

## **James C. Howell**

Pastor, Myers Park UMC, Charlotte, NC, Western NC Conference

For 35 years, James has overseen the life of the local church – preaching, teaching, writing, and articulating a vision for the growing congregations he has served. And he has been deeply engaged in the life of our denomination and in missional transformation in both community and world. He has been senior pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church since 2003, and has served churches in the Charlotte area for 30 years. He is a graduate of the University of South Carolina and Duke Divinity School, and has a Ph.D. from Duke in Old Testament Theology. He has published 15 books, serves on numerous nonprofit boards in the community, speaks frequently in Charlotte and around the country, and is an adjunct professor of preaching at Duke Divinity School.

James is married to Lisa Stockton Howell, a social worker and community activist focusing on educational equity. They have three adult children: Sarah, Grace and Noah. Sarah is an associate pastor at Centenary UMC in Winston-Salem, N.C. Grace teaches art for UMAR, a United Methodist agency dedicated to promoting community inclusion, independence and growth for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities through residential, vocational and cultural enrichment opportunities. Noah is a college student, enrolled at the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill. James bikes, loves books and movies, plays piano and played Captain von Trapp in a community theater production of *The Sound of Music*.

For a fuller accounting of the following highlights, go to [www.revjameshowell.org](http://www.revjameshowell.org).

### **Churches Served:**

Small rural church (Wesley Chapel, Misenheimer), a declining inner city church (Plaza, Charlotte), a small town church (Davidson), and a large traditional urban church (Myers Park, Charlotte).

### **Growth:**

Davidson UMC (1991-2003) grew from 400 to 3300 members (3000+ joining, 1200+ by profession of faith)

Myers Park UMC (2003- ) has moved from 3700 to 5300 (3000+ joining, 1300+ by profession of faith)

**Denominational Doings:**

Representative of Methodism in Episcopal/United Methodist Dialogue on Full Communion (2015)

Representative of Methodism in Catholic/Methodist dialogue on the Doctrine of Justification (2009-2012)

General Board of Church & Society (2008-16)

Conference Board of Ordained Ministry (2012- )

Delegate Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference (1996-2016) and General Conference (2008-2016)

Delegate to the World Methodist Council (1986-2011)

Board of Visitors, Duke Divinity School

**Community/Mission Involvement:**

Heavily involved in mission work in Charlotte, the nation and world

President of Mecklenburg Ministries (the Metrolina's Interfaith organization)

Regular guest commentator for local TV and radio on politics and culture

Critical Need Response Fund board member (Charlotte's response to the economic downturn, 2008-2010)

Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools Superintendent's Advisory Board

**Preaching/Teaching:**

*The Festival of Homiletics* (2009-2012)

Sermons on *The Protestant Hour / Day One* (many times, 1996-2015)

Kristallnacht, 70th Anniversary Commemoration, Temple Israel, keynote speaker (2008)

Celebration of American Preaching, The National Cathedral, Washington, DC (2011)

Duke Chapel (many times, 2005-2015)

Preaching Conference, North & South Georgia Annual Conferences, St. Simon's Island (2013)

High Point University Baccalaureate speaker (2006)

Charlotte city-wide YMCA Prayer breakfast keynote speaker (2004)

Jameson Jones Distinguished Lecturer in Preaching at Duke (2003)

Western NC Conference United Methodist Women School of Christian Mission keynote speaker (1989, 2005)

Davidson College Annual Martin Luther King Service preacher (1993, 1999)

City of Charlotte Martin Luther King Observance preacher (1994, 2000)

Virginia Annual Conference guest preacher (1996)

South Carolina Annual Conference guest preacher (2001)

Western North Carolina Conference guest preacher (2000, 2007)

Foursquare Gospel National Convention - Leadership Keynote speaker (2002)

## **Some Priorities I Would Commend to Any New Bishops**

(1) **Strive to be like Pope Francis.** The world loves the humility, the lovely intentions, and the joyful smile of our pope. He is humble, he accepts no preference, and he keeps it simple with his gestures, embraces and words. Be a symbol of hope. Be a beacon of light. The episcopacy in our day isn't about technique, or wielding power well. It's about humility, prayer, compassion.

(2) **Be weak enough.** In society, leaders strut their strengths, and have all the right answers. In the Church, we believe strength is perfected only in weakness. God uses the weak, the unexpected ones, the meek. We want to know you are weak enough for this job. Pope Francis humbly says he isn't up to the task, and asks everyone to pray for him. We want and need leaders like King Jehoshaphat, who in a crisis prayed "Lord, we do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you" (2 Chronicles 20:12).

(3) **Keep the church together.** This is a historic role of the office of bishop, and one more important now than ever. Do not take a side, show us how to embrace difference, and help all of us to fathom and cling to what truly are the essentials of our beloved church – which are never "positions" on "issues," but are always core beliefs about God, Jesus, and redemption, and ways of being in the world – mercy, community, holiness and compassion.

(4) **Reform the appointment system.** The particular reform of the itineracy I have in mind is this: treat us like adults (which we are), and encourage your superintendents to do the same. Find ways to offer transparency and genuine friendship to the pastors who are not your subordinates but your equals, your colleagues, your peers and potential friends. Clandestine cabinets who know what's best for others (without ever conversing with them) are demoralizing and will be the death of the denomination – and they should be if they persist. If an appointment has to happen, and isn't a good fit, explain it for what it is – and even apologize, either to the laity or to the pastor. Candor and care in talk between the equals who are superintendents and appointed pastors are the sine qua non of a church that dares to call itself Christian.

(5) **Do not say "I will enforce the *Discipline*."** It is code language – but more importantly, we are not electing you to join a robed police force. We are asking you to lead, to dream, to inspire. The *Discipline* has its uses – but let's be honest: the authors of the *Discipline* are 1,000 people who meet briefly,

occasionally, and not deeply, speaking different languages, who aren't entirely happy to be together at their quadrennial meeting. It is not a divinely inspired book. We use it to organize, not to punish or erect a fortress around a dying denomination. Aren't there ways to uphold and be creative with respect to this crucial Methodist book?

(6) **Promise you will not by default blame the clergy when there's trouble in a parish.** This happens with a sad constancy, and it only demoralizes the only constituency a bishop has at the end of the day – the clergy. When any ruckus in the church arises, we feel the bishop and cabinet's suspicious eyes trained on us, and not so often on the people, who can be as dysfunctional as us clergy. Can we cheerlead our clergy instead of pressuring and blaming them?

(7) **Be available.** Listen – to all of us. Plan from the outset to be available, accessible, contactable. Yes, this is a daunting request; but pastors have absolutely no choice but to be available, accessible and contactable – so why should a bishop be less so? Early Methodism established an episcopacy, not to elevate high achieving clergy above the rest of us, but simply to offer particular responsibilities for some among all who are peers. The local pastor has to answer to everyone; there is daily accountability, and the expectation that I am reachable, and should be responsive. Plan before election to be no less so.

(8) **Create a culture of gratitude.** So many clergy feel unappreciated. We could have done many other things for a living. By choosing to serve God, we live in places we would not choose and among people who can be unkind, and we love them despite the loneliness, often hostile situations, and long hours. Express gratitude constantly. Gratitude is a theologically robust habit, and the best antidote to anxiety and low grade depression. Make your conference known for its written and oral expressions of gratitude among the pastors and churches.

(9) **Plan to be the one who shows us the way to God.** Teach: and it's the content of the faith that you should teach, not clever business techniques. Set an example for superintendents and pastors as teachers. Be willing to cope with the dark days I for one believe our church will have to endure. Our culture is drifting somewhere ugly – and we need leaders who don't blame us for what's happening around us but can help us understand, commiserate, and band together in faithful testimony to the true and living God who won't be banished even during the inevitable shrinkage of United Methodism. Ours is

to be faithful and holy, ours is to be the church, a light to the nations, even and especially when the nations don't care or pay us any attention whatsoever.

(10) Finally, **be a risk taker**. In such a world, we need courage, creativity, not keeping the institution propped up, but daring to be a bit foolish, willing to make a lot of mistakes. We expect you as bishop to make a lot of mistakes – as long as they are lunges toward the dawning of a new day, as long as they include us, as long as they are about the glory of God and not power or politics or anything other than the humble, holy, compassionate heart of God.