

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

### **Rev. Amy Coles, Western North Carolina**

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

As a life-long United Methodist, I grew up being formed through Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, children's and youth choirs, church day camp, UMYF, mission trips, and retreats. At the same time, I watched my parents participate on church committees, in church workdays, at blood mobiles, and in teaching Sunday School. They encouraged me to serve as appropriate in the nursery, helping at VBS, and cleaning up after the "coffee time" following worship. From an early age, I learned that "church" was about worship, study, and service.

I made a personal profession of faith as a ninth grader in the spring of 1978. During college, I was given the opportunity to teach Sunday School, help with the Junior High UMYF, and train as a leader for the Bethel Bible Study, a Lutheran precursor to Disciple. Even as I thought my life would be focused on developing computer software for preschool and elementary classrooms, I knew that it would also include a significant investment in my local church.

Answering God's call to ministry soon after I graduated from college was difficult, as only once had I experienced worship led by a female pastor. I entered seminary at Duke sure that I was being called into youth ministry, an area of service in which I found much joy. It was in seminary that I was given the Wesleyan language to describe my faith journey thus far. God's prevenient grace through my parents and many others led me to that moment of justification in ninth grade, and God's sanctifying grace from that moment forward was leading me towards Christ-like perfection in love. I learned that the spiritual practices in which I'd engaged, Bible study, accountability groups, silent retreats, prayer, and communion were God's means of grace, and that serving others was a natural and expected response to that love.

Embracing that God's call was to ministry as an elder in The United Methodist Church was another moment of justification in my life. The disciplines which formed me as a youth and young adult continue to sustain me even now, as well as the others that I've added over the years, like fasting and journaling.

I would describe the rhythm of my life in the words of Elizabeth O'Conner, a journey inward and a journey outward. I am passionate about leading the community of faith to be about the kingdom work of love, justice, and mercy, and have come to know that doing that work faithfully is a response to a growing relationship in the God I know in Jesus Christ.

**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.)**

To me, pastoral fruitfulness means leading a congregation in fulfilling the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ through their vision as a community of faith. Guided by the Wesleyan understanding of holiness of heart and life, I have understood my call as a pastor to include preaching, teaching, and modeling the interrelationship of discipleship and mission as a faithful response to Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. In each church that I've served, I have witnessed God's transforming power in the lives of those in the church and the community.

My first appointment was to a healthy rural church that taught me much about what it means to be a pastoral leader. Through relationship building, I was able to help heal some woundedness from the past which created space for God to lead members back to participation with the congregation. I worked to coordinate and strengthen the children and youth ministries, through which we gained several new members. For adults, I initiated a weekly prayer group as well as several short-term studies. I also led the church in facilities and grounds improvements to provide a welcoming and functional space for worship and ministry.

After four years, I offered myself and was appointed as the associate pastor of a new church start into which had recently merged an established church on the downward slope of her lifecycle. There, I was able to experience, support, and expand a vibrant small group ministry. I also had the opportunity to focus on the assimilation of new members in the life of the congregation through encouraging participating in discipleship opportunities and outreach ministries in addition to worship. The church offered daycare, preschool, and afterschool care to those within the community. My undergraduate degree was helpful as those programs grew, and as we strengthened the connection between those ministries and the church community.

In my third year as an associate, I was asked by the Bishop and Cabinet to move to a medium-size rural church which was somewhat skeptical of and reticent to receive their first female pastor. When I moved again, ten years later, I gave thanks for the ways that God had worked through my partnership with the laity in deepening their impact on their community and the world. I facilitated the beginning of Disciple Bible study for adults and youth as well as adapting it for children. I encouraged the fulfillment of their goal to begin a preschool and afterschool program utilizing the space in a newly built fellowship hall and classroom building. In time, we added a secretary and fulltime Christian educator to support the growing ministries of the congregation. I led the church in the formation of intentional outreach ministries to the community, including a yearly food, clothing, and

school supplies distribution which continues to this day. During the last five years of my tenure there, the congregation was chosen to be one of the thriving rural congregations in the Thriving Communities Initiative, a joint program of The Duke Endowment, Duke Divinity School, the North Carolina Conference, and the Western North Carolina Conference. Through participation in that initiative, we were able to be a “teaching parish” for others as well as to glean ideas and resources from other thriving congregations.

As a District Superintendent, I employed what I learned in the settings in which I’d served to nurture and support the growth of local churches within the district. Those efforts were met with varying degrees of success; however, the risks and failures always bore the fruit of further knowledge about the attitudes, behaviors, tools necessary for a local church to thrive and to grow.

**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 that God has woven and will continue to weave my skills, knowledge, and abilities to enable me to be the leader needed for this time in the life of the Church. As a result of my employment as a teacher and in retail management prior to seminary, I have skills and abilities in communication, budgeting, coaching, and supervision. While serving as a rural church pastor, I gained knowledge in asset-based ministry development as well as the necessity of foster relationships with local schools and other community leaders. Superintendency enabled me to learn coaching and mediation skills as well as how to develop a missional strategy for a diverse group of churches. I’ve been mentored by three different bishops in my current role as Assistant to the Bishop and gained insight into the myriad of responsibilities of episcopal leadership. I’ve worked with teams to write grants, implement a performance management system for conference staff, reduce the number of districts in the conference from 15 to 8, and build a new conference office.

In the Gallop StrengthsFinder Inventory, my top 5 strengths are Relator, Developer, Achiever, Positivity, and Strategic. Through these assets, I am skilled at building relationships with laity and clergy and enabling them to develop their gifts and grace to fulfill God’s mission and vision in our corner of God’s kingdom.

As we remain mission focused, “business as usual” must change so that we can address the adaptive challenges of ministry in a post-Covid world. Shifting assets back to the local church to strengthen their discipleship and evangelism ministries is essential. An emphasis on empowerment will change the way we approach missions. A conference staff focused

on resourcing and supporting rather than programming will again help strengthen clergy and laity in bearing witness to God's presence in the world.

**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)**

Jesus modeled spiritual leadership as he gathered his disciples, instructed them in the "why, where, and what" of his mission, and then sent them forth in the knowledge that they could and would do even "greater things" than he. Such leadership is crucial in the life of the church today as for too long, we've settled for making members rather than disciples.

"Developer" is one of my top 5 strengths on the Gallop StrengthsFinder Inventory, and thus I gravitate towards helping others embrace and employ God's gifts and skills in their lives. In my last pastoral appointment, I had the opportunity to supervise the summer internship of seven field education students. In weekly supervision meetings, I explored with the intern where his/her giftedness intersected with the needs of the congregation. Many areas of ministry were often new to the student, which allowed for some practice and stretching of their leadership skills. Many of these interns now serve as colleagues in the Western North Carolina Conference, and it's gratifying to see how God has formed them into strong, faithful, spiritual leaders.

These interns were also instrumental in discovering younger leaders within the congregation. Because of my long tenure in that appointment, I was able to walk with these youth through their high school and college years. Catherine was an accomplished athlete and a faithful leader in the youth group. She was a champion for the youth summer mission trip and even when travel softball conflicted with the trip, she would do all that she could to participate in as much of the week as possible. In college, Catherine began exploring a call to ministry. I asked her to help lead worship while she was home for the summer, and we explored the differences between her deeply rooted, traditional home church worship and the energetic contemporary worship she'd experienced in Chapel Hill.

Three or four years after completing law school, passing the bar exam, and working in an office of legal affairs at a state university, Catherine's passion for missions was rekindled while participating in several mission trips to Kenya. These experiences led her to answer the call that she'd experienced years before. Currently, she is in her fourth year of ministry in Tigoni, a small community in Kenya. There, she works with girls in a local high school, passing on her gifts of spiritual leadership to them.

One of the roles of a District Superintendent is serving as the spiritual leader for the clergy and laity of the district. In the Smoky Mountain District, I had the opportunity to be a

part of the appointment of several young clergy to the churches in the eastern part of the district. Over the years, I'd observed that isolation was one of the factors which led younger clergy to leave ministry 5-7 years after graduation. Thus, I wondered if intentionally appointing them in a place where they could build community with each other would be beneficial to them and the churches they were serving. The results were far greater than I ever imagined. Not only did these clergy form community, but they also welcomed clergy of other denominations to join them in ministry with their community. They developed a strong church-school partnership which included packing weekend food backpacks, sponsoring summer feeding sites, improving third grade literacy, and working to alleviate the homelessness of children in the county. When severe flooding occurred in their county last fall, it was the missional network, comprised of these clergy, which took the lead in response and recovery. Nine years later, this "experiment" continues to allow clergy and the congregations which they serve to experience and live out the power of our connection.

**5. 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)? Describe your track record of doing the "right thing" in difficult situations.**

Throughout my life, I have been held accountable for my results as a student, as a preschool teacher, as a retail store manager, and as a pastoral leader. When challenged, I know myself as one who will rise to the occasion, and thus I've always appreciated the Wesleyan concept of growing in faith through gracious accountability. Even though it was hard and painful at times, I explained to S/PPRCs that I wanted them to give me open and honest feedback so that I could grow in my effectiveness as a pastor. When that was difficult for the committee, I sought out others in the congregation who would offer straightforward appraisals of my leadership. That pattern has continued as I've often asked to be held accountable by my cabinet colleagues and my covenant peer group sisters. They are instruments of God's sanctifying grace in my life.

It took some time for me to learn the value of holding laity leaders accountable for the work of their ministry areas. I was far too quick to pick up "the slack" because I knew they were busy. However, in doing so, I was also denying them the blessing that it is to follow through on what God has called you to do. Over time, I learned that supportive meetings with leaders to discuss what their team hoped to accomplish followed by regular reflection on the progress being made helped to increase their overall effectiveness.

The same was true when I worked with clergy as a district superintendent. I was intentional in building trusting relationships through setting clear expectations, and then

during consultations, focused on the clergy's progress in achieving his/her personal and professional goals. At times, those supervisory meetings led to the development of a personal performance improvement plan, because every church deserves the best leadership the pastor can offer.

As I think about episcopal leadership, I'm sure that I will follow the same pattern, asking the cabinet and episcopacy committee to hold me accountable and offering the same to those within the conference. God's Church deserves nothing less.

That kind of "outward" accountability is paired with an "inward" self-accountability through which I seek to do the "right thing" in difficult situations. In 2015, I was elected second in the Western North Carolina Conference delegation, and subsequently was selected as the episcopal nominee for conference. During the same time, I became aware of the need to provide care and a home for my 14-year-old niece. What I thought would be a short-term necessity evolved into long-term care. My niece needed love, stability, and the opportunity for regular visits with her mother. Thus, I made the difficult decision to withdraw as the nominee. Even now, when asked if I regret that decision, my answer is no. I did what needed to be done, the right thing at that time.

As the Assistant to the Bishop, I'm often involved with clergy who have broken covenant. Each of those situations is heart-breaking for me and can be especially difficult if the clergy has been a friend. Yet for the sake of the mission and those whom we serve, it's essential to hold clergy accountable and to work with the bishop in seeking a just resolution to the complaint.

Serving on the Connectional Table's Allocations Task Force gave me another opportunity to live into my core value of integrity. We were led by Chairperson, Bishop Christian Alsted, and Chief Connectional Ministries Officer, Rev. Kennetha Bingham-Tsai, and as we prepared for the 2020 General Conference, it became evident that the proposed 18% cut in the denominational budget for the 2021-2024 quadrennium would result in a 22.7% decrease in the five apportioned funds allocated by the Connectional Table: World Service, Africa University, Black College Fund, Ministerial Education Fund and the Interdenominational Cooperation Fund. It would have been easy for the task force to recommend across the board 22.7% decreases yet doing so would threaten the viability of some of our smaller agencies. Thus, the task force determined the need to diverge from the way that adjustments had been made over previous years. We grounded our work in scripture and developed a values-based approach toward making these decisions. With the aid of a financial professional, we sought to balance our values with denominational priorities and the analysis of financial capacity. What resulted is what the task force and the Connectional Table believe to be a more equitable division of resources.

**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.)**

Within the Annual Conference, I served as a District Superintendent for 6 years. It gave me an opportunity to experience anew the breadth of the connection, as I grew to appreciate the variety of churches and clergy found within the boundaries of a district. I had the opportunity to re-imagine charge conferences so that they might be more relevant to today's culture and to establish missional networks to promote a spirit of collaboration rather than competition.

As both a DS and as the Assistant to the Bishop, I've been exposed to the administrative and programmatic aspects of the work of an annual conference. I've served as a staff liaison to Conference Finance and Administration, Equitable Compensation, Justice and Reconciliation, and the Conference Trustees. As our Conference has become more intentional about helping churches determine the legacy they want to leave to future generations, I've witnessed resurrection through re-missioning and using sale proceeds of closed church building to plant new churches.

I was elected as a reserve delegate to Jurisdictional Conference in 2008 and as a delegate in 2012, 2016, and 2020. I've also served on the Junaluska Associates Council, which supports the Development Staff in their efforts to increase giving to this SEJ conference and retreat center.

In 2016, I was nominated as a jurisdictional representative to the Connectional Table which has given me a global perspective of our denomination. I've served on the Agency Evaluation Advisory Group who has developed a process for evaluating the ways in which our general agencies are engaging in the Four Areas of Focus. Additionally, I've served as the CT representative to GCFA's Economic Advisory Committee which provides important input in the development of the denominational budget. As mentioned above, I was also a part of the Budget Allocations Task Force for the 2021-2024 quadrennium.

I was elected as a general conference delegate in 2012, 2016, and 2020. I served on Finance and Administration in 2012, Discipleship in 2016, and will serve on General Administration in 2024, pending the Judicial Council decision on whether current delegations will serve, or new ones must be elected.

**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.)**

The Connectional Table has given me the opportunity to gain a deep appreciation for incredible gifts and resources across our worldwide church. In much the same way that we must continue to work to eliminate racism here in the United States, I believe that we are called to repent of our US-centrism and the colonialism which permeates our interactions with our brothers and sisters across the world. We have much to re-learn from their passion for evangelism and the joy-filled exuberance of their worship. I wonder how open we might be to reverse mentoring from them.

In partnership with the North Carolina Conference, our Conference has been in ministry with the people of Armenia for over 25 years. As a District Superintendent, I've also supported churches who are doing important work in Haiti.

I celebrate the significant ways that UMVIM and UMCOR enable us to put our faith into action. I have had the opportunity to participate on numerous disaster recovery teams following hurricanes and flooding in North Carolina, Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi.

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

In youth ministry, I was taught that the most effective strategy for helping youth grow into life-long, faithful followers of Jesus was the ratio of 5 adult mentors for each youth. Over the years, I've both witnessed the efficacy of that theory and championed that model in the churches in which I served.

Last week, with no prompting from his aunt, the nephew for whom I am the guardian wrote a letter to the church I was serving during his elementary and middle school years. Now a Sergeant in the U.S. Army, he wanted to thank the members of the church for their love, support, and witness which nurtured his journey in faith and continues to undergird his desire to lead a Christian life. My nephew can name his 5 adult mentors in that congregation.

Through these relationships, the church can also more effectively fulfill her responsibility to recognize and encourage those whom God is calling to lay, licensed, or ordained ministry as well as to missionary service. As I've shared above, I have made it a priority to mentor college-age youth and seminary students as they explore their call. I've also been intentional about developing relationships with clergy in the first years of appointment to a local church. My hope is that I can be one of their "5", as I support and



encourage them to grow as clergy leaders and provide opportunities for them to share their skills, knowledge, and understanding through reverse-mentoring.

**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**

I've spent the last two years facilitating informational sessions across the conference on the Protocol for Reconciliation and Grace through Separation as well as the continuing United Methodist Church. I've begun each one with "the given" that our disagreement in the level of inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons in the life of our church is a disagreement over the interpretation of the biblical passages which refer to homosexuality. I've also acknowledged that harm has been done to persons and to the United Methodist witness as each "side" has disparaged the other. Rather than gathering for biblical study and conversation where one seeks to understand more than being understood, we've turned each other into enemies through claiming that "I'm right and you're wrong."

Separation may be necessary for a time to create a space and place which ends the harming of our LGBTQIA+ brother and sisters and fully welcomes them into the community of faith. Yet as we rebuild "the dividing wall of hostility" between us, may we do so with repentant hearts for our rejection of Christ "as our peace." (Ephesians 2)

**b. Local church closures and establishing new faith communities**

In the Western North Carolina Conference, there are over 300 churches which average less than 29 persons in worship each Sunday. While some of those churches are small, strong, vibrant communities of faith, others are no longer able to fulfill the purpose and mission of the church. Recognizing the need for some intentional discernment by these churches regarding the legacy they hoped to leave to future generations, I helped to write a grant through which the conference received \$2.7 million over a 5-year period to develop and implement a process of merging, repurposing, or closing those churches which had come to the end of their life cycle.

We are still assessing the results of this effort. In some cases, church members have breathed a sigh of relief when offered the opportunity to close and then join another United Methodist Church. Others have partnered with nearby churches and envisioned ways that their property might be used for the betterment of the community. Still others have resisted, being determined that the last member alive will

lock the doors and turn out the lights. Financially, we've been able to use the legacy proceeds from the sale of these churches to fund the planting of new faith communities through encouraging healthy churches to either multiply or partner with a new church start. In the future, I also imagine the embracing of more and more "third places" or "fresh expressions" as the location where people gather outside of work, home, and a traditional church, for worship, fellowship, and service.

**c. Next generations leaders**

In almost every church consultation I've been a part of over the last thirteen years, I've been told that what the church needs is a pastor who would increase the number of children, youth, and young adults in the church ... to keep the church alive. I then would wonder aloud with the S/PPRC about why young persons seemed to have little interest in the institutional church and in their local church in particular.

I'm convinced that we will reach youth and young adults when we give priority to their discipleship and engagement above our own wants and desires. To do that will require a period of reverse mentoring in which we seek to hear, understand, and celebrate the ways and places in which they grow closer to God. Subsequently, it will take our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness to bring to fruition what they desire in a faith community. Further, we must let them lead the way.

**d. Guaranteed appointment for clergy**

I will never forget the experience of being a DS sitting across from a S/PPRC committee struggling to share why I thought a pastor would be a good missional match with their congregation without sacrificing my integrity. What I wanted to say, but couldn't, was that he/she had to go somewhere because "all elders in full connection who are in good standing in an annual conference shall be continued under appointment by the bishop ...." (2016 Book of Discipline, ¶337) Guaranteed appointment can be frustrating when the pastor is ineffective. At the same time, security of appointment allows us to live into our commitment to open itinerancy and protects the prophetic voice of a pastor.

I find myself reticent to support the end of guaranteed appointments and in doing so, potentially bring harm to the whole in order to correct just a few. Rather, the Staff/Pastor-Parish Relations Committee, District Superintendent, and Bishop need to be honest in naming and addressing issues of laziness and/or ineffectiveness, especially

when it's a pattern in two or more settings. Too often, we've opted for "being nice" to the detriment of the clergy and more importantly, the mission.

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

As I've shared earlier in this document, I believe that the greatest challenge for The United Methodist Church is addressing the adaptive challenges of being a post-Covid church. Amidst the questions with which we must wrestle are: Now that the Global Methodist Church denomination has been launched, what defines the identity of the continuing United Methodist Church? What forms of church governance will enable greater fulfillment of the mission and the nimbleness needed to meet the varied contexts within our worldwide connection? What are effective and sustainable ways to develop clergy and laity to lead local churches and fresh expressions? How can we communicate, nurture, and strengthen the gifts of the connection in fulfilling the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world?

The greatest opportunities for the UMC arise out of our Wesleyan theology of grace and the inextricable link between personal piety and social holiness, love of God and love of neighbor. I fully believe that we have what the next generation is seeking, often summarized by "food, friendship, and fido." "Food" describes a desire to gather with others around the table for real and relevant conversation and connection. "Friendship" expresses the deep-felt need for support, encouragement, accountability, and love through authentic relationships. "Fido" conveys both the longing for something or someone to care for and love as well as a concern for practices which will sustain our created world.

In it's fullest, United Methodism offers a relationship with the God we know in Jesus Christ through "food, friendship, and fido." All are welcomed to the Table. All are "beloved" to love others, especially those who feel most unloved and unwanted. All are invited into a journey of reclaiming the holistic harmony with God, self, others, and creation. Our call is to illuminate that this is who we are over and above the message that what defines church is what we're against. In doing so, we have the opportunity to offer others a life that really is life through participation in the kin-dom of God.