



# KEN NELSON

## EPISCOPAL NOMINEE

SOUTH CAROLINA CONFERENCE

# SEJ Committee on Episcopacy Questionnaire Responses

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

I believe that the church is of God and is a gift to the world. While I honor and affirm the institutional church (the United Methodist denomination), I believe that the deepest longing in every life is for God's gift of salvation. I am committed to inviting people first to become disciples of Jesus Christ, and second to connect with the community of faith so that we might live, love, learn, serve, and grow into the body of Christ, which He calls His Church.

I believe people are looking for something real, something authentic – namely, to be disciples of Jesus Christ and not just members of the church. Discipleship means that Jesus Christ is transforming our lives and that we seek to join with God in changing the world around us, locally and globally. Therefore, I believe the church is at its very best when it is transforming the lives of those within, while at the very same time reaching out beyond its walls to address the needs of those who are not a part of the church or anybody's church.

I bring a deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ. I experienced the transformative power of God in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in my own life. It is a discipleship that led me through the brokenness of neglect and abuse as a child to a profound sense of calling to be a follower of Jesus Christ and an ordained minister serving in The United Methodist Church.

I grew up at Epworth Children's Home, a United Methodist ministry in Columbia, South Carolina. Epworth called forth in me my God-given potential and sacred worth. I am the product of a United Methodist faith that declared that the church must be actively engaged in evangelism – calling people to repentance and announcing God's offer of forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ. That same church embodied a faith that changes social conditions and structures in the world so that the poor have good news proclaimed, the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, and the widow and orphan receive care. At Epworth, I experienced this love of God that would not let me go. It filled me with a sense of gratitude that compels me to share the saving work of Jesus Christ with others. It was at Epworth that I first experienced my call to ministry.

I am unapologetically Wesleyan in my theology. That means that I emphasize both the personal piety and the works of mercy, which lead us to avenues of service locally, nationally, and internationally. I have a strong, yet practical working knowledge of The Book of Discipline as a tool for ordering the life of a congregation. It is secondary to my reliance on scripture. Both are tools, not weapons. I have a strong commitment to connectionalism as it relates to open itinerancy, outreach, missions, and giving. I believe in formation and teaching, and they are central to my ministry.

I believe that, in Jesus Christ, God's grace is offered to all persons. Thus, I am willing to be in ministry with all. Difference is a reality. My focus will always be on our need for God; therefore, I believe the church must be open to being in ministry with all. I believe we must offer a radical hospitality that recognizes that "God catches His fish before He cleans them." We are all a part of fallen creation in need of God's grace, and it is that very grace that transforms and helps us to become a new creation.

I practice spiritual disciplines in my relationship with Christ. I find prayer and journaling fruitful. I am a part of an accountability group. I love spending time reading scripture and particularly using the practices of Lectio Divina. My personal spirituality tends to be liturgically centered, but worship is about God above all else. Worship – no matter its style – must be done with excellence and must be about God above all else. Worship that inspires is what is most important. Worship that reminds us or helps us enter the presence of God is worship that is life giving and transformative. For some persons, worship may be their first and perhaps only encounter with a congregation. Thus, worship must be planned and led with energy and excellence.

I am a collaborative leader, one who builds consensus. Consensus by its very nature means that we will not always agree, but that all voices will be heard and that we will seek common ground. We can even disagree without being disagreeable. Healthy conflict can help bring about new life. Agreement does not always come, but Christ must remain at the center of all that we do. Right relationships matter! I believe that God is always inviting us into risk-taking mission and ministry that takes us out of our comfort zones.

**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 in the local church for 14 years in a variety of ministry settings.

**2006-2007 – Silver Hill Memorial United Methodist Church (Pastor)**

- Helped congregation prepare for leadership transition, following pastor who had served 11 years.
- Motivated congregation to pay 100 percent of its apportionments and direct billing, and moved congregation along in its capital campaign.
- Initiated the first Disciple I Bible Study class, started a Thursday night Bible Study, stabilized a developing Sunday School Ministry, and created a weekly church newsletter.

**2002-2006 – Centenary/Kingsville Charge (Pastor)**

- Gave leadership and oversight to major (\$40,000) renovation of the parsonage.
- Established new worship times, strengthened relationship between the churches by creating joint fifth Sunday worship, re-vitalized Sunday School Ministry, created church newsletter.
- Motivated congregation to use pledge cards and to move to tithing and the usage of a zero-based budget model. Paid 100 percent of apportionments and direct billing expenses each year.
- Paid off debt on the parsonage and rental property purchased five years prior. Hired a professional administrative assistant and custodian for the charge.
- Dramatically improved the level of participation in Bible Study and the number of persons in attendance in worship. Initiated Disciple I Bible Study.
- Expanded outreach ministry to include engagement in cross-racial experiences, as well as experiences with the poor and downtrodden, and started communitywide "Back to School" worship service.

### **2000-2002 & 1994-1998 – St. John’s United Methodist Church-Aiken (Associate Pastor)**

- In this cross-racial appointment, helped congregation take a large leap toward open itinerancy in its staffing and membership. Served a total of six years as a part of a multi-staff church, and helped the congregation prepare for its first female senior minister.
- Helped congregation plan and implement a \$5.2 million dollar building and renovation campaign and \$600,000 organ campaign.
- Helped congregation develop new strategies for stewardship. Shared in a ministry where the budget grew from \$835,000 to \$1.3 million in eight years.
- Helped transition through three senior ministers.
- Raised a 15-year-old nephew after my sister became ill.

### **1998-2000 – Duke University Chapel (Assistant Dean of the Chapel & Director of Religious Life)**

- As first African American to hold this post, coordinated the work of 35 campus ministers and the budget for all Religious Life staff for the Chapel.
- Gave general and pastoral oversight to worship and administrative life of Duke University Chapel.
- Led spiritual formation groups for Duke Divinity School and taught preaching class to student pastors.

### **1993-1994 – St. Mark and Mt. Zion United Methodist Churches-Sumter (Pastor)**

- Brought a sense of renewal and unity to a divided charge.
- Paid 100 percent of apportionments in both churches, and created a plan to sell former parsonage, which was no longer inhabitable.
- Initiated new worship traditions, including Lenten and Advent studies, as well as a weekly Bible study and a youth group, and started a church newsletter.
- Attendance stronger at both churches, growing to nearly 100 in each.

### **3) What skill sets, knowledge and abilities would you bring to the office of the bishop, The United Methodist Church, and annual conference leadership? What profound changes to “business as usual” as an annual conference do you think would be fruitful?**

For nearly thirty years now, I have served The United Methodist Church and the South Carolina Conference at nearly every level, in nearly every setting. I bring a deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ. I have experienced the transformative power of God in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in my own life. It is a deep discipleship that led me through the brokenness of neglect and abuse to a profound sense of calling – first to be a follower of Jesus Christ, and second to serve God’s church as a pastor. I have served 14 years in the local church and more than 15 years in administrative ministries, including appointments as a congregational specialist in Connectional Ministries and as the Coordinator of Clergy Services. For the past eight years, I have served as the Conference Secretary.

I currently serve as the Orangeburg District Superintendent, leading 89 congregations and 64 pastors, representing 15,875 United Methodists across six counties. I understand the local church and extension ministries are the primary places where disciples are made and where communities are transformed. Yet, we are better and stronger because we are connected to others beyond ourselves.

My work on the General Board of Church and Society and the Connectional Table have given me the ability to understand the complexities of being a global church. At the conference level and on a global scale, I have been able to work with diverse populations to design collaborative results.

I bring a spirit of calculated risk-taking – a willingness to “think outside the box while staying the in the book.” I am strategic about naming current realities while dreaming about new possibilities. More importantly, I am not afraid to surround myself with clergy and lay colleagues who think differently and creatively. I champion persons who have the best interest of the church at heart and who can move beyond mere representation to see a global perspective.

I am a bridge builder who believes in unity – not that unity means unanimity. Our unity is found *in* Christ; not just in right beliefs about Christ. Right belief matters, but Christ matters all the more! Respectful engagement across differences matters. In some circumstances, right relationships matter as much as being right! Repeatedly, Jesus interacted with sinners, saints and outsiders to point to God’s work in redeeming the created order. Cultural competency starts with being aware of one’s own worldview while developing positive attitudes toward difference.

**Profound Changes** – What could happen if we were to let go of the notion that the heart and soul of our ministries are tied to geographical boundaries, buildings and systems? Ministry is about God, people and God’s work of the redeeming creation. The COVID pandemic has shown our ability to be creative and to achieve effective outcomes in new ways. During the pandemic, many people worked from home, shared workspace and reduced staff without reducing the quality and quantity of work.

As we have worked our way out of pandemic, I have made a point of encouraging local churches in the Orangeburg District and across the conference to resist the all-too-human tendency to slide back into our pre-pandemic ways. We have shared what we have learned, and many of our churches are indeed building on what worked when we were not able to gather for in-person worship and ministry.

I am part of a conference that has twelve district offices with eleven part-time administrative assistants. While this has served us well for a long time, perhaps it is time to ask if this is the most fruitful way to carry out our work. Might there be a way to realign personnel and facilities and still achieve effective outcomes? How might those resources be reallocated for mission and ministry? As a jurisdiction, are there ways that we might achieve fruitful and effective outcomes in working across annual conference boundaries?

**4) How have you demonstrated the spiritual gift of leadership? (Give examples of ministry context where spiritual leaders were discovered, developed and deployed for a Kingdom task.)**

I have spent most of my time in ministry teaching and forming persons for leadership as clergy and laity. As a pastor in the local church, I have emphasized placing folks in small groups for nurture and accountability. The church offers community, specifically small groups in which participants can gather to experience acceptance, belonging and nurture, as well as challenge and encouragement for the journey of faith. These groups often gathered around prayer, gender and age issues, parenting, and other such life issues. More importantly, these groups focused on how people could more passionately follow Jesus and practice their faith in the marketplace.

Persons who participated in these small groups were those best equipped to serve as leaders in our congregation. They were fruitful because they could own their own brokenness and redemption and were gracious in inviting others into authentic Christ-centered relationships.

I have emphasized with laity that we are partners in ministry and that one of the best things they could do is to participate in spiritual gifts assessments. We then invited these persons to share in leadership, using their gifts.

For 10 years, I served on the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, whose primary focus was leadership development. We centered our energies on helping foster an environment of call and made great strides toward investing in younger, more diverse leaders. Under my leadership, we developed partnerships with seminaries to send students to South Carolina to serve in our conference while they were still in seminary.

Many of these persons are now serving as pastors in the South Carolina Conference. Our Board of Ordained Ministry set aside funding to pay for these internships. We placed these persons in our best and strongest congregations so they could experience healthy DNA among our strongest clergy and laity.

I also have taught at the United Methodist Women's "mission u," the United Methodist Men's Spiritual Life Retreats, and Conference Youth Events.

**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.**

Holy Scriptures and The Book of Discipline are central to my understanding and practice of ministry. They serve as the solid foundation for accountability in our life together in ministry.

I belong to an accountability group with whom I pray, study and struggle for life and work balance. They have been honest in sharing with me times when I was not working well at being intentional about this balance. They remind me that we are people of multiple covenants. The accountability came when I was asked to provide a copy of my calendar to demonstrate where I was spending my time.

As former chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry, there were times when I was part of a team that had to say to a candidate that he or she had not shown themselves ready for commissioning or ordination. The goal was always to hold in tension the well-being of the candidate and the well-being of the ministry setting in which the candidate might be appointed.

There also have been times when we needed to consider the readiness or effectiveness of clergy members. Sometimes the decision was to discontinue the candidate or a provisional member from their status. We also had to help ordained elders recognize that their ineffectiveness was bringing harm to a local church, offering grace to help the clergy member develop a corrective action plan. When clergy members were unwilling or unable to meet the standard, we helped them exit ministry for the well-being of the church and themselves. While these circumstances are never easy, they are necessary.

One of the most difficult circumstances I have encountered is having to ask for the removal of a member of the Board of Ordained Ministry who was not living up to the very principles that we were asking of those whom we were interviewing. The member was a friend of long standing. The member was inappropriate in his conversation with a candidate. While the behavior did not rise to the level of a chargeable offense, it was conduct unbecoming the member.

On another occasion in a Clergy Session, I called attention to the fact that our clergy found it "humorous" when the historic Wesleyan question about "being in debt so as to embarrass you in work" was being posed to our ordinands. Perhaps it showed an insensitivity by clergy members to the amount of debt carried by our candidates.

It was the right thing to do when I called for a reduction in conference funding for “historic” initiatives that no longer demonstrated fruitfulness. This was, perhaps, not the best way to win friends, but it reflected my desire for better stewardship of conference resources generously provided by laity across the conference.

**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.)**

My experience throughout the church is extensive. Each day I continue to learn something new!

**Annual Conference**

Since June 2020, I have served as the Superintendent of the Orangeburg District, where I serve as the chief missional strategist. In the midst of a global pandemic, we relocated the district office, purchased and paid for a new district parsonage, and hired a new district administrative assistant. Together with the district lay leader, we have infused the Orangeburg District with a robust energy for partnership and engagement in mission and ministry that led the district to pay 95.3 percent of connectional askings in 2020, and we finished first among 12 districts in the conference in 2021 in apportionment payments, at 98.3 percent. When I arrived in 2020, the district was fifth in apportionment payments.

Prior to serving as District Superintendent, I served for six years as the Coordinator of Clergy Services. In this role, I served as the administrative registrar for the Board of Ordained Ministry, helping our annual conference focus on leadership development. For the past eight years, I also have served as the Secretary of the South Carolina Annual Conference. In partnership with the bishop, I led the team that planned, implemented and assessed annual conference. I gave oversight to editing and publishing the Conference Journal. Serving as the conference secretary has afforded me the opportunity to witness the presidential duties of a bishop. I gave oversight to the transition process of moving our annual conference session from one venue to another – as well as into a virtual venue during the COVID-19 pandemic. By virtue of this position, I have served as ex-officio member the Conference Trustees, the Committee on Standing Rules, and the Committee on Nominations.

For seven years prior, I served on the Connectional Ministries staff as a Congregational Specialist. My primary role was to resource, equip and connect local congregations for the work of ministry. This marked a paradigm shift in the work of the Connectional Ministries office from conference-level programming to resourcing local congregations. This meant coming alongside congregations daily to enable them to engage in vital and vibrant disciple making in their particular context. Simultaneously, I held the portfolio for African American Ministries and was the founder of the South Carolina Summit on the Black Church. For 10 years, I served as a member of the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, chairing it for five years and serving as registrar for three.

**Jurisdictional Conference**

I was elected as a delegate to four SEJ Conferences (2008, 2012, 2016 and 2020). I served on the 2016 Committee on Plan of Organization and Rule of Order. I also have served Black Methodists for Church Renewal of the SEJ, including work as secretary of the organized Black Caucus of The United Methodist Church. I served two terms as member of the Board of Visitors for Duke Divinity School.

**General Conference**

I have served as a delegate to five General Conferences (2008, 2012, 2016, 2019 and 2020). In 2019 and 2020, I was the first-elected clergy delegate and co-chair of the delegation.

From 2012-2016, I served on the Board of Directors of the General Board of Church and Society. Since 2016, I have served on the Connectional Table, including as a member of the Committee on the Worldwide Nature of the Church. I chair the Leadership Development and Community Life Committee and convened the search team for the current chief connectional ministries officer. I have been an active participant and officer in the National Black Staff Forum.

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

My service on both the General Board of Church and Society and the Connectional Table – which are both global in their make-up and in the scope of their mission and ministry – has helped shape my thinking as it relates to ecclesiology and missiology.

I also have participated on mission teams with persons across the globe in Honduras, Guatemala, Brazil and the Holy Land. These have mostly been for relief work and disaster response. As a member of the Connectional Table, I traveled to Norway, where I experienced first-hand the vitality, life and ministry of the church there. This engagement in mission and ministry across the globe has reminded me of the strength of the connection, while clarifying the need for ministry to be both connectional and contextual. In all these places and ways, I have seen God at work in reconciling all things and people unto God's self. I gained a glimpse of how God and the people of The United Methodist Church are transforming the world.

Anyone who as ever attended worship at a General Conference begins to understand what it means to be a global church. In that setting, we get a glimpse of God's kingdom.

We are a global church, not because we say we are, but because God intends to redeem the whole world and all of the created order. We have much to learn from one another. We must remember that God still has a mission in the world. God has a vision of a world redeemed and ordered anew. God is at work in ways that are wonderful and particular to every context. The time has come for a global Book of Discipline that allows adaptability to respond to mission and ministry in every context. In this way, we can maximize our ability to make disciples of Jesus in every nation, tribe and tongue.

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

Developing lay and clergy leaders begins with affirming the sacrament of Baptism and God's claim upon every life. All Christians are called into ministry by virtue of their baptism. The apostle Paul affirms one expectation of leaders is to "equip the saints" for the work of ministry.

We must be intentional about forming both laity and clergy for this work. Local congregations must be intentional about creating discipleship systems that nurture persons from the cradle to the grave. These systems must reach persons who know nothing about God or faith, as well as those who are more mature in faith, mission and ministry. This means helping our laity discern how God is inviting them to live out their faith daily.

As a District Superintendent, I have invited our pastors and lay leaders to meet regularly to discuss the needs, gifts and inclusion of the laity in the life and ministry of the local church, the district, the conference, and the community. I have invited our pastors and laity to get to know each other personally; to pray with and for one another, the congregation, the community and the world.

I have collaborated with our District Lay Leader and Director of Lay Servant Ministries to promote Lay Servant Ministries and the partnership between the laity and the clergy. I created a leadership team of clergy and laity that meets quarterly to guide our life and ministry together. I meet with my District Lay Leader every other Friday for the purpose of prayer, visioning, reflections and strategizing about how we can strengthen the ministry of the laity in the district and build upon the partnership with the clergy.

As we seek to develop future clergy leaders, we must continue to create a culture of call where persons see themselves as a part of God's story, and then respond in faith. That means every United Methodist congregation must be encouraged to see itself as a disciple-making out post.

As a pastor in the local church, I was intentional about including children and youth in the life of the congregation. We moved beyond "Youth Sunday" or "Children's Sunday" to active, systematic inclusion of children and youth in worship planning, leadership and service. Growing up at Epworth Children's Home, it was routine for children and youth to be actively engaged in leading worship, serving as ushers, or speaking on occasions. I took that with me into ministry, and it has always been a part of my practice.

As it relates to developing clergy, we can help create a culture of call when we support people who are exploring ministry – whether in lay, licensed, commissioned or ordained ministry. Creating healthy spaces and places for persons to explore ministry options in a safe and supportive environment are key ingredients for a meaningful career in ministry.

As a pastor in the local church, I invited our youth and adults to shadow me for a day as I went about the work of ministry. This allowed them to see and experience some of the wonderful and demanding things that we get to do as clergy. As a former chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry, I helped our conference and local congregations partner with our United Methodist seminaries to create ministerial internships in the South Carolina Conference for persons who were exploring their call to ministry. These partnerships produced clergy who are now serving within and beyond the boundaries of the South Carolina Conference.

**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** – I believe that, in Jesus Christ, God's grace is offered to all persons. All persons have sacred worth, thus I am willing to be in ministry with all. I also understand and appreciate those who seek to hold the church accountable for conforming to scripture and The Book of Discipline. I believe that persons have every right to work within existing structures to change the Discipline, but never to violate it. As an episcopal leader, I will honor my vow to uphold the Discipline and continue to work for the unity of church.

b) **Local church closures and establishing new faith communities** – While I grieve the closure of any church, everything and everyone has a life cycle. I believe that we must help congregations honestly assess their current realities and context. To that end, I have been a part of our conference's Forward Focus initiative. This voluntary process is designed to help local United Methodist churches and charges study their past, present and future potential for ministry to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. I believe that we must do whatever it takes to create new spaces for new people that will bring these persons into relationship with Jesus and the church.



c) **Next-generation leaders** – As the former chair of the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, I have been privileged to walk with many young leaders. We must be willing to listen, engage and respond to emerging expressions of ministry. We must continue to be vigilant in our efforts to foster an environment of call. This must happen on ball fields, in high schools, at camps and retreats, and on college campuses. We must invest in our youngest leaders and be very intentional in both our appointment making and our care of these persons.

d) **Guaranteed appointment for clergy** – Two things are true. First, every ministry setting deserves an effective high-functioning leader. We have some ineffective clergy. Bishops, superintendents, Boards of Ministry, and Staff-Parish Relations Committees need to be up-front and proactive with underperforming or ineffective clergy. We must use existing disciplinary processes to provide opportunity for corrective action plans and/or remove or not appoint ineffective clergy. Second, The United Methodist Church has not fully lived into the promise of open itinerancy. Guaranteed appointments are needed to protect clergy from being denied appointment because of gender, race, ethnicity, prophetic ministry or theological bent.

**10) What do you see as the greatest challenge for The United Methodist Church?  
What are the greatest opportunities?**

The greatest challenge facing The United Methodist Church today is that we still have a sin problem! In particular, we are deeply immersed in the sin of idolatry. Because we have not been fully redeemed, there remains in me and in my denomination a proclivity toward making God over in our image. Too often, we have believed that God only works in ways that align most closely with our own theological, political and cultural perspectives. This sin of idolatry manifests itself in all kinds of “-isms” that divide us and lead to disunity in the body of Christ. We must repent! In Christ, our unity has been restored, but we must continue to proclaim and embody this truth!

The greatest opportunity before us is to help create diverse global leaders who are both adaptive and resilient. Let’s be honest: The challenges facing our denomination are adaptive, not technical. We are not going to think our way into a new way of being. Instead, we could help create a culture that encourages holy innovation and experimentation as normative. We could invest resources in innovative congregations and ministries that are exploring new ministries, in new ways, with new people. We have the opportunity to claim anew that the work begun at Pentecost continues! God’s mission is yet alive. God is making all things new. We bear witness to this in our affirmation and desire to be a global church in mission and ministry to the poor, the widow, the orphan, and all who have no hope!

Leading is risky, dangerous work. This kind of work demands new ways of doing things – and that can sometimes cause pain. In my work as District Superintendent, I have learned that when people and systems feel threatened, they can take aim at the person pushing for change. We must have a heart that breaks when congregations fail to live up to their potential, yet we must endure in hope, and boldly proclaim that Christ is still at work in and through the church!