

*My Response to the Eight Questions for an Episcopal Nominee from the Southeast Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy*

*David Graves*

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

I am a Christian by the grace of God. In Ephesians 2:8 and 10c, “You are saved by God’s grace because of your faith. This salvation is God’s gift. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.” (CEB version) Our Wesleyan theology emphasizes the grace of God: prevenient, justifying and sanctifying.

In my case, I am a third-generation Methodist. God’s prevenient grace was at work in my life as I grew up in Fountain City United Methodist Church located in Knoxville, Tennessee. It was there I accepted God’s justifying grace. During a series of confirmation classes, I met Bishop L. Scott Allen and later professed my faith at a deeply meaningful service. My memories of that experience are powerful. My home church nurtured me in my early faith journey. It was family, Sunday school teachers, and youth leaders, other saints of the church, and pastors who were living examples of Christian faith. My pastor as a youth, Ed Eldridge, nurtured my call to ordained ministry.

I continued to grow in God’s love and felt God’s tug on my heart at the age of 21 to enter into full-time Christian ministry. As a way of living out sanctifying grace, I served in the local church as a youth director (now called student ministries). The next step in my call was becoming an ordained elder in 1992. Because of a Wesleyan understanding of grace, I have sought to live a life of vital piety and social holiness. Personally, Wesley’s quadrilateral of scripture, reason, experience, and tradition has led and guided my life.

Bible study and worship are a weekly means of grace for me. Daily, I explore scripture using the discipline of reading Old Testament, Psalms, New Testament, and the Epistles. This practice, along with my other personal reading, keeps me centered in my life. As I enter 2016, I am reflecting on Fred Craddock’s book, “A Taste of Milk and Honey.”

As a complement to my reading, I seek to journal weekly, and I am presently working on an article that summarizes and wraps up my journey as a District Superintendent, specifically focusing on mission, ministry and strategy.

As I have for years, I meet with a spiritual director. I’m involved in the Walk to Emmaus, and I take retreats each year for spiritual and personal growth. One of the blessings of my life in this season of ministry is the opportunity to pour into others’ lives especially young clergy. Over the

years, several clergy have “fed” me and mentored me. In my current mentoring experiences, I find that the more I give of myself, the more I get in return. These relationships are both enjoyable and spiritually satisfying.

Psalm 51 has been a guiding scripture for my practice of spiritual holiness. As the Psalmist proclaims in Psalm 51:10, “Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me.” Before I can minister or give leadership to others, it is important that I practice spiritual disciplines and pray for transformation to take place in my own life. I seek to root my life in this amazing grace of God.

## **2. Describe your record of pastoral fruitfulness in the local church.**

It has been a blessing to serve my entire ministry in growing congregations and as a District Superintendent of a growing district. Presently, I serve as the Senior Pastor of Church Street in downtown Knoxville, a 2600+ member congregation adjacent to the campus of the University of Tennessee. Church Street is one of the most diverse congregations in the Holston Conference with regard to race, socio-economic status and theological viewpoint.

Prior to being appointed to Church Street in June of 2015, I served as the District Superintendent to 58 churches in the Kingsport District in upper east Tennessee. During my six years there, we turned around 35 years of decline in professions of faith, membership, discipleship and finances. We consistently led the Conference with 100% paid each year to the District apportionment and twice we paid 100% to the Annual Conference. This came after receipts had dropped to an all-time low in 2008.

During my tenure as Superintendent, I established a District Transformation Team. This team consisted of twelve people, half clergy and half laity. This effort helped revitalize several congregations, established three parish ministries, and started a new church which is now the third largest attended church in the District. Moreover, our team provided tools for clergy and laity to discern mission and strategy for their congregations. This strategy resulted in the development of a District-wide leadership academy to train laity and clergy along with providing Bible studies. A local pastor serves as the Academy Director. In addition, the academy provides leadership for our Lay Servant training and Certified Lay Ministers. Kingsport District pursues a goal of having at least one Certified Lay Minister in each local church. In 2013, I received the Harry Denman Evangelism award by the Holston Conference for my work in the District.

Prior to my time as a District Superintendent, I have led churches in which 12 persons felt called and are now serving in full-time ministry as missionaries, local pastors, deacons and elders. Those same churches have begun four new worship services. Hundreds of persons have made professions of faith in Christ. Several hundred more have participated in mission teams. During

my eight years as Director of Student Ministries at Hixson UMC, the student participation grew from 30 to 150 students. While serving at St. Matthew UMC, our worship attendance grew 125% along with membership, discipleship and countless professions of faith. We started the first contemporary worship service in the whole upper East Tennessee area. While serving at Ooltewah UMC, we experienced phenomenal growth in membership, worship and discipleship attendance, professions of faith, and buildings to our campus. In all these ministry settings, capital campaigns raised several million dollars, thus completing the construction of new buildings, paying off indebtedness and funding mission purposes outside the walls of the church. All along the way it became clear to me that ministry is best accomplished in teams.

### **3. How have you demonstrated the spiritual gift of leadership?**

Beginning with youth work while in college, I have served in leadership roles throughout my adult life. I have come to realize that for leadership to be effective, it must be led by the guiding of the Holy Spirit. I also know that effective leadership works best when it is done collaboratively. A starting point for me is building relationships. I spend enormous amounts of time doing this. I seek to build trust, and that can only come from developing relationships with people, groups, and congregations, because trust is not given, but earned.

I have demonstrated adaptive skills and new approaches depending on the situation. Moreover, I have been able to come alongside others in building teams with both clergy and laity. I lead by a strong commitment to prayer, conversation with others, and discerning next steps. While serving as a District Superintendent, our Transformational Team formed an Intercessory Prayer Team that prays for each church and pastor daily. This team started with three people and grew to over sixty in a four year period.

I have given leadership as pastor to a small membership church (St. Matthew, Kingsport). St. Matthew became a medium size congregation moving from 131 to 299 in worship attendance. This was followed by my appointment to a medium size membership church (Ooltewah, Chattanooga). Ooltewah's congregation moved from 233 to 646 in worship attendance. Along the way, I have given leadership to helping congregations raise millions of dollars for ministry, capital campaigns, and missions across the street and around the world. I have served on the District and Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, have been Dean of the Cabinet for two years, and presently serve on the Conference Trustees and on the Credit Union Board of the Holston Conference.

In my varied appointments, I have equipped and empowered laity and clergy to fulfill their gifts for ministry. Four examples: (1) Stephen DeFur was a part of the youth group at Hixson United Methodist Church where I served as Director of Student Ministries from 1983 to 1991. Presently, Stephen is Senior Pastor of the Cokesbury United Methodist Church in Knoxville,

Tennessee. Cokesbury is the largest church in Holston Conference averaging almost 4,000 in weekly worship attendance. (2) Victor Dingus, a lay person, who was a part of my District Transformational Team in Kingsport. Victor went on to obtain his DMIN at Wesley Seminary and now provides congregational revitalization consulting services through Hinton Rural Life Center, and Annual Conferences within the SEJ. (3) Susan Arnold, a local pastor, whom I encouraged and assisted to attend seminary will graduate in May of 2016. Susan is the pastor of a medium size congregation that is vital and growing. She served for a time as the Director of Connectional Ministries of the District. (4) Ted Wasson, church maintenance supervisor, whom I mentored for several months after he came to work for Ooltewah UMC. Ted grew in his faith walk and grew in his faith sharing. In Ted's first year with the church, he led 17 people to Christ. If the maintenance supervisor of the church is winning people to Jesus, it puts the pressure on the ministry staff. Yet from the parking lot to the pulpit, it is all about doing ministry as a team. Each team member is critical to the purpose and mission of the church.

In each of the settings where I have served, I have recognized the spiritual gifts of others and sought to call them forth. This is where I get my greatest blessing... in seeing others succeed in Kingdom work.

#### **4. Demonstrated willingness to be held accountable and to hold others accountable for their results with grace.**

At the core of my faith, I live into the sense that at the end of the day, regardless of position or title, I am simply a sinner saved by God's grace. To live life with humility and accountability is most important. I feel very strongly that if I am going to hold others accountable, I must first be held accountable. During all of my ministry, I have sought to surround myself with strong leaders, deep thinkers and various personalities to help me work through specific situations. I welcome the thoughts and recommendations from my team, both official and unofficial, paid and volunteer. I encourage people to challenge me spiritually, intellectually, and programmatically so that I continue to provide an opportunity not just be held accountable, but to grow as a leader. I believe a leader rises (or falls) to the level of his or her colleagues, confidants, and parishioners. In the words of John Wesley, "Christians watch over one another in love." I preach and teach that being accountable to Jesus means we are growing in holiness. For the last fifteen years, I have surrounded myself with a team of persons whom I meet with regularly. Also, I have a covenant group. Wherever I have served, I have asked and encouraged other clergy, staff, and lay leadership to help me in this area of accountability by setting goals and benchmarks to constantly review how I and we are doing. As a pastor and district superintendent, I've done my best to operate within covenants so each member of the Body of Christ knows his or her responsibilities and areas of accountability.

Creating an environment of setting objectives and numerical goals with regular review and as needed problem solving to drive and ensure accountability in my tenure as a District Superintendent went a long way in turning around 35 years of decline. Without accountability, trust cannot be built, and without trust a denominational leader is not going to be very successful. The same is true for a pastor in a local church. I have a proven track record in utilizing accountability while extending both truth and grace. It is a balance that has been one of my strongest assets especially when built on a strong platform of transparency.

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

Doing the right thing can be a very challenging part of life. The more responsibility one has, the more the accountability factor comes into play. Doing the right thing is something that I take most seriously as this is where trust is earned or broken. I seek to build trust by developing relationships framed in sharing personally about my calling and mission. I seek to listen, gather facts, pray a lot, and seek to live out of the Wesleyan quadrilateral seeking win/win solutions. I have mentioned previously the importance of trust as a key ingredient for leadership and fruitfulness. As I spend time with unchurched people, I have learned they don't trust pastors and especially do not trust denominational leaders. A lot of folks sitting in our pews don't either. Therefore, I seek to build relationships with people, be transparent, and make team decisions. It helps me accomplish the right thing even when it is hard. This has helped me lead congregations through significant change. An example of doing the right thing was when we made the decision at Ooltewah to move the traditional worship service from 11am to 9:30am and begin a new contemporary worship service at 11am in the year 1999. The decision was based on reaching a new segment of people in our community. Tough decision, but one we did with lots of conversation, relationship building, and made by our leadership team. Some people left the church, but hundreds came. Over a seven year period church worship attendance grew over 200%. The church doubled in membership.

Because I have been a visionary and an agent of change throughout my ministry, I often find myself dealing with difficult situations as we move forward. However, I have sought to do this with a pastor's heart. I have had to terminate staff and deal with difficult church members. As a District Superintendent, I had to mediate conflict with pastors and church members. Along the way, I have had the heartbreaking work of supervising the surrender of pastoral credentials. None of this is easy. Yet, I have sought to do it all with grace and mercy. I don't mind conflict, and I am energized when I can help people and congregations get to a better place. One of my mottos or sayings that I tell pastors and laity, and what I seek to live by in my own life, is that no matter what happens, if you are totally right and another person or group is totally wrong, you still have to act like a Christian. This Kingdom behavior is best accomplished when one lives

with accountability and facilitates ministry as a team. These guiding principles are my foundation for seeking to do the right thing.

#### **6. What has been your exposure to the Annual, Jurisdictional and General Conference?**

Most of my experience has been in the local church, district and annual conference. In the Holston Conference, I have been a member of the Board of Ordained Ministry, have served for many years as a member of the Resurrection Design Team (our annual youth event that has an attendance of over 10,000 students), and have served on the Cabinet for six years, two as Dean. Along the way, I have been exposed to several denominational leaders, and worked with other district superintendent's inside and outside the Holston Conference in developing a district mission and strategy for church revitalization. While serving as Kingsport superintendent, we were the first district in Holston and one of the first in the general church to develop a district strategy for mission focused on congregational revitalization. I have served on the Board of Camping in the Holston Conference which helped to start a new conference camp after a flood destroyed an existing camp. I am serving on our Conference Trustees and Credit Union Board.

I attended the Cabinet Consultation at St. Simon's Island five out of the six years I served on the Cabinet. In 2014, I was called on to lead two sessions at the Cabinet Consultation on District Strategy when the Keynote Speaker became ill. I have attended the School of Congregational Development. I was an observer at the 2008 General Conference, a delegate to the 2012 General Conference and am presently the Head of the Holston Delegation for 2016.

#### **7. Experience in the global United Methodist Church communion**

Since my youth I have been involved in missions. As a college student, I was on the ministry team of an inner city church in Knoxville, That situation was a 24/7 ministering addressing the needs of people living in the community and on the streets. Ironically, I am presently serving a downtown church which ministers in the same kind of way.

It has been this kind of experience that planted the seed to have a heart and passion for the marginalized. I have led youth and adults in the Appalachian Service Project, hurricane relief, mission experiences in downtown Atlanta and to the ends of the earth in India. My work in India is a continuation of my mentoring and teaching of pastors and lay leadership within the local church. This was accomplished by our church partnership with missionaries, Peter and Esther Pieria. Out of this partnership, Kevin Bowling and his family are presently teaching in India.

Wherever I have served, I have sought to give apostolic leadership to defining our mission around Acts 1:8, making a difference in the immediate community and to the ends of the earth. All of my work in the area of missions has brought me to see that we are a global church which

is our greatest strength. Furthermore, it has helped me to define my personal mission statement: **“Win people to Christ, see the overlooked, transform lives and change the world.”**

### **8. Response to the “hot topics” in the United Methodist Church**

- a. **Human sexuality**-This is a hot topic for some in our culture and to many in our local congregations. Moreover, it has become an agenda for some while others focus on it as a social issue. As a leader, I see and hear both sides. At my core, I have a traditional view regarding the values of marriage. But in my work with youth and as a pastor, I have talked to countless young people, parents and grandparents concerning homosexuality. First and foremost, I am called to be a pastor to all people; and as such, in all things I attempt to focus on my principle mission statement of winning people to Jesus. This includes offering the whole Gospel for the whole person. Human sexuality becomes a part of the conversation. I believe if this were our focus, we would learn to live together in our differences while accomplishing the mission set forth by Christ in Matthew chapters 25 and 28. I will uphold the Discipline in matters concerning human sexuality and expect all to be accountable to it whether one agrees or not. This is critical to our Wesleyan heritage and covenant that all clergy pledged to uphold.
  
- b. **Local church closures and establishing new faith communities**-Lovett Weems and Gil Rendle have both shared that 33% of all churches will close in the next few years if they continue to keep doing ministry the way they do presently. When I first heard this, I thought it could not be true. After a few months into my time as a District Superintendent, I saw the reality of this statement. There are going to be church closures regardless of our best efforts. But there could be fewer of these if each district and annual conference has a strategy not focused on telling people what to do or sending down a program on high, but on giving clergy and laity tools to do fresh, creative ministry.

Our Kingsport District Strategy enabled several congregations to be revitalized. This, along with creating shared ministry opportunities for churches in cooperative parishes brought new life and growth to each church, but more importantly to an entire community. Moreover, it is important to start new churches, again with fresh strategies, to reach a segment of our culture that established congregations are not going to reach. We need both revitalization and new church starts. In the Kingsport District we tried three new church start ventures. Each one provided new opportunities, with Shades of Grace becoming a driving force in identifying and serving the marginalized. Shades of Grace reaches over 300 people each week after only 12 months in existence. One of our new church starts did not work, but we learned from this venture. Being willing to try new things and discern fruitfulness is most important. As a denominational leader, I feel we need to provide opportunities and resources for clergy and laity to begin new faith communities while at the same time equipping existing congregations in revitalization efforts. In my work as a Superintendent, I sought to give every opportunity for the local congregations to discern and plan for a future. Regardless of best efforts, there will be

some churches that will need to close. Yet, I feel it most important church closures happen with dignity. How can we work with churches like Hospice that honors the life cycle of a church and propels it to give life to another church or possible new church venture. I have a proven track record as a District Superintendent and pastor in these areas.

- c. Next generation leaders-**The recruitment, mentoring, equipping and providing opportunities to our next generation is critical for the future of the church especially as United Methodists. We need to be open to unconventional ways of allowing young clergy to follow their passions for ministry rather than trying to fit them into a traditional model of ministry. We need to create environments that allow clergy and laity to take risk and accept failure as a learning experience, not a punishment. This is going to be critical to attracting effective and creative young clergy. Moreover, we need to provide funding resources for those attending seminary to not incur debt. As a District Superintendent, I did this with providing local pastors scholarships in their course of study work and seeking grant funding for seminary students. We need to rethink how we do leader development in the local church, district and annual conference. As a pastor and superintendent, I am proactive in seeking diverse and youthful leaders. We need their voices at the table while giving them opportunities to lead and succeed.

Just as important clergy leadership development is to the church, developing lay leadership is just as critical. In doing team ministry, the equipping and empowering of lay persons for ministry has been the foundation stone for the fruitfulness of my ministry. As a Superintendent, the creation of our Academy was a wonderful tool for training laity for ministry. The goal of having a Certified Lay Minister for each congregation grew out of the Transformation Team and is facilitated by the Academy. In the future, some churches are going to be led by Certified Lay Ministers. Another component to next generation leaders is around bi-vocational ministers. Due to lack of funding resources, many churches are and will be served by a bi-vocational minister. A diverse look at next generation leaders is very important to fulfilling mission and strategy for the church's future. I have a track record as a Pastor and Superintendent in doing this work effectively.

- d. Impending death tsunami-**Lovett Weems statement about losing a generation of members to death encourages us to take a look at what is to come. No one has ever been more prophetic as this is happening in large numbers in our denomination. While I was a District Superintendent, I saw this occur in several of our small membership churches, as well as large membership churches. When I visited churches, I sat in worship thinking that if this person (this elderly, but very involved lay person) is no longer able to give leadership in this church, who is going to pick up the mantle? If things don't change, no one. This is also true in the church where I presently serve. We average one death in the congregation each week. However, work is being done to bring in new members at a larger rate than those who die or transfer their membership.



Without reaching new people, we will escalate local church closures. Again, it is critical that a strategy be developed around revitalization and new church starts. This focus begins assisting churches at looking at their community and what is the next step they can take in reaching their community.

- e. **Guaranteed appointment for clergy**-I struggle with this somewhat. I feel the guaranteed appointment is a core principal of our denomination. However, this process has seen its day years ago quite frankly. Because I have sat at the appointment-making table, I see that we sometimes really hurt our mission of making disciples for the transformation of the world. Fruitful clergy do not need to even think about guaranteed appointments. Dealing with ineffective clergy is hurting local churches and the clergy themselves in the long run. If we are to thrive as a denomination, we need to do away with guaranteed appointments, yet we also need to build trust with clergy. This happens when we develop relationships, a critical piece of the system. For many, the system has let clergy and lay leadership down. We must be proactive in helping clergy rethink ministry, and give them tools for ministry. Leadership needs to be focused on what effectiveness and fruitfulness looks like. We need to be clear on expectations, and improve the selection and mentoring process.
  
- f. **Term episcopacy**- I fully support terms for bishops. I would support 8 to 12 year terms. I am against reelections of bishops for another term as I feel this would take away from the mission of the church. Moreover, I support once a bishop's term is completed, they return to their annual conference to serve as an Elder in that conference. A Bishop should not be a bishop for life, but for a term.
  
- g. **The world-wide nature of the church**-I feel that the beauty of the United Methodist Church is our connection. The world-wide connection gives us a strength that benefits the church greatly. In the same sense, our world-wide church is our biggest struggle in many regards. When you deal with different cultures, languages, and theological viewpoints, it makes things very hard to navigate. My desire is that we work to build bridges amongst our differences and remain a world-wide church rather than opt to various versions of the Book of Discipline. We become united when our focus is on unity. Seeking unity in peace, equality for women, and education for children around the world. We seek to be unified and united in elimination of poverty, health care and social justice for all. Personally, I have a strong conviction to keep our Methodist Church together in the messiness of our differences. United we stand tall in the world.