

Responses to SEJ Committee on Episcopacy Questions
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1. How do you reflect a life and ministry rooted in Wesleyan theology, spirituality, and practice?

I was brought up in First United Methodist Church of Lakeland, FL, faithfully attending Sunday school and worship, singing in choirs, going on mission trips, and participating in UMYF. When I hit college, however, I decided that I wanted to go my own way. I had a wonderful time living only for me, worshipping solely on Easter and Christmas Eve to avoid my mother's guilt trips.

After college, I decided that law school was the best way to spend another three years in Gainesville. I continued to enjoy myself, excelled in law school, and went to work at age 23 for a premier Florida law firm. I made a ridiculously high salary and dreamed of having a huge home and all the trappings of "success." Life in the law firm taught me a strict work ethic, a commitment to excellence, and an ability to work under intense pressure with immense responsibility. It also provided many lessons about justice and the gross imbalances of power in our society.

After several years, I found myself increasingly miserable. I had everything I'd dreamed of having, but had no sense of purpose or contentment. The only meaningful thing I did for others was to volunteer to do legal work for the homeless at Metropolitan Ministries in Tampa, but I quickly saw that legal options for the homeless were dismal.

Things changed one night as I unpacked boxes while moving into my dream house. I ran across my old confirmation Bible and started reading the gospel of Luke. That evening, I experienced vividly the presence of Jesus Christ and truly knew Christ's justifying grace. Jesus asked me if I had had enough of doing life my way and if I would now please try doing it HIS way. After this encounter, I, in every sense, became a new creation and headed to nearby Hyde Park UMC. From that night forward I have prayed and studied scripture every day. I immediately began tithing (I was surprised to find that not everybody did!) and have ever since. I have also depended upon the means of grace and Christ's sanctifying grace to convict me of sin and move me toward perfection in love.

That night, I also committed my life to doing whatever Christ called me to do. He first called me to lead a chapel service for the same homeless ministry I had helped with legal advice. What joy! There was transforming power in the gospel that was not present in the law! I watched as many of their lives changed just as mine had been changed.

After a few years of volunteer ministry, Christ called me to sell my dream house and go to seminary, then into parish ministry, and now offer myself to the episcopacy. I want every person to know the power and love that I have found and have given my life to that pursuit. Because of my experience, I have great patience with and compassion for those who choose to wander far from God and a desire to welcome them home.

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 measured fruitfulness in the local churches I served by how lives were being transformed and how those who had been transformed then sought to transform our community and the world. My main focus was old-fashioned, Wesleyan dependence on the means of grace, so I would seek to bring folks in through worship or service and then urge them to study Scripture, pray, commune, worship, and become accountable to a small group. I wanted them to experience the grace and power of Christ just as I had.

This was my approach in my first appointment as the first female associate at the largest church in the conference. I loved building a large group of young adults who loved Christ and were determined to make a difference in the community. Many of them continue to serve, now with their children, that church and its community. I was also touched by how that church embraced me, accepted my leadership, and let me explore all areas of ministry.

After four years there, I was appointed to a rural church that needed to become a suburban church because of the growth of the community. Over five years, that church of 300 members welcomed 85 new members (48 on profession of faith). They had over 200 connected in some way with a small group, and giving reached an all-time high. The church that had so feared change eventually hosted a YMCA after school and summer camp program, joined with other churches in outreach to the needy in the area, and went on mission trips throughout the world.

After five years in Tampa, my pastor husband Allen and I told the bishop that having two churches and a two-year-old were too much! We were also crazy enough to ask for a church that was vital to the annual conference but currently in dire straits. That led to our next nine years as co-pastors of two large churches that were both in dismal financial condition when we arrived. Both were using their children's areas as storage closets. Both had spirits of defeat and hopelessness. Both had physical plants that reeked of decay. Both had staffs that were dysfunctional and unmotivated. Both had large groups of people who met us with the warning that if things didn't change fast, they were leaving.

Like trauma doctors, Allen and I set to work on these coding churches. By the power of God and an emphasis on prayer and the means of grace, new life and growth happened. We rekindled a spirit of joy. We assembled excellent staffs that came to work together as one. We led capital campaigns. We empowered leaders in the congregations to do ministry and to lead small groups. We were not surprised that, after four years at the first congregation, when the church was out of the trauma unit, the Cabinet had another coding church ready for us.

Our time at each of these churches ended a free-fall into decline. At First UMC Cape Coral worship attendance increased, there were 79 professions of faith in 4 years, and giving and those involved in mission increased dramatically. In my five years at First Ocala, there were 150 professions of faith and a dramatic increase in numbers involved in missions. Although the

death tsunami has greatly affected that church and worship attendance has suffered, it now has 23 babies in the nursery, an excellent preschool, and strong children's and youth ministries, all of which give it a strong foundation for future.

As a superintendent, I have walked with leaders who inhabit very similar churches. I have to think this type of transformative leadership, with its many trials and frustrations, often among people who disagree with you and are slow to buy into a new vision, is well suited to the demands of the episcopacy. It also requires a leader to take risks, and I believe our episcopal leaders must be risk-takers.

3. 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)

To me, the heart of spiritual leadership is discerning together through prayer and the means of grace where the Holy Spirit is leading, clearing barriers to her work, and assembling the gifts of many to fulfill the Spirit's vision. I have a lengthy list of how this has unfolded through my years in ministry, and here are a few items from that list:

When I was at Hillsborough UMC in Tampa, I was compelled, after reading Jim Cymbala's *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire* and Terry Tekyl's *Preyed On or Prayed For*, to start a Monday night prayer service. Bob, one of our regulars, soon expressed interest in leading the service. I agreed, and Bob learned all he could about prayer and possibilities for worship. He suggested a new format for the service, and we worked together so that he would be confident and prepared to lead.

Bob took over that service and built a solid group of prayer warriors. Their prayer brought revival and a new spirit to that church. Bob also came to help with visitation and other areas of worship. He devoted hours to prayer and told me countless times how grateful he was to do this and how Christ had become real to him through this ministry.

After I moved from that church, Bob would check in with me every few months. He would always end our conversation by giving me the count of how many days he had been praying for me. When Bob died a couple of years ago, the pastor invited me back to lead the prayer service in Bob's memory. I used Bob's format, and we all marveled at how God had worked in Bob's life and how he, in turn, was Christ to so many. That night, Bob's wife handed me the final page from his prayer journal, written the day he died. Written across the top was, "Day 4,038 of praying for Sue."

At First Ocala, three laypersons felt God's call to start a ministry to the homeless at the height of the 2008 recession. We supported them but wondered if this "country club" church could embrace such a ministry. Amazingly, the ministry grew to the point that now, every Tuesday morning, 200-250 homeless folks come to the church for a hot lunch, toiletries, clothing, backpacks, blankets, tents, referrals for medical and dental care, and support for prescriptions. The church is recognized far and wide for its expertise in getting I.D.'s and for its

bike ministry, which distributes and repairs bikes for hundreds. Lunch is followed by worship and a Bible study for those seeking recovery. 125-150 volunteers provide one-on-one care and prayer support for those who attend.

A few years later, I started a group interested in studying the early Methodists, especially William Wilberforce and the Clapham Circle. Like them, we pledged to fully commit ourselves to the means of grace and discern what the Holy Spirit was calling us to do. The group happened to have a school principal, a guidance counselor, and many teachers. We sensed a call to help the children in our schools and established an Education Task Force. By assembling a large group of school personnel and interested parents, they provided support and services to the homeless families in the school district. They hosted town hall meetings for superintendent and school board candidates. Most importantly, they successfully lobbied to get a tax increase so that each school would have music, art, and physical education programs. This tax increase was a miracle in a region that is anti-tax and contains a large percentage of retirees reluctant to pay for better schools. Countless children have been helped because this group listened to the call of the Holy Spirit.

4. 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)?

I have long realized, since my early law firm days, that I am more fruitful when much is expected of me and the bar is set high. Some of the most grace-filled and important conversations I have ever had involved someone I love and respect telling me that I failed to work to my ability or that I did not give a job my full attention. I have always told my Staff Parish Committees to be brutally honest because I want to do Kingdom work with excellence. I made sure I had a functioning Superintendency Committee to do the same for me in my role as a DS (accountability with them took a different form when they were the first to name for me the call to the episcopacy they discerned in my life and asked me to explore it).

I use my own background and experience of accountability to hold others accountable. It is essential that those I oversee sense my love for them and my desire for their wholeness and well-being. It is equally important that they know I expect them to work to their capacities, to give their jobs their full attention and efforts, and to be fruitful in their ministries.

Over the years, I have had many opportunities to implement this approach to accountability. Confronting staff and key leaders is an unavoidable part of serving turnaround churches. We arrived at churches that had not evaluated staff in over ten years. As a result, many staff members feared accountability.

I took time at each of these churches to build relationships of support and concern with staff members. We worked with staff parish committees to craft job descriptions and set forth clear expectations. After this careful and prayer-filled work, each staff person had to decide about his or her own desire to do the jobs as described. When necessary, we gave staff members a clear list of areas for improvement along with a clear plan and timeline for change. No one was

“fired,” but some employees lost their jobs because they chose not to do what was required to keep them.

This approach took a lot of the emotional angst and uncertainty out of the process. It achieved a good balance between support and accountability. It is an approach I have taught to the Staff Parish Relations Committees in my district and a process I have used when writing covenants between SPRC’s and clergy regarding fruitfulness and job performance. I have also used this focus on support and accountability when supervising the 93 pastors in my district. They have received a list of my key expectations and are evaluated annually.

Additionally, I have held countless candidates for ministry accountable for sixteen years on district committees on ministry, nine years on the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, and six years on the executive committee of the Board. As chair of the theology review team, I had numerous discussions with candidates as to what our expectations were and how they could work to meet them.

Much of my work in my six years of the Chair of the Order of Elders was to explore how to better hold clergy accountable. We emphasized participation in covenant groups and held trainings to make them vehicles for accountability. We also recommended the establishment of clergy peer groups. As DS, I work with the leaders of these groups to create yet another supportive vehicle for accountability.

I ventured into a very unpopular form of accountability last year when I emphasized physical health and exercise. I am deeply concerned with the unhealthy lifestyles, chronic health problems, and obesity prevalent among clergy. I am also all too aware of the systemic financial burdens poor clergy health places on our insurance programs and the resulting cost to our churches and clergy. Our district clergy peer groups read and discussed “*Younger Next Year*” and met with a dietitian/diabetes educator. I am glad we addressed it because, although I did hear grumbling, three pastors have told me that they were grateful for this call to accountability because it saved their lives.

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

Our Annual Conference found itself in the difficult situation of having an unfunded liability in its pension program that made our plan unsustainable and threatened the future financial viability of our churches. The clergy would have to forfeit some retiree health benefits if the AC was going to remain solvent. As co-leader of the task force to address this problem, I went to listening sessions around the AC and addressed the AC clergy session with our plan. They voted to do away with retiree health benefits for anyone new to the system and agreed to a defined payout amount for many current members of the plan, saving the conference \$140 million and preserving its future.

Concerned about the young clergy who were losing these benefits, I also met to listen to as many of them as I could. They indicated that student debt was their biggest concern. We put together a team of key leaders and, with contributions from individuals, the Florida UM

Foundation and the Conference Board of Pensions, made it possible for new ordinands to receive checks for \$5,000. We are also working to ensure that they receive financial planning help to prepare for retirement.

On the DS front, it seems like you are in a difficult situation daily. One especially difficult situation involved meeting with a very upset and split SPRC with concerns that their pastor's health was adversely affecting his memory and his effectiveness in the church. Through very difficult conversations, we discerned together that it was time to move the pastor for his welfare and the welfare of the church. It was the right thing to do.

I had to have several meetings with churches to establish guidelines and write covenants for registered sex offenders who regularly worship there (many grew up in these churches). We had candid discussions of how to have a church open to all while making sure all are protected.

I have found myself in many difficult situations as our Annual Conference tries to live into the Call to Action's vision of shifting the bulk of our resources to the local churches where ministry happens and disciples are made. As a DS, I downsized my office staff in order for the district budget to be sustainable in the future. I have also done this work Conference-wide as a member of the Strategic Leadership Team. We are now implementing SLT recommendations to streamline district offices, consolidate all district properties into a Conference portfolio managed by one property company, and combine district new church funds into a Conference-wide Development Fund. This is the right thing to do, but we have had to work through tremendous resistance, deal with the stress of streamlining staff, and live into a major adaptive challenge.

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.)

As a District Superintendent I have been exposed to the many issues and agonies of the appointment-making process. I have worked on creating a culture of joy and grace-filled accountability in the district along with the huge challenge of transforming charge conferences into inspirational events. I have gained insight into 83 churches of all types and the diversity of clergy gifts. This exposure and work is very different from focusing on one congregation. I have learned of systemic issues of which I had no idea until I became a DS. I have also grown to appreciate the importance of gifted part-time and bi-vocational clergy.

I have gained a big-picture view of the work of the Annual Conference through my work as a member of the Conference Strategic Leadership Team (see the answer to question 5). I have also served as the Chair of the Order of Elders, a member of the Fresh Expressions Florida Steering Committee, the Conference Board of Pension and Health Benefits, the Board of Ordained Ministry, the Committee on Resolutions, the Conference Committee on Spiritual Formation, the Annual Conference Worship Team, the Task Force for Young Clergy Debt Reduction, and the committee that created our Center for Clergy Excellence. I also rewrote the Conference Standing Rules in 2001.

I was elected as a delegate to the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference in 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016. I served on the 2008 Committee on Plan of Organization and Rules of Order and the 2012 Committee on Appeals.

I was elected as a delegate to General Conference in 2008 (3rd clergy elected), 2012 (2nd clergy), and 2016 (1st clergy). I have served on the Judicial Administration Legislative Committee at each General Conference and chaired it in 2012. I have committed much time and energy to legislation regarding trial process for bishops and clergy. I have worked with the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry to draft legislation regarding complaints and the trial process and have worked with the Commission on the Status and Role of Women regarding investigation and process in sexual misconduct cases.

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 husband Allen and I have personally served in Methodist missions in the Dominican Republic and Zambia. As a local church pastor and as a DS I have worked with Methodist missions in, and sent parishioners to, Haiti, Cuba, Russia, Costa Rica, Peru, and Angola. I have learned much through these experiences about the global Methodist communion.

I traveled throughout England and met with leaders of the British Methodist Church and the Anglican Church who are at the forefront of the Fresh Expressions movement as we seek to develop Fresh Expressions of Christianity throughout Florida and in my district. I have also experienced the global United Methodist communion through my leadership of the Alumni Board of the Candler School of Theology and its mission of theological education.

I know the work of UMVIM and UMCOR all too well from my time serving in southwest Florida during the devastating hurricanes of 2004. I have personally been a part of many relief efforts requiring their involvement after hurricanes, tornadoes, and flooding. My district has one of the finest First Response Units in the country, and numerous UMVIM volunteers come from this area.

8. What is your response to these “hot topics” in the United Methodist Church? Please limit your response to two paragraphs for each topic.

a. Human sexuality

I usually find myself playing the centrist role in discussions regarding human sexuality. I understand and appreciate those who seek to hold the Church accountable for conforming to Scriptural mandates and for lifting up our Wesleyan heritage of scriptural holiness and a life that is being sanctified and conformed to the likeness of Christ. I also understand and appreciate those who have experienced the Holy Spirit at work in the lives, marriages, and church leadership of LGBTQ persons. What I cannot abide is the fear, anger, and contempt that I have

witnessed each “side” having for the other. This unwillingness to discuss, discern, and seek to understand the other is, I am certain, not of Christ and grieves the very heart of God.

I look to Acts 15 for guidance. There, the Jerusalem church was asked whether the mission of Christ should be extended to Gentiles. The Jerusalem church did not ridicule and question the faith of those who sought to include Gentiles. It came together with them to pray and discern the direction of the Spirit. I believe that prayerful discussion and mutual respect should be our Church’s approach to issues of human sexuality. We are all still in the process of being shaped by Christ’s prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. As an episcopal leader I will fulfill my vow to uphold the *Discipline* (as a lawyer, the rule of law is important to me) and continue to work for the unity of the Church.

b. Local church closures and establishing new faith communities

The heart of the gospel message is that death is not victorious and that we are to follow Christ as agents of resurrection. Churches have life cycles, and we need to focus on how to bring new life out of death. We in Florida are at the forefront of the Fresh Expressions movement, which involves discerning where the Holy Spirit is calling and moving out into “third spaces,” where people already are present and find community. There, leaders creatively determine how to spread the gospel and develop Christian community. We are also having success with healthy churches taking over existing church sites and rebirthing congregations. I strongly believe in discerning where the Spirit is leading and being creative and nimble enough to use resources to further the Spirit’s work.

As a DS and as part of a Conference-wide initiative, this fall I conducted twelve charge conferences with churches that I had studied and concluded would be facing closure within 2-3 years if they did not embrace adaptive change. We had candid conversations about their present reality and set forth clear guidelines about what they should seek to do over the next two years to become vital again. We settled upon clear indicators so that they could gauge for themselves how they are doing and offered some resources to help should they choose to change. If there is no increase in fruitfulness, district leadership and I will pastorally help them move toward closure. The churches seemed to appreciate frank discussion and clear direction. Experience has taught me that churches facing closure go through the familiar stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Adequate time is needed for this process and a pastoral presence is needed to shepherd the church through it.

c. Next generations leaders

Our Cabinet spent our last retreat with Duke Divinity School’s Greg and Susan Jones fleshing out how we, as leaders of our Annual Conference, will “overinvest in the young.” Our Annual Conference has had great success at attracting, investing in, and deploying young clergy. Our Office of Clergy Excellence has a staff person whose focus is on relationship with young clergy. Young clergy are considered during the first appointive session so they receive an appointment that best fits their gifts and potential instead of what is left after all the appointments

are made. We have an excellent Residents in Ministry Program. My district's clergy peer groups keep young clergy in communion with other clergy and involved in lifelong learning.

I also mentor many young clergy and lay leaders and make sure their names are raised at nominations time. One third of our eighteen General Conference delegates are under 40. Most of all, I realize we have much to learn from the next generations. They are creative and energetic and grow weary of church as usual. I have many fine young clergy and lay leaders in my district, and most of them have Fresh Expressions ministries meeting in restaurants, clubs, and other "third spaces." Their fresh insights and approaches to ministry have revitalized their churches and our district.

d. Impending death tsunami (Lovett Weems)

The death tsunami has already begun; I have mourned the death of key leaders and officiated at their funerals. Each year it impacts the church more and we are being forced into radical adaptive change as we adjust to the loss of these large givers and faithful attenders. It is time to act with urgency and have honest conversations with at-risk churches about the realities they are facing.

We have two choices: live out of fear and face the future with doom and gloom; or faithfully discern, with hope and expectancy, what the Holy Spirit is leading the UMC to do next. If we lead where the Spirit is calling and overinvest in the young, I believe we enter into an exciting new chapter for the UMC. The critical question is: Are we willing to change?

e. Guaranteed appointment for clergy

I don't think anyone fully realizes the impact of guaranteed appointment until he or she sits with Cabinet colleagues at the end of appointment-making sessions and agonizes over having to yet again send an ineffective/underperforming clergy person(s) into yet another church. It is especially frustrating when gifted local pastors are available but the appointment must go to the elder. Clearly we have to take some action to avoid this scenario, especially since the number of churches able to afford full connection elders is decreasing in most annual conferences.

I think, however, that to end guaranteed appointment is an extreme reaction to the problem. I do believe guaranteed appointment is needed to protect clergy from being denied appointment because of gender, race, ethnicity, prophetic ministry, or theological bent. I also think that bishops, superintendents, and staff parish relations committees need to be up front and proactive with underperforming/ineffective clergy. I have observed a reluctance to name and document such issues. Our Annual Conference's creation of a Committee for Clergy Effectiveness to address these issues has proved beneficial. I also think that the Disciplinary process for administrative complaint and review should be more common. This review process includes safeguards but at the same time allows for removing ineffective clergy from the appointive process.

f. Term episcopacy

Interestingly, my thoughts on term episcopacy echo my thoughts on guaranteed appointment for elders. First, lifelong episcopacy safeguards the prophetic and often unpopular role of the bishop. The bishop takes a balcony view of the whole of the Church, praying through that perspective, and listening closely to discern the vision and guidance of the Holy Spirit. No doubt, some will disagree with what the bishop discerns. Some will question the bishop's actions and decisions and some will have unrealistic expectations of the bishop. If we truly believe that God calls, installs, and equips bishops for service, why would we want a group of disillusioned and disgruntled humans to intervene unnecessarily?

Second, I think that using term limits to remove ineffective/underperforming bishops is an extreme reaction. The Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy should be setting clear guidelines for accountability and be working with these bishops toward improvement. Administrative procedures exist in the *Discipline* to remove them if necessary. Third, it takes time to gain experience and to live into this calling. Why have bishops interrupt their learning curves to offer themselves to another election process? For all these reasons, I believe term episcopacy is a bad idea.

g. The Worldwide Nature of the Church/Global Book of Discipline/Global Structure

Few things are as compelling to me as the need for the UMC to be a worldwide Church. Worshiping at General Conferences with brothers and sisters from all over the world is when I truly glimpse the kingdom of heaven on earth and the fulfillment of Christ's prayer for unity. We need to work side by side, in the trenches, and learn from each other. This learning cannot be as effective if we are just a loose coalition of Methodist "states." Paragraph 101 of the *Discipline*, which provides for a Global Book of Discipline, captures this vision well.

We have much to learn from one another. We in the United States need to be reminded that we are not the center of the universe, free to fall back into paternalistic and imperialistic ways. We need to see again through our brothers and sisters around the world what evangelistic fervor looks like, and throw off the apathy and inward focus that tends to bind many of our churches. We also have much to share: teaching resources and partnership opportunities to address the most basic of human needs. I recently was in a meeting when a United Methodist leader, a laywoman from Mozambique, urgently requested that the Church partner with many in her community to help end widespread rape and sexual abuse. The needs of this world require a worldwide church to address them.