierra Leone Annual Conference. The CRC (renamed the Child Reintegration Centre) now provides access to education and health care for more than 600 children in supported family-based care, working to give children who live on the street, often due to food insecurity, a new life and supporting parents to help lift families out of extreme poverty. 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. Utilizing outpatient care and village clinics, Mercy staff currently provide 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 the Sierra Leone Annual Conference who staff and lead these ministries 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 Conferences? (For example, cabinet experience, service on a committee, board or agency, etc.)**

In the Virginia Annual Conference I have served on the Bishop's Initiative on Children and Poverty, the Common Table Task Force (restructuring our Annual Conference leadership, chairperson), the Board of Ordained Ministry (member), All Things New (Conference plan for church development and revitalization), the Committee on Episcopacy (chairperson), and the Five Talent Academy (chairperson). I have been the Virginia clergy leader to General and Jurisdictional Conference 5 times and have served on the Southeastern Jurisdictional Committee on the Episcopacy for 13 years, serving

as an officer for 10. 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, which was another opportunity to better understand and learn from the General Boards and Agencies. I 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* for the 2020 General Conference.

**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 have experience in the global UMC through service on the Board of Directors for the Child Reintegration Centre (formerly Child Rescue Centre) and Mercy Hospital, founded 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*, *Courage: Jesus and the Call to Brave Faith* as well others.

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

Lay and clergy leaders respond well to ministry where something is at stake. They want to know that lives are being transformed as people accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and grow in discipleship. They are willing to engage in ministry when people are being fed, educated, and cared for in ways that bring greater health and vitality. Often as a church, we ask too little of people, or ask them to lead matters where there is no transformational outcome. People engaged in ministry that they deem meaningful and important are willing to learn best practices. We are aided by excellent training that has been sponsored by our district and conference. I have taken teams of clergy and laity to training held at various churches and events around the country where we can learn as a team and later consider how to best implement what we have learned to improve our ministry.

**9. 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 biblical and theological interpretations related to human sexuality that are varied. 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 expression to heterosexuality. These same elements lead others to call for intentional and full inclusion of all persons, including same-gender marriage.

I affirm that the sexuality of gay and lesbian persons is an orientation that 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, but not the requirement, to offer Christian marriage to gay couples. Members of local churches have varying views on same-sex marriage. Congregations already both manage this tension and maintain their unity in Christ. I believe that our denomination can do this as well if duly qualified gay persons were licensed, commissioned, and ordained to serve as clergy in our denomination. Annual Conferences can be trusted with the ability to discern who should be ordained. I do not think that General Conference will be able to resolve this issue in a manner acceptable to everyone in our global church. A plan of regionalization like that proposed in the Christmas Covenant would help our global church deal with these issues in a manner of mutual respect. At the same time, we can continue to work together globally to spread scriptural holiness, serve with the poor and marginalized, and work for social justice despite our disagreements on human sexuality. We must face the negative impact this unresolved conflict is having on our ability to share the good news of Christ in our communities. Congregations in many places in our global connection such as the United States that cannot affirm and welcome LGBTQ persons 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 more traditional views without forcing each other to violate our consciences. We can offer greater freedom of practice without holding judgement toward others who disagree with us.

### **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, a trend that the pandemic has only made more severe. 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. Consideration and coordination of this effort should be a primary focus of our Annual Conferences.

**c. Next generations leaders**

There must be a new spirit of support and encouragement in our conferences if there is to be a new life in our church. We must communicate that these people are important, provide them the scaffolding that enables them to find success in ministry, and deploy them strategically to serve churches who will appreciate them or put them in settings where they can engage in collegial relationships with fellow staff members. I have brought next generation leaders together in learning cohorts to help them build relationships with other clergy, learn about topics and skills they describe as important, and spend time learning from each other. Vital conferences do this as well. It would be helpful if clergy and Cabinet members would listen to them preach, observe the life of their congregations, and have a sense of who they are and what they do well. Large churches could provide intentional coaching and training, along with collegial relationships that would benefit these leaders in the years ahead.

**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 most of our congregations have embraced an 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.

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 and 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.

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

The United Methodist Church needs to reset its focus and ministry. It is time to let churches and clergy who want to leave to do so. We must no longer spend time and energy defending our denomination from the disparagements of others. We must focus on our mission and purpose. Like John Wesley, who hoped to reset the Anglican tradition, we must cherish our theological heritage while making significant changes of practice for the sake of the gospel. Wesley rose above his personal beliefs and principles allowing women to preach and engaging in field preaching to reach large numbers of people with the good news of Jesus Christ. He and other early Methodist leaders had reservations about whether it was right to do these things, or if they would work, but trusted that the Holy Spirit transforming lives was a sign of God's intention and blessing. What are we willing to try and do for the sake of the gospel? Like Wesley, we must start with people as they really are and go to where they really are with a message from the Bible that addresses the real issues of their lives.

The splintering of the United Methodist Church, lost offerings, and the impact of the pandemic on the church are not topics that motivate people to enter a relationship with Christ, but they seem to consume most of our denominational energy. There has never been a time when there are so many people who do not know Jesus Christ in our midst. They have real life issues they are dealing with that we can choose to address. We must reach them in ways they find relevant, which will be as diverse as meeting them in nature to using the latest technology. We must become theologians in those spaces, to connect people to the life-giving grace of Christ described in the Bible. This is where vitality and life are going to be found for our church. We are stewards of the United Methodist witness in our communities. The disaffiliation of some of our churches provides us the opportunity to start a new United Methodist witness that can be fresh and vital. Conference leaders will need to figure out how to bring that witness to communities where it is no longer present.