

Dr. R. Lawson Bryan's Responses To
Questions for an Episcopal Nominee from the SEJ Committee on Episcopacy

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

I aspire to Wesley's vision of the union of knowledge and vital piety, aiming to serve Christ with head, heart, and hands. My focus is on Scripture as the primary authority for Christian belief and life, while recognizing the importance of Tradition, Reason, and Experience as key resources for faith and practice.

Spiritual disciplines I practice are: daily prayer, undergirded by the use of the Book of Common Prayer and other resources; daily scripture reading and reflection; participation in the Three-Year Covenant Community and monthly retreats with a clergy covenant partner. I am currently in a clergy support group whose members come from all five of the jurisdictions in the United States.

It was out of the regular discipline of study and reflection that I found clarity of purpose in Ephesians 1:9-10:

God has made known to us God's hidden purpose, to be put into effect when the time was ripe, namely, that the universe, all in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ.

Several years ago I felt a calling to organize a Pan-Methodist pastors group to build supportive relationships with AME, AME-Zion, and CME colleagues. What a blessing this group of Wesleyan pastors has been to me.

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.)

My experience with local churches includes: a small membership church, a divided church, an inner city church, a grieving church, a county seat church, and larger churches with a global outreach. I participate in the Leading Edge, a group of 100 churches with the largest average worship attendance among United Methodist churches in the U. S.

a. Youth Director—First UMC, Decatur, GA (1973—75)

While in seminary I served as youth director on the staff of First UMC in Decatur, Georgia --- our youth went to twelve different high schools, requiring me to wrestle with building community among such a diverse group of youth.

b. Associate Minister—Trinity UMC, Opelika, AL (1975-76)

This was my first appointment after seminary. My responsibilities included pastoral visitation, preaching, and youth ministry. Near the end of that year my district superintendent approached me concerning an appointment in Panama City, Florida. I look back on that year in Opelika with gratitude for the numerical and spiritual growth of the youth group.

c. Pastor—Hiland Park UMC, Panama City, FL (1976-1980)

I was appointed at below minimum salary. The previous pastor had left abruptly without notifying the church or the D.S. My first task was dealing with the polarized feelings among members. By God's grace we experienced a 45% increase in membership and a 25% increase in worship attendance. Sunday School growth led to the construction of an education building. Membership in United Methodist Women increased by 70%.

d. Pastor—Dexter Ave. UMC, Montgomery, AL (1980—86)

This church is located near the state capitol and across the street from Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist. When I arrived the church was still struggling with what happened in 1965 after they voted to seat all who came to worship, including African-Americans. The church lost 400 members in a month and 60% of the budget. They were still grieving over the losses that came about as a result of making the right decision. Serving this church immersed me in adapting to inner city ministry. I had to Re-Think Church. This led to my doctoral project: dealing with collective grief in a congregation while developing a strategy for community ministry in a downtown church. We showed a membership increase for the first time in ten years. We started Friday Focus, worship and lunch for those working at the capitol and other offices downtown. The study of collective grief has helped me in every other church I have served.

e. Pastor—First UMC, Brewton, AL (1986-1990)

This appointment was a complete change from the inner city and introduced me to ministry in a county-seat town. Relationships in the community as well as the church emerged as a key focus. Preaching was a priority to the congregation. Thankfully, membership grew by 18%, while worship attendance increased by

14%. We renovated several areas of the building, established an archives center, and formed new Sunday School classes.

f. Senior Minister—Ashland Place UMC, Mobile, AL (1990—1997)

Shortly before moving to Mobile, a member of this church called me and said: “I hope you can help this divided church!” Working together, and with the Spirit’s guidance, we were able to develop momentum and growth. A long range plan was adopted and the Fellowship Hall / Education Building was paid off. Membership increased by 29% and worship increased by 17%. I served on a task force working with a district judge to determine the feasibility of establishing a Drug Court for those with substance abuse issues. That court has been a huge success. This appointment also gave me the opportunity work for healthy interfaith relationships. I was invited to be part of a three-person panel discussing understandings of God from the perspective of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

g. Senior Minister—First UMC, Dothan, AL (1997—2007)

FUMC Dothan is a church of 2500 members located in a city that is a regional center for medical services, education, business, and the arts. Given the size of the church staff, this appointment challenged me to grow as a senior pastor whose primary responsibility was to cast a vision and to recruit, train, and supervise a large staff. We regularly sent mission teams to Russia and Brazil. I led a medical mission team to Panama. Membership grew by 34% and worship increased by 33%. We built a 39,000-sq. ft. children’s building and purchased additional land for parking. The worship ministry expanded from two traditional services on Sunday morning to six services: three traditional services; one contemporary service; and two Anglican-style Communion services held in the chapel. I had the opportunity to work directly with our United Methodist Homes for the Aging and the United Methodist Children’s Home.

h. Current Appointment: Senior Minister—First UMC, Montgomery, AL
(2007—present)

With 4,000 professing members plus 500 children and youth, FUMC Montgomery has a 186-year history of fruitful ministry. Dr. Karl Stegall served this church for nearly twenty-five years. Thanks to his skillful leadership and his passion for the Gospel, we were able to lead the congregation in a healthy transition. With 107 staff members, one of my priorities is organizational health and leadership. Our organizational structure features seven staff members who report directly to me and who each are responsible for the supervision and support of well-defined clusters of staff members.

I promote Sunday School as one of our key opportunities for evangelism and congregational care. We offer 25 classes for adults and 21 classes for youth and children. Over the past eight years participation in Vacation Bible School has grown from 600 to nearly 800.

The Adult Respite Ministry started three years ago in response to the question: What needs to happen in this community that is not likely to happen unless churches do it? This ministry is for persons who have dementia, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and other disabilities. The program has grown to four days a week with over forty participants, over 100 volunteers, and two salaried staff persons. It has been called "a model for the Southeast" by the lead medical researcher for Alzheimer's Disease at the University of Alabama Medical School. Our program is helping start similar programs in Birmingham, Dothan, and Auburn.

I have had the opportunity to co-chair Believe It!, a community initiative designed to connect local citizens with the public school system. I have also had the opportunity to participate in Leadership Alabama. We are currently developing a support group for families of persons who are incarcerated. We recently purchased several acres of land adjacent to the church and are developing a Master Plan for Land Use.

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).

- a. Developing Community Ministry

While serving the Dexter Avenue UMC in Montgomery, I developed a plan to reconnect the church with the changing neighborhood. I identified and trained twelve church members who were then assigned in pairs to walk down six streets, knock on doors, meet the residents, and get to know them. Out of that experience we developed a strategy for community ministry in an inner city church.

- b. Visioning

In 2013 I gathered a group of ten church members who spent a year as a covenant group preparing to lead the congregation in identifying the core values that have guided FUMC Montgomery for over 185 years. Those church members then led the church in the identification of six core values. Those values are used to evaluate ministries and to plan new initiatives.

c. Addressing a Pressing Social Need

The Adult Respite Ministry, described earlier, involved discovering church members who shared the vision, developing them through specific training focused on understanding dementia and skills needed to work in that area, and then deploying them to lead the various components of what has become a four-day-a-week ministry. Over 100 church members have been trained and deployed in this program.

d. A New Opportunity for Age-Level Ministry

Recognizing that Baby Boomers are now the largest demographic group in the United States, I identified seven Baby Boomers in the congregation and trained them to become the Baby Boomer Task Force. Their training included reading two books: *Ministry and Aging*, by Richard Gentzler, and *Living Fully, Dying Well*, by Rueben Job. Once they were trained, I turned over to them the operation of the Baby Boomer Task Force to explore how to use the human resources represented in the 1,000 Baby Boomers who are members of this church.

e. Leadership Development: Intern Program

Our intern program discovers college students who are well-suited to be hired as interns in the following areas: children; youth; music; missions; church administration and pastoral ministry. Our program has provided staff members for other churches and has resulted in a number of interns deciding to go to seminary and enter ordained ministry. Other interns use this contextual education to equip themselves for lay leadership in the churches of which they will be members.

f. Leadership Development: Lay and Clergy

As chair of the Alabama-West Florida Conference Academy for Congregational Excellence, I help lead a course entitled, *Becoming A More Effective Leader*. The participants, both laity and clergy, are persons who are identified for us by the district superintendents. We meet with them monthly for a year to develop and enhance their leadership skills. They are deployed by the bishop and cabinet to serve in churches and in the annual conference. To date we have discovered, developed, and deployed over 100 persons, both clergy and laity.

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)?

a. Collaborative Approach to Pastoral Ministry

I introduced a process to help SPR committees collaborate with me to set priorities for my work as senior minister. This involves a set of cards each of which names one of the major categories of pastoral work: evangelism, pastoral care, worship, preaching, administration, and so on. Committee members rank the cards in order of priority and then share with the rest of the committee. I share my cards and discussion follows until we have consensus about the priorities on my time. This becomes an agenda item for succeeding meetings as we have ongoing evaluation of the results.

b. Staff Evaluation

I worked with our SPR Committee and our staff to design and implement a process for staff evaluation, including a profile of each staff position and a description of how that position is to be evaluated. An important component of this process is the training of supervisors for doing evaluations of those who report to them. Accountability focuses on assessing fruitfulness in terms of accomplishing goals that were set collaboratively.

c. Financial Leadership/Stewardship

I share specific information about my financial stewardship with the Finance Committee, the Administrative Board, and the entire congregation as an act of accountability for what I preach and teach.

d. Worship Leadership

In 2005, I acted upon a challenge from my district superintendent to expand the number and types of worship services offered in the congregation I was serving. This resulted in the decision to expand from two traditional services to three traditional services, one contemporary service, and two Anglican-style Communion services --- a total of six services on Sunday morning. This entire process was an exercise in planned change, collaborative leadership, and congregational communication.

e. Nominations and Leadership Development

I introduced a process for the Committee on Nominations and Leadership Development to use in evaluating nominees in terms of prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. Empowering the laity for ministry is essential to the work of disciple making in the local church. The time and energy we have devoted to

identifying, developing, and deploying effective laypersons has resulted in fruitful ministry and fulfilled laity.

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

Some of the more difficult situations in which I have tried to do the “right thing” include:

- a. I initiated an exit strategy for a staff member whose toxic behavior was recognized by some but not recognized at all by others. There were confidential matters that I was not at liberty to share with the congregation when I announced the change. The Staff-Parish Relations Committee and I were able to prayerfully negotiate his exit and the church emerged in a stronger overall position. I kept an open door in terms of meeting with all who wished to express their opinion about the change that was made.
- b. I am navigating through the re-assimilation of a church member who has a long history in the church and community but for whom certain facts have become public knowledge that have led to estrangement from many persons. This involves ongoing reflection as to what the “right thing” is in terms of balancing a church member’s desire to return to former areas of involvement versus the concerns of other involved in those same areas.
- c. In order to prepare the way for growth in several program areas, I have had candid conversations with staff members whose skills had formerly fit well in their position. Sometimes I have been able to move a staff person to another staff position that better aligns with his or her gifts for ministry. In other instances my responsibility to the good of the whole church led me to design and implement an exit strategy.
- d. During a political campaign season, I had to confront a highly visible state official about his use of church property in filming a campaign ad. Our Trustees have a policy of not allowing candidates, even those who are church members, to film their ads on church property.
- e. I worked with the Church and Society Work Area to sponsor two gatherings focused on homosexuality, the church, and society. One of our Jewish friends sent a letter of appreciation in which he said, “I do not believe this type of conversation could have been held in any other church in our community.”

- f. As a member of the Presidential Search Committee for Huntingdon College, I supported the position that the school needed a president who would reconnect the college to the church. From faculty, to staff, to trustees, to alumni --- there can be widely differing views of what is needed in presidential leadership. Since becoming president, The Rev. J. Cameron West has shown us what it means to reclaim the church identity of a wonderful school such as Huntingdon.
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....)

ANNUAL CONFERENCE:

I have had the privilege of chairing the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry after having served as a division chair and as vice-chair of the board. These roles provided direct experience in assessing readiness for ministry on the part of candidates and, once they were serving in an appointment, in assessing effectiveness in ministry.

I have also served as chair of the Committee on Investigation, chair of several district committees on ministry, and chair of the district committee on superintendency.

I chaired the task force to study the apportionment formula of the AWF Conference. We considered how all the other annual conferences in the United States arrive at their apportionments. Then we evaluated our own formula.

I am a member of the board of directors of the United Methodist Children's Homes of the Alabama West Florida and the North Alabama Conferences.

I have had the privilege of chairing the board of directors of the Academy for Congregational Excellence since its inception in 2011. This is the first agency of the AWF Conference created for the sole purpose of the leadership development among laity and clergy of the conference.

JURISDICTIONAL CONFERENCE:

I have been elected as a delegate to several SEJ conferences and have served on the jurisdictional committee on nominations.

I serve on the board of trustees of Huntingdon College, an outstanding UM-related liberal arts college in Montgomery, Alabama. I have learned much about United Methodist higher education through President West's transformational leadership.

My wife and I are members of the Committee of 100 of the Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

GENERAL CONFERENCE:

As a delegate to General Conference, I have served on the legislative committee on Church and Society #1.

I currently serve on the General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits of the UMC. Within that board I am on the Audit Committee.

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.)

I serve on the General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits, which oversees investments in excess of \$20 billion on behalf of over 90,000 clergy and lay participants. Within the GBOPHB my area of responsibility is as a member of the Audit Committee.

In 2012, I published a book entitled, *Pursuing Science, Finding Faith*. This book grew out of a sermon series on faith and science. It is intended to be a starting point for exploring the relationship between faith and science.

I have worked through UMVIM to send mission teams to: Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Estonia, and Panama. We have established a policy that all of our mission teams are to be sent under the auspices of UMVIM. In 2010 I traveled to the Baltic Mission Center and Methodist Seminary in Tallinn, Estonia. While there I had the privilege of meeting with Olav Parnaments and other leaders of the Methodist movement in Estonia. I also visited with Kaupo Kant who is pastor of a church that FUMC Montgomery helped start and continues to support in Voru, Estonia. In 2016 FUMC Montgomery will send the following mission teams: two adult teams to Quito, Ecuador, one of which is a medical mission team; adult team to Red Bird; college team to Costa Rica; middle school team and high school team to projects within the SEJ.

My work with UMCOR includes special offerings for disaster relief, preparing flood buckets, and hosting UMCOR-led training for those who wish to serve as relief workers. We will be supporting UMCOR's initiatives with Syrian refugees.

8. 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

The *Book of Discipline* expresses the covenant in which we are bound together as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Social Principles, within the *Book of Discipline*, represent a prayerful and thoughtful effort to be faithful to the scriptures and to the spirit of Christ in speaking to a wide variety of concerns. Paragraph 161, sections A through O, and paragraph 162.J. address human sexuality in all its breadth and complexity. Some of the positions in these paragraphs lead to discussions in which United Methodists hold differing opinions. I encourage those on both sides to consider John Wesley's sermon, *A Catholic Spirit*, in which Wesley explores the reasons we should expect differences to arise among us. Then Wesley raises the question, "...though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?" I believe we can and I have tried to lead in a manner that brings people together to experience the mystery of unity in Christ in the midst of differences. I have found that many people long for a community in which they can find support as they wrestle with matters related to human sexuality. I seek to provide pastoral care to clergy and laity who hold divergent positions on these matters. I am always amazed at what they have already been dealing with in their own lives and families. When given an opportunity to share in an atmosphere of trust I have found that the ties that bind us are strengthened even as differing positions are acknowledged and respected.

In June, 2015, our church offered a two-part series entitled, *Healing Conversations: Homosexuality, Church, and Society*. The goal was to create a non-anxious environment in which those with differing views on same-gender relationships and the celebration of marriage could come together to discuss these matters. The discussion was informed by Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. In both sessions there was a sense of unity that enabled us to address each other as fellow disciples seeking to be faithful to Christ.

b. Local church closures and establishing new faith communities

For all the struggles mainline churches are facing, we are also living in a time of great creativity among local churches. Many churches have expanded the types of worship services they offer, the number of small groups, and the mission outreach opportunities. One very hopeful approach to establishing new faith communities is Fresh Expressions ---- which started in England and now is being implemented in several locations in the United States. This approach utilizes established churches to sponsor new faith communities among well-defined groups such as: artists, bikers, and persons in recovery.

The Gospel of Mark offers a word of hope for churches of all sizes and situations. Forty times Mark uses the word “immediately.” This one word conveys a sense of action that is sustained throughout all sixteen chapters. While I certainly value our United Methodist emphasis on methodical study of issues, there comes a time when analysis and study need to be translated into immediate action. Learning that we can act “immediately” builds momentum which leads to the lessening of discouragement and an energizing sense of hope for the future. I suggest twelve specific actions that local churches of any size can take “immediately.” Some of these actions are: a model for visiting each church household within a brief time span; forming an Adult Respite Ministry to address a current social need; giving attention to Baby Boomers as one of the largest demographic groups in the church and in society; partnering with other churches in the Methodist family (AME, AME-Zion, CME, for example) to build relationships and a common witness. These actions can also spur local churches to make their own list of ways they could act “immediately.” Vitality will increase once we add the word “immediately” to our Methodist vocabulary.

c. Next generations leaders

Just as a medical school has a teaching hospital, FUMC Montgomery and Huntingdon College have partnered to provide contextual education for the next generation of local church leaders. College students apply for internships in their areas of interest: children’s ministry, youth ministry, music ministry, missions, and pastoral ministry. Six of our interns are in seminary now. Others graduate from college and find positions in areas such as music ministry and youth ministry. Huntingdon has received a Lilly grant of \$600,000 to continue and expand the college’s leadership programs. The church/college partnership is raising up lay and clergy leaders.

I support the Stegall Seminary Scholarship Program which began while Dr. Karl Stegall was senior minister of FUMC Montgomery and continues under his leadership today. The Scholarship Foundation was given birth at FUMC Montgomery and our church has led in this effort over the past eight years. The goal is to address the debt that most seminary students incur in order to fulfill their educational requirements. This program currently provides

\$10,000/year to every seminary student from the AWF Conference who is a certified candidate for ministry in the United Methodist Church.

d. Impending death tsunami (Dr. Lovett Weems)

Anticipating the “death tsunami” that is projected to occur between 2018 and 2050, Weems encourages local churches to act by doing a financial reset so as to avoid a death spiral later. Weems’ observation fits well with the emphasis on acting “immediately” which I have outlined above in item 8.b. I offer two additional considerations. First, currently the largest demographic group in the United States is composed of Baby Boomers. They already understand what Weems is saying for they have had to deal with such changes in their own businesses and personal careers. Boomers are uniquely equipped to help with this very issue.

Second, we can use the leadership lessons that have emerged in New Orleans in response to the catastrophic devastation of Hurricane Katrina. My alma mater, Tulane University, faced the question of its own survival. Scott Cowen, president of the university, cast a clear vision: if we try to keep doing business as usual we will all go down together; but if we focus on our core majors and core departments, cutting out all others, we can survive and grow strong; as we grow strong we will be able to grow back the majors and departments we had to cut. That strategy has worked so well that Tulane is stronger than ever and has more freshman applicants than any other private university in the country. Scott Cowen faced a death tsunami and led his institution through it. I wonder what lessons are transferable to the church?

f. Guaranteed appointment for clergy

Paragraph 337.1. refers to elders being continued under appointment by the bishop unless they fail to meet the requirements for continued eligibility listed in paragraph 334.2,3. The process for placing a clergyperson on administrative location is described in paragraph 360. It seems that the Book of Discipline already provides for determining when a clergyperson’s effectiveness has diminished to the point that he or she should be placed on administrative leave. The real issue may be identifying clear standards for ministry and then following the process when there are questions about eligibility for appointment.

The Academy for Congregational Excellence in the AWF Conference, which I chair, exists to strengthen lay and clergy leaders. Such organizations could help annual conferences develop resources for evaluating effectiveness, design continuing education for specific competencies, and assist with exit

strategies that help identify ways to serve Christ and the Church other than ordained ministry.

f. Term episcopacy

Term episcopacy is already practiced in some of the annual conferences located outside of the United States. This question may have arisen within the U.S. in response to concern over accountability of bishops. We need to work intentionally to develop relationships of trust between laity and clergy toward the bishops, whether or not we have term episcopacy. I believe the connectional system is strengthened when bishops uphold the Book of Discipline, teach orthodox Wesleyan theology, encourage churches and individual Methodists to think and act “immediately” in their worship, witness, and service, and intentionally build relationships of trust among clergy and laity.

I offer two other considerations. First, what if the Council was composed of active bishops only? Retired bishops would return to an annual conference of their choice. This focuses accountability on active bishops while giving retired bishops a venue in which their experience can be used for the good of the church. Second, in the discussion of possible arrangements for term episcopacy I encourage us not to remove the possibility of a person being elected to serve one quadrennium. I am in that category and have given much thought and prayer to this matter. I have been proposing that we pay attention to the word “immediately” which occurs over forty times in the Gospel of Mark. After years of study, the time has come for local churches to act “immediately” on that which we know to be important to our vitality. A bishop with four years to serve, and with a focus on acting “immediately”, could very well free the churches of an annual conference to identify what they can do immediately and then act on it.

g. The World-Wide Nature of the Church: Global Book of Discipline/ Global Structure

To continue offering a world-wide witness we need to maintain a sense of identity that is truly global. Paragraph 101 identifies those parts of the *Book of Discipline* that are global in the sense that they cannot be changed or adapted except by action of the General Conference (Parts I—V). Those parts include: the Constitution; Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task; The Ministry of All Christians; and the Social Principles.

Part VI concerns matters of organization and administration: the local church, ordained ministry, superintendency, and church property. I hope that enough flexibility can be provided in this section to allow annual

conferences to respond as needed within their own context of ministry. For example, a certain amount of local autonomy can enable conference boards of ordained ministry to increase the opportunities for ministerial education in ways that best fit their context. The goal is to maintaining global identity and witness while providing for flexibility in operational matters within annual conferences.