

Rev. Dr. Byron Thomas
North Georgia Conference Episcopal Nominee

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

I learned a very important lesson in my early ministry. When I received my call to ministry, I was in the United States Air Force. Having no one in my family who was in ministry I did not know what to do. I made the decision to delve into the reading and studying of scripture. For an entire year, at the end of my shift and after getting something to eat, I would go to the barracks, read the Bible, and study Matthew Henry's Commentary. I did this Monday through Friday from 6:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. for an entire year.

This disciplined approach to reading and the studying the Bible provided me with a familiarity that I had never known before. A seminal moment came for me when I returned to my hometown the following summer. I did not let my pastor know I was coming home, but Sunday morning when I arrived at the church, he invited me to the pulpit. Then something happened that would have an impact on me for the remainder of my ministry. Fifteen minutes before it was time for the sermon to begin, my pastor looked over at me and said (in front of everyone), "You look like you are ready to preach." He then told me to go back into his office and get ready.

Because I had to prepare, I really didn't have time to panic. I went back to his office, opened my Bible, and whatever text it fell to is what I used for the sermon. I don't remember the text or the sermon, but what I do remember was experiencing the effect of the sermon flowing out of me when it came time to preach. I realized that it flowed out of me because it was already in me. The reading of scripture during the past year was akin to God's Word being deposited in me. In short, I was practicing spiritual discipline before I knew what a spiritual discipline was. In particular, the study of scripture had already begun to mold me in ways that I was not aware of until that moment. Over the years I picked up on other spiritual disciplines – prayer, fasting, silence, solitude, service – and have come to treasure their value in putting me in a position of enhancing the chances of hearing from and being directed by God.

It was while attending a local church in seminary that the next phase of my development regarding Wesleyan theology and spirituality would occur. This church was deeply involved in the social gospel and provided me with many remarkable opportunities to experience a church making a profound impact on public discourse and providing direction for the larger community. What it lacked however was a spiritually rooted, social gospel. Even though this church was very well known for its engagement in the community, people within this church were going to other churches after

attending worship to “hear the Word.” Although they appreciated the community focus of the church, what they desired was a Word for their souls on Sunday morning.

The larger issue for me however was that spiritual formation and the social gospel (Wesley’s vital piety and social holiness) were always spoken of as two separate, unrelated, disconnected phenomena. As I studied Wesley, my gratitude for him increasingly grew as I discovered in him that vital piety and social holiness were not only linked but inextricably bound together. What I have since come to realize is that vital piety and social holiness are two sides of the same coin. They serve to inform, guide, and refine each other.

The other component of Wesleyan theology, spirituality, and practice was his emphasis on small groups. While my early introduction to the small group concept largely had to do with structure, my appreciation for his practice has grown as I have witnessed how small groups facilitate meaningful relationships, foster unity, create community and provide for an opportunity for iron to sharpen iron. More specifically, there is no magic in small groups, but if the work of study, prayer, accountability, nurture, and the cultivation of spiritual growth are taking place it is a tool of immeasurable value for individual and corporate growth within the body of 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.)

In September 1999, I was living in Atlanta while maintaining my relationship with the Little Rock Annual Conference where I had been ordained as an Elder. During this period, I was called by a District Superintendent inquiring as to whether I would be interested in “doing a favor” for the North Georgia Annual Conference. There was a church that was in trouble and needed someone to come in and fill in for a period of six weeks.” He made it clear that it was for six weeks only and under no circumstances should I consider this as something that would turn into a full-time appointment. This temporary assignment ended up being extended and ultimately turned into a full-time appointment where I served for four and a half years. I have no doubt that the reason it was extended, at least in part, was because of two factors: 1) Even though I arrived in September the church met 100% of its apportionment obligation by year’s end for the first time in twenty-seven years; 2) While this was only a six-week assignment, my mindset from the beginning was not to politic for the job but to carry out my duties and responsibilities as if I was their pastor for however long I would remain there.

My next local church appointment was from 2006 through 2013. It was a church that had a debt-load of over two million dollars. For years this debt load had been an albatross around the church’s neck and her ability to garner resources for vital ministries within the church and the community. This amount of debt for an increasingly aging population felt “burdensome” to the church, so we devised a plan to accelerate the

paying down of the debt. This, along with the church agreeing to make some strategic decisions regarding the selling of property, led to the retirement of the mortgage five years early at a savings of hundreds of thousands of dollars in interest. After having served this church for a period of six and a half years the church had zero debt and \$4.5 million dollars in the bank.

I served as the Chair of the Board for the Interfaith Children's Movement (ICM), a non-profit organization that sought to impact the well-being of children throughout the state of Georgia by engaging the legislative process. This organization began as an Atlanta-based movement but expanded across the state of Georgia over the course of several years. Partnerships were established with other organizations that were oriented more towards direct services to children but they did not have a legislative focus. These relationships enabled ICM to advocate on behalf of children on issues critical to their needs.

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

Richard Rohr, an American Franciscan priest stated that "Jesus gave us an experience, the Greeks made it a philosophy, Rome made it state religion, Europe made it a culture, and America made it a business." One of the things that I am acutely aware of is the central role of the experience is for church growth (depth). Central to the church's ability to increase the possibility of persons having this experience is having an intentional discipleship process in place that, minimally, focuses on daily prayer, weekly worship, daily Bible study, service, spiritual friendships and giving. An intentional discipleship process emphasizes the central role that the experience of Jesus plays in the lives of people of faith and the ability of the church to operate faithfully.

I have had the opportunity to travel extensively internationally. The exposure to others outside of the United States allowed me to hear voices and value the viewpoints of people of faith who grew up and appropriated their faith under a different set of circumstances. I believe this broader view of the world where a western understanding of what faith is and how it is executed has played a central role in my appreciation for how God is at work among people throughout the world.

With respect to what change to "business as usual" may benefit the church, I believe that our church needs to become more focused on the work of being in alignment with the ongoing, dynamic operation of the Holy Spirit. Along with this the church would be enhanced by becoming nimble in her work in order that we might respond to real need more quickly. Along with this I believe there needs to be a reclaiming of the central role that Wesley placed on accountability for the faith.

Furthermore, I believe that in addition to looking at whatever return on investments we get by counting the number of people who attend church on a weekly basis, either in person or online, growth should be looked at in the way lives are transformed and meaning and value has been added to the lives of people.

Finally, I believe that fostering an environment of open, honest communication around our work together will be of tremendous benefit.

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.)

From 2013 until 2021 I served as the Senior Pastor at Ben Hill United Methodist Church. While attention has been given in my previous local church appointments to spiritual formation and discipleship, during my tenure at Ben Hill 135 persons went through Disciple Bible Study. Many continued in Disciple II, III, IV, & V. There was a substantial increase in the number of people attending adult Sunday school classes as well. One of the greatest benefits for the church was that many of those participants used their Disciple foundation to offer themselves for leadership roles within the local church as well as district and annual conference positions. Further, there was significant involvement in the missional work of the church coming from those who participated in Disciple classes.

In addition, I have also given leadership to pilgrimages to the Holy Land, Jordan, Italy, and Turkey since 2012. These have been formative experiences in that not only the lands of the Bible take on new meaning, but the experience of journeying together has helped to form community and foster the kind of relationships that come through shared, sacred experiences.

Leadership UMC was a ministry of the North Georgia Annual Conference that “equipped emerging laity throughout the annual conference for service in mission and ministry within the local, district, and conference.” Each year, regardless of the church to which I was appointed, a lay person from that church participated in this training to enhance their understanding and skill set for ministry and provide them with a broader network of support.

Beginning on December 25, 2019 through January 8, 2020, I served as a chaperone for youth missionaries from Ben Hill UMC to South Africa. In addition to serving at orphanages in Johannesburg and Zimbabwe, youth traveled to various sites and participated in activities designed to enhance their immersion experience. The purpose of this mission trip went beyond simply helping; it exposed these young people to the richness, beauty, depth and deprivation of other people and cultures and reminded our young people of our obligation to respond to human need in the world. This was the

second time since 2016 that Ben Hill led a youth mission trip to South Africa as part of the church's Global Leadership Development Initiative.

I was intentional about cultivating clergy and laity development through ongoing training. The clergy I have mentored have participated in Certificate in Executive Leadership programs and several have gone on to pursue advance training in Doctor of Ministry programs. Additionally, lay staff participated in annual trainings in their areas of leadership. This enabled staff to bring learnings to the church as well as to enhance staff development. It also contributed to enhanced morale as staff appreciated the church's willingness to invest in their professional development.

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?

During my pastoral ministry I routinely met with the Staff Parish Relationships Committee (SPRC). My practice was also to meet with the chair of the committee on a monthly basis (or whenever the need arose) in order to discuss issues and how they might be addressed. While an annual evaluation is performed, meeting regularly allows corrective action to be taken as issues arise. I also met with my District Superintendent for a yearly review and consulted as needed via phone.

In terms of holding others accountable, I meet with clergy staff on a weekly basis to discuss issues and provide feedback. We as a staff – clergy and laity – also met two times each month to hear reports from each work area, get status updates, provide feedback, and discuss ways in which we might support each other.

Perhaps one of the most impactful practices that I adopted was simply being in ongoing conversations with people who will give me honest feedback. These people are comprised of both laity and clergy.

Regarding doing the right thing in difficult situations, I believe that it is important to have a "theology of conflict." Mine comes from the opening verses of Genesis when it speaks of "the earth being formless and empty and darkness covering the face of the deep." The Hebrew term used to describe these conditions is 'chaos.' Chaos describes disorder and conflict. And yet it was when the Spirit of God hovered over this conflict and God spoke that creation was formed out of conflict. I operate under the notion that creation can still be brought out of conflict. The principal driver in this is love. I have found that when I have determined in my heart to love someone with whom conflict is inevitable, it directly impacts how I interact with that person. Love does not provide the energy to feed chaos. In fact, it provides an opportunity for chaos to be transformed. This should not be confused with the belief that this somehow makes doing the right thing in difficult situations easy. It simply provides a means by which relationships might be redeemed.

The following is one example of how I did the right thing in a difficult situation:

There was an occasion where I had to ask someone to discontinue teaching a class because of the oppositional behavior, anger, and abuse they began demonstrating towards members of the class. I had fellowshipped in this person's home on several occasions. We had many long, deep, and fruitful conversations. I had been one of the co-facilitators when he had taken Disciple I and II. I, along with my co-facilitator, believed that he could be an effective facilitator.

While initially things went well, eventually his behavior deteriorated and he became abusive. I determined that it would be best to sit down with him and bring my concern to him. However, the determination to sit down with him was only one component. The major concern for me was the "spirit" that I would bring to the conversation. I determined that I was going to operate from a place of truth, love, and reconciliation.

During our conversation he expressed his disappointment in my leadership, contended that I was using the church for professional advancement, that my preaching was no longer effective, and that I couldn't do anything to him. It was a conversation where it would have been very easy for me to assume a defensive position and fight back in an attempt to justify myself. However, I shared with him that while I could no longer permit him to teach the class that I still loved him (and I meant it) and I still considered him a friend. He indicated that he did not feel the same about me and continued to express his disappointment.

It took approximately a year for reconciliation to take place. We have since gone out to eat together and have had long conversations via phone. We are in fact closer on this side of the conflict. Creation can still come out of chaos.

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.)

I have served in several capacities within the Annual Conference: Associate Director of Connectional Ministries; Chair of the Committee on Ethnic Local Church Concerns; Member of the Board of Ordained Ministry; Chair of the Standing Rules Committee; Chair of the North Georgia Black Methodist for Church Renewal; Coordinator of the Southeastern Jurisdiction of Black Methodist for Church Renewal; Board Member, General Black Methodist for Church Renewal; Chair of the North Georgia Delegation to the 2020 General and Jurisdictional Conferences; Delegate to the 2019 Special Called General Conference; Delegate to the 2016 General and Jurisdictional Conferences; Alternate Delegate to the 2012 General and Jurisdictional Conferences; Board Member,

Hinton Rural Life Center; and Board Member of the Foundation for Wesley Woods; Cabinet Rep to Wellroot and to United Methodist Women in Faith.

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.)

Since the mid-1980s I have facilitated youth excursions and mission trips. Many of these were geared towards local UMYFs, partnering with schools to gain involvement from youth from underserved areas of the city who had little exposure beyond their communities. I remember well the words of one parent from such a community the second year that her child participated in a college excursion: “He will have been to more places than I have ever been.” Whether the trips by youth have been up the eastern seaboard to various Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and then exploring Washington D.C. and New York City, going south to various schools and boarding a ship with forty young people heading to Nassau, Bahamas, or heading west to the variety of HBCUs in the Midwest culminating in our trip to the majestic Grand Canyon, each of these trips was designed to expose the youth to God’s people, God’s creation, future opportunities, and to engage their imaginations about how they could be better stewards of what God has entrusted to us.

During the late 1980s, I was part of a delegation from Perkins School of Theology that initially visited a refugee camp in Brownsville, Texas. This was during a time when the Sanctuary Movement had its beginnings and people were fleeing from Central America’s civil wars and oppression and seeking refuge in the homes of persons within the United States. This led to an experience several weeks later where I was part of a delegation that visited El Salvador to gain a deeper understanding of the circumstances that were taking place in-country. This was one of the most eye-opening and formative experiences during my time in seminary. It would not be my first experience of seeing power being used to control, subjugate, and disenfranchise persons who were poor and dispossessed. However, this would, in fact, be the first time that I saw poverty used as weapon and tool for controlling a significant portion of the population.

In 2013, I traveled to Kenya with a group of clergy and laity from the North Georgia Annual Conference to participate in the Annual Conference’s “Bridges” initiative. This initiative was geared towards building relationships and creating partnerships that would be mutually beneficial for ministry opportunities. In this experience, I witnessed how colonialism continued to play a major role in the lives of Kenyan’s indigenous people and saw challenges to their quality of life that arose from internal conflict, greed, and power. However, it was here that I also witnessed amazing innovation brought about by an entrepreneurial focus in which the Methodist Church is playing a major role. This includes mentoring young people in business and cooperative agricultural initiatives.

From December 25, 2019 through January 8, 2020, I participated in a youth mission trip to South Africa and Zimbabwe. The principal focus of this work was to allow the youth to engage in working in several orphanages in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Old Harare. These were orphanages where many children who are HIV positive received care.

I have worked with the United Methodist Publishing House on creating a digital work entitled "Navigating Isaiah." The focus of this work was to draw upon the influence of the prophet Isaiah's visions and dreams and their impact in addressing the issues of his time and the work that he was called to do.

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

In addition to the information provided under question #4, I would add that young people were given opportunities to provide leadership with the encouragement of experienced adults who gave them freedom to lead. Many children had their first opportunity at public speaking in the church under the loving tutelage and support of people who understood that this was part of the fulfillment of the church's obligation inherent in the covenant made by the church at baptism.

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 everyone is of sacred worth. I am also of the conviction that it is the Christian position to love first, second, and third. As our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ provided for us the pattern and practice for how we should treat others. This pattern and practice was one of radical inclusiveness, grace, mercy, and the building of a community where a premium was placed on unity. Inclusive of and critical to this perspective is the theology of family contained in the salvific event. The Book of Hebrews – as well as other places throughout scripture – speaks of God being our Father and that Jesus seeing us as "being of one blood." As such we are sisters and brothers. If the impetus for the sacrificial death of Jesus was love and if his death was for the entire human family and not for a particular subset of the human race, then it seems to go against both the impetus and understanding contained in the very act of "salvation for all" to then suggest "others" who live different lifestyles are somehow beyond the scope of God's salvation. Furthermore, this othering of people, may point to the need for persons to justify ourselves. This approach is not new. Having said this, I do not advocate forcefully imploring people to engage in certain acts for which they are morally opposed.

- b. **Local church closures and establishing new faith communities:** When the life cycle of a church is such that it is no longer a viable option to keep it open, careful consideration should be given regarding how to best help that faith community celebrate its ministry across the years. While the closing of a church may be an administrative decision, it is also a ministry decision in that it involves God's people. As such, the task should be approached prayerfully and compassionately as closing a church greatly impacts the people of that congregation as well as the community. A prayerful, conversational approach should be taken, not first and foremost around closure, but around what it might take to refresh and repurpose the church to give it a new expression. It is only after these types of considerations have been addressed by all parties that closure becomes a necessary option. Even so, the members of that church should be nurtured and guided in such a way that they might continue their faithfulness in ministry in another United Methodist expression.
- c. **Next-generation leaders:** Proverbs 20:29 says, "The glory of young men is their strength; but the splendor of old men is their grey hair." I believe this text provides a prescription for leadership in ministry for any generation. It recognizes the blessings of both youth (vitality) and age (wisdom). It allows for a creative working relationship where both youth and age recognize the inherent value in the other. There are numerous examples of this throughout scripture. When Elisha was unaware that God was calling him, it was Elijah who helped him to understand that it was God. Ruth supported Naomi in her later years when she had no husband or children to care for her while living in a foreign land. Naomi then provided Ruth with insight that led to her marrying Boaz. When Ester placed a premium on safety at a time when her fellow Jews were in grave danger, it was her uncle, Mordecai, who provided her with the needed perspective for her to summon the faith and courage necessary to help save her people. These represent but a few examples of the many where experience and strength worked together. As such, I believe that next generation leadership must value the best of tradition and experience.

I believe it is important for next generation leaders to embrace the kind of leadership that emanates from living close to God. It is this relationship with God that provides the requisite experience that allows people to lead from a place of security, authenticity and transparency. If there is one thing that seems to characterize the yearnings of people, it seems to be leadership that operates from a place of depth. Whereas breadth (as defined by how many people are attending a particular church) has been a defining characteristic for effective leadership over the past few decades, people are yearning for those who can speak to the deeper needs of the soul. The capacity to speak to the deep desires that people have for meaning and purpose in their lives and provide guidance in helping people navigate faithfully will be critical for next generation leaders.

- d. **Guaranteed appointment for clergy:** I am not a proponent of the guaranteed appointment system. While I do not like to speak in broad strokes regarding this matter, I believe that guaranteed appointments potentially run the risk of cultivating a culture where clergy are disincentivized. I also believe that while providing security to clergy is necessary, if someone is not performing up to standards, accountability measures have been taken, and there is no improvement over time, then the gracious thing to do is to help that clergy find a place more suitable for their gifts. The present appointive process allows underperforming or poor performing clergy to simply go from one appointment to another. Notwithstanding, and I think more importantly, this may be another situation that highlights what is absent from the conversation. Throughout scripture there is repeatedly an emphasis on one's "call" to ministry. While call is frequently spoken of in terms of securing new people for ministry, what might it mean to view one's call as an ongoing, dynamic process and nurture persons from the standpoint of their call. In my own experience, it has been the certainty that I have been called to ministry that not only has incentivized me during the last forty years but has provided the assurance during the most challenging times of ministry – including loneliness – that this is exactly what I am supposed to be doing with my life. In essence, the call to ministry is not simply about an event that happened once upon a time; it is about how remembering one's call to ministry provides perspective, fuel and fight for the times in which we live.

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

I believe that the greatest challenge of the church is to take the message of the gospel seriously. Specifically, to return to my earlier quote by Richard Rohr, that the experience of Jesus is central to our faith. The opportunities that we have are directly related to this point. I believe that people are wired for God and placing an emphasis on the centrality of this relationship will resonate with people of all ages.