

*The 2016 SEJ Questions for an Episcopal Nominee  
Rev. Sharma D. Lewis—North Georgia Conference*

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

As early as I can remember I was nurtured in the Christian faith by my parents who understood that God's grace was made real in Jesus Christ. I was raised to be committed to the Wesleyan tradition and taught the importance of having a disciplined spiritual life – emphasizing consistent worship, prayer, fasting, Bible study, sharing my faith with others and regularly partaking in the sacraments – all of which we as United Methodist refer to as “means of grace.”

I am a third generation Methodist whose grandfather, Rev. Vanderbilt Simmons, Sr; great uncle, Rev. Claude Simmons Sr; and aunt, Rev. Essie C. Simmons all served faithfully as United Methodist Clergypersons. Presently, my mother, my siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews are active laypersons in The United Methodist Church.

John Wesley believed that God provides us with three kinds of grace; prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace. God's prevenient grace claimed me early as I was baptized at 6 months old. At the age of 12, I accepted God's justifying grace at Brannen Chapel United Methodist Church located in Statesboro, Georgia. My earliest memories include: participating in Sunday school, Vacation Bible School and Methodist Youth Fellowship. At the age of 16, I was assisting a Sunday school teacher with the second grade Sunday school class and teaching my own second grade Vacation Bible class. These classes helped influence my Christian journey and shaped my overall spiritual development. As I grew to be a young adult, I sought to understand the rich legacy of the Wesleyan tradition. It was at the age of thirty that I surrendered to the call of ordained ministry.

My seminary experience helped me to grasp and truly shape my love and understanding of the Wesleyan tradition. As a result of this experience, I came to value the tenets of our Wesleyan Quadrilateral; scripture, tradition, experience and reason. They provided me a guide for understanding our Christian theology and a way to live out my Christian faith.

My spiritual experience and practice in the Wesleyan tradition is both personal and social. I read scripture each day using a variety of devotional resources to enhance my understanding of the written Word. The discipline of prayer is the means by which I draw near to God. I have been involved in the North Georgia Walk to Emmaus, taken silent retreats and participated in the Educational Opportunity Wesleyan Heritage tour that allowed me to trace the Wesley brothers' footsteps. In addition, while serving as a pastor and a District Superintendent, the church has afforded me opportunities to exercise the practice of the Wesleyan social holiness by working in ministry with the poor, serving at food and clothing drives initiatives, as well as leading mission trips. Wesleyan theology has permeated my preaching, teaching and lifestyle; areas that are crucial for an episcopal leader to model.

**2. Describe your record of pastoral fruitfulness in the local church. (For example, increase in worship attendance, professions of faith, small groups, missional engagement, social justice, etc.)**

In my tenure, I have served in a variety of settings which include a large urban church, a midsize suburban cross-racial church, a large suburban church and currently in an executive setting as a District Superintendent. Professions of faith, average worship attendance, outreach efforts and number of small groups have increased in every setting.

I am a second-career clergyperson who began with my first appointment in 1999-2004 as the Associate (and subsequently Senior Associate Pastor) of the 8,000 member Ben Hill United Methodist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. My responsibilities at Ben Hill UMC included the areas of evangelism and spiritual formation. During my service at Ben Hill UMC, I instituted and carried out numerous evangelistic events in the Ben Hill community helping to propel this church to become one of the fastest growing churches in our denomination.

Two thousand new and restored members were added to the congregation. There were 125 professions of faith, 39 bible studies offered weekly. Small groups consisted of United Methodist Women, men's ministry, Bible studies, Sunday school, children's ministry, confirmation, youth ministry, young adult ministry, Jewels and Partners, outreach/evangelism ministry, prayer ministry, nine choirs, hand bell ministry and two liturgical dance teams.

I have served two congregations as the pastor in charge. From 2004-2010, I was appointed as the first African-American and first female Senior Pastor of Powers Ferry United Methodist Church, a cross-racial congregation in Marietta, Georgia. I led this community in the process of embodying the belief that they were empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the love of Jesus Christ through worship, outreach and spiritual growth.

During my time of service this 275 member church grew with over 69 new and restored members. There were 13 professions of faith and seven bible studies offered weekly. Small groups consisted of United Methodist Women Circles, United Methodist Men, Bible studies, Sunday school, children's ministry confirmation, Y.E.A.H (Youth Excited About Him), young adult ministry, outreach/evangelism ministry, women's prayer ministry, Power Surge Praise Band and two choirs.

From 2007-2010, I was appointed as the first African American female Senior Pastor in 140 years at Wesley Chapel United Methodist Church located in a sprawling semi-suburban area about 30 miles from Atlanta, Georgia. During my time of service, my passion for evangelism and spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ was truly blessed.

Over 600 new and restored members were added to Wesley Chapel and worship attendance doubled to approximately 1275. There were 76 professions of faith and 21 Bible studies offered weekly. Small groups consisted of United Methodist Women, United Methodist Men, Bible studies, Sunday school, confirmation, children's ministry, youth ministry,

young adult ministry, Jolly Seniors, Caring Partners, prayer ministry, evangelism ministry, Wesley Chapel Praise Team, four choirs and two liturgical dance teams.

My visibility as a spiritual and pastoral leader propelled me into numerous leadership roles in the local community, including “MUST Ministry,” Hands On Henry County” and “Many Hearts, Many Hands McDonough;” a partnership with McDonough First United Methodist Church that brought together 350 volunteers. While at Wesley Chapel, I received the North Georgia Harry Denman Evangelism Award and the G. Ross Freeman Leadership Award given by the Southeastern Jurisdiction United Methodist Men.

I have partnered with laity in creating new ministries in every church served; while additionally I have had many invitations to preach, speak, and lead plenary sessions and workshops within my annual conference as well as throughout The United Methodist connection.

**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.**

I currently serve as the District Superintendent of the Atlanta-Decatur-Oxford District (ADOX) in the North Georgia Annual Conference. This very diverse district includes 60 local church communities and approximately 120 clergy. As the other District Superintendents, I assist the Bishop with the general act of superintending by providing spiritual and pastoral leadership, supervision and administration of the clergy and laity of the Conference and, specifically, my district.

My spiritual gift of leadership has been exemplified by increasing the ADOX District Apportionments from 82.0% to 94.0% in six years; by assisting in the appointments of five women as senior pastors, eight young adults under the age of 35 as senior pastors and four cross racial/cross cultural appointments. In addition, I have been instrumental in promoting growth within the ADOX District by partnering with the Office of Congregational Development and the ADOX District Strategic Growth Team by starting two “new faith communities,” launching a “satellite” campus and revitalizing an historic church in the ADOX District.

As the Senior Pastor of Wesley Chapel United Methodist Church in McDonough, Georgia my spiritual gift of leadership and passion was made evident. During my three-year tenure, over 600 new and restored members were added and worship attendance doubled from 600 to approximately 1275. The evangelism team was discovered, developed, deployed and trained in quarterly seminars/workshops to witness to the community of Henry County and surrounding counties. My spiritual gift of leadership propelled the church to develop and implement “Many Hearts Many Hands McDonough,” a great day of service in the city of McDonough, Georgia. Wesley Chapel partnered with McDonough First United Methodist Church where 350 volunteers were deployed throughout Henry County. This evangelistic/outreach event provided food, clothing, lawn care, home repair, ADA ramps and rehabilitated playgrounds at Wesley Lake and McDonough Elementary Schools. In

addition, Wesley Chapel leaders partnered with “Community in Schools of Henry County,” Henry County Department of Family and Children Services (DFACS) and the satellite campus of Mercer University to provide a full Christmas outreach event which included food, clothing and gifts for 90 disenfranchised families across Henry County.

During my tenure at Powers Ferry United Methodist Church, I enlisted and empowered leaders to develop and implement new ministries – Bible studies, young adult ministry and women’s prayer team. As a result, the women’s prayer team partnered with the United Methodist Men to renovate a storage room to serve as the church’s prayer chapel.

As a result of my leadership at Ben Hill United Methodist Church, the Ben Hill Training Institute was empowered to partner with Atlanta Metropolitan College to offer continuing education courses as an addition to the Ben Hill Training Institute Bible Study Curriculum.

In the North Georgia Annual Conference, my peers have affirmed my leadership by electing me as the first African-American female to lead the Delegation to the 2012 General and Jurisdictional Conferences. In 2015, I was affirmed again and voted to lead the Delegation to the 2016 General and Jurisdictional Conferences. Additionally, the Delegation unanimously nominated me and the North Georgia Board of Laity unanimously joined them in choosing me to be the annual conference episcopal nominee.

**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)?**

As a United Methodist clergy, I am committed to the itinerate system and have honored the judgment of the Bishop and Cabinet in making my appointments. My effectiveness is important to me and to the church I serve. I desire to be held accountable for the results in the ministry to which I have been entrusted and for my own personal development.

While a District Superintendent, I have intentionally kept a highly visible presence within my district through the normal responsibilities of clergy meetings and charge conferences, as well as preaching and leading worship or hearing my pastors preach weekly. At the annual fall “Set Up” meetings, I articulate my expectations of the clergy and goals for the churches and district. In addition, I further reiterate these goals and expectations during the clergy evaluation period. My goals and expectations are as follows:

1. Unless there is an unavoidable conflict, I desire to see all clergy at scheduled meetings.
2. It is anticipated that all churches will make a good faith effort to pay 100% of conference apportionments and district work fund.
3. All churches are expected to work diligently to have professions of faith annually.
4. As members of the conference team, weekly reporting of Vital Signs is anticipated.
5. Clergy are urged to foster a productive and respectful working relationship with the laity.

6. As well as practice the means of grace – prayer, fasting, Bible reading, etc., clergy are strongly encouraged to take a weekly Sabbath rest and appropriate vacation time. The accountability for this statement (#6) is based on the scripture found in III John 2 – “...dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.”

As a pastor, I held my staff accountable in weekly staff meetings where we reviewed what was happening in their respective areas. We did thorough annual evaluations and looked for ways to improve as consultations were carried out with the Staff Parish Relations Committee. Volunteers were trained and held accountable at an annual leadership retreat where goals were set by the church council and monitored throughout the year.

In my personal development, I have always had trusted clergy peers, prayer partners, family and friends who challenged me and held me accountable with grace for my professional, spiritual and personal development.

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

Leadership is a “process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal.”

I have discovered that the ability to do the “right thing” in difficult situations is often not clear and usually not easy. However, as a servant of Jesus Christ, I am called to be an imitator of our Lord and Savior.

A female pastor of one of my district churches was brutally raped in the church office. I immediately realized that the care and compassion for my clergyperson took precedence in this situation. Because of the nature of the case and the brutality of the attack, I felt most comfortable with serving as the Interim Pastor for the first two months. I ensured that she had proper care and counseling through this ordeal. Likewise, I was on the scene to guarantee that the members of that church had the attention they needed in dealing with this horrendous situation. Security measures were implemented and her attack was the impetus of a partnership with DeKalb City Police Self Defense and Community Watch Program.

Also, during my tenure as a District Superintendent, two clergy persons were removed because of sexual misconduct. I was deeply saddened for the pastors, their spouses, their families, the churches and the annual conference. Because of the nature and proof of the sexual misconduct, I helped the clergypersons after consultation to exit the ordained ministry. The appropriate steps of surrendering of credentials were exercised. Our wounded were not abandoned. Care and compassion for these pastors, their families and the churches were offered.

I have worked diligently to encourage churches to receive pastors without regard to gender, race or age. As a direct result of these efforts, five clergypersons, four cross racial/cross

cultural clergy and eight young adults under the age of 35 have all been successfully appointed during my six year tenure.

My leadership as a pastor was challenged as I dealt with a church leader who appeared inebriated more than once on church grounds. This ordeal taught me something about tough love as I sought ways to offer pastoral support and guidance in helping this individual deal with the addiction.

In summary, it is my desire to lead in difficult situations with prayerful discernment, with speaking truth in love, with a non-anxious presence and with fairness and just resolution.

**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.)**

The area of **Conference** Leadership includes:

District Superintendent, (Atlanta-Decatur-Oxford District) (2010-present)

Cabinet Representative, Board of Ordained Ministry (2010-2013)

Cabinet Representative, North Georgia Outreach Ministry (2010-2013)

Cabinet Representative, United Methodist Women (2013-present)

Cabinet Representative, Commission of Equitable Compensation (2013-present)

ADOX District Committee of Ordained Ministry (2010-present)

Bridges Mission to the Philippines; (Co-Lead) (2013-present)

Conference Board of Ordained Ministry (2007-2010)

Conference Board of New Church and Congregational Development; Vice Chair (2007-2009)

Wesley Woods, Inc., Board of Directors (2011- present)

United Methodist Children's Home, Board of Directors (2010-present)

Brannan Tower, Board of Directors (2010-present)

BreakThru House, Board of Directors (2013-present)

Committee on Episcopacy (2012-present)

Ethnic Local Church Concerns Committee, Chair (2008-2010)

Teaching Parish, Candler School of Theology, Instructor (2007-2010)

Recipient, Harry Denman Evangelism Award (2010)

The area of **Jurisdictional** Leadership includes:

SEJ Clergywomen's Gathering, Workshop Leader (2015)

Intentional Growth Center, Board of Directors (2014-present)

SEJ Committee on Episcopacy (2012-present)

Committee on Coordination and Accountability (2012-present)

Recipient, G. Ross Freeman Leadership Award (2010)

The area of **General Church** Leadership includes:

General Conference Delegate – (2016, 2012); First clergy elected in (2016, 2012)

Jurisdictional Conference Delegate – (2016, 2012); 2008 (Reserve Delegate)

World Methodist Conference Delegate – (2016) Houston, Texas; (2011) Durban, South Africa

World Methodist Council Member, (2016)

School of Congregational Development Workshop Leader, General Board of Discipleship, (2010, 2014, 2015)

**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 experience in the global United Methodist Church has broadened my vision of ministry and the understanding of John Wesley’s phrase, “the world is my parish.” I have shared in short-term mission initiatives to Lucea, Jamaica; Kericho, Kenya; and Manila, Philippines.

My first introduction to the Southeastern Jurisdiction United Methodist Volunteer in Mission (UMVIM) was the training I received as I prepared to lead the youth team of Ben Hill UMC to Lucea, Jamaica. The purpose of this trip was to introduce international missions to our youth, paint the host United Methodist Church fellowship hall and teach Vacation Bible School for the community. Secondly, I was invited to teach workshops during a “Global Summit” with Kenyan pastors and to preach in their conference. Presently, I am co-leading the North Georgia (BRIDGE) to the Philippines; a partnership initiated by Bishops B. Michael Watson and Rodolfo Juan. This missional work seeks to address the extreme poverty in the Philippines, establish a campus ministry at Wesleyan University, continuing education for leadership development and form medical and dental mission teams.

The packaging of relief supplies for Hurricane Katrina victims, preparation of “Stop Hunger Now” meals and hands on support of the ADOX district disaster response representative are a few projects in which I have assisted through United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) as a pastor and a District Superintendent.

Through my participation as a workshop leader and preacher for the School of Congregational Development in 2010, 2014, and 2015, I have had an opportunity to work with the General Board of Discipleship.

Finally, I have enjoyed the work of The World Methodist Evangelism to spread the name of Jesus Christ through evangelistic training, developing new churches and renewing the Methodist movement. As a result, I have served as a delegate to The World Methodist Conference in Durban, South Africa (2011) and will also serve as a delegate to The World Methodist Conference in Houston, Texas (2016); where I will be elected to serve as a World Methodist Council Board Member from (2016-2021).

**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:**

Human sexuality has been a controversial topic in The United Methodist Church for approximately forty-three years. Related issues have been discussed in holy conferencing and debated in numerous sessions of General Conference. I support The 2012 Book of Discipline which states “... human sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift.” Human sexuality is a gift from God that is to be expressed joyously in the commitment between two married individuals. Therefore, I believe in the sanctity of marriage. Further, I affirm that no person or persons should be abused or denied justice, healthcare, protection, shelter and other basic rights.

I am in agreement with the Discipline that “... any form of commercialization, abuse or exploitation of sex is inappropriate behavior.” It is essential that we advocate for laws to prevent the sexual exploitation of children, to protect all persons who face sexual violence, and to guarantee freedom from human trafficking. I affirm that God’s grace is available to all people. The church’s responsibility is not to condemn or reject God’s people. We are called to reach out and be witnesses to all regardless of their sexual practices or orientation.

**b. Local church closures and establishing new faith communities:**

According to Dirk Elliott, in his book Vital Merger, he states that “the rising cost of health care, aging of the church and declining membership, are rendering more and more churches to close.” Unfortunately, as a District Superintendent over the past six years of service, I have witnessed first-hand the decline of church membership and the aging of congregations to be the two reasons for church closures in the ADOX district. New ways to engage in ministry are necessary to counteract the rising problem of church closures.

The United Methodist Church has identified planting new congregations and renewing faith communities as critical in developing successful vital congregations. Clearly, we must seek creative and innovative ways to reach more people. With intentional efforts and the utilization of annual conference resources as engaging local churches in evangelism, outreach, stewardship and worship, we can create dynamic ministries that connect congregations to their local communities through worship, small groups and missional outreach. Our goal in the denomination must be to re-evangelize the world and bring new life to our churches and their people. As a District Superintendent, I have been able to be a catalyst to start two “new faith communities,” launch a “satellite campus” and revitalize an historic church in the ADOX district. All these churches have experienced an increase in professions of faith, worship attendance, outreach involvement and small group participation.

**c. Next generation of leaders:**

The United Methodist Church is faced with a diminishing number of capable leaders. In order for the denomination to overcome this deficiency, significant changes have to occur. The church must give serious attention to how we invite, nurture, encourage, identify and prepare clergy and laity for leadership within and beyond the walls of the church. The leadership crisis offers us with an opportunity to open the doors to fresh insight and ideas from bright and gifted young adults.

I believe that potential leaders must be identified. Then, these persons need to participate in an intentional process which is designed to equip, empower and train our next leaders. Furthermore, such training should reach to district, jurisdiction and general church levels. If elected a bishop of The United Methodist Church, I will encourage the clergy and laity to deepen their exploration of God's call upon their lives. I will urge the development of programs that are designed to prepare clergy and laity to serve in specific ways. I will aggressively search for talented younger clergy and under-utilized pastors to appoint them to settings where they can serve effectively.

**d. Impending death tsunami (Dr. Lovett Weems):**

Dr. Lovett Weems, author of "The Coming Death Tsunami," suggests that unless the denomination experiences a major resetting of its financial baseline and refocus on reaching younger and more diverse people, the future of The United Methodist Church will be dim. Statistics have proven that as membership decreased over the years, giving has continued to increase even after inflation. According to Weems, the practice of depending on fewer people to provide more money is unsustainable in the face of the coming "death tsunami."

I agree with Dr. Weems that resetting our financial baselines will allow churches to focus on the mission of The United Methodist Church instead of dwelling on economic and budgetary issues. The attraction of younger individuals will allow the denomination to grow, identify and train the next generation of leaders. When we embrace our multicultural diversity, our witness to the world is stronger and our ministries have a greater impact. I also believe that through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, The United Methodist Church will weather every test, trial and tribulation which threatens our promised future.

**e. Guaranteed appointment for clergy:**

David Noer, author of Breaking Free: A Prescription for Personal and Organizational Change, states that "engaging in a strategy that sets up long term dependent relationships with employees is expensive and limits flexibility." Noer writes that "dependent employees are motivated by pleasing, fitting in and most of all by staying employed." He further states that "they are not the independent employees you need to thrive and compete in the new reality." These statements characterize our present guaranteed appointment system; as Noer describes, it is a "system that baptizes dependency." In The United

Methodist Church, we are bound by the reality stated in Judicial Council Decision 1226 which asserts “security of appointment has been a part of the tradition of The United Methodist Church and abolishing security of appointment would destroy our historic plan for itinerant superintendency.” As a District Superintendent for the past six years, I have witnessed clergy who wanted to pursue other vocational choices, but remained in ordained ministry due to the dependence on the economic stability provided by The United Methodist Church.

The guaranteed appointment will eventually be a financial burden that is not sustainable. According to The United Methodist Sustainability Advisory Group, it is estimated that the denomination has a surplus of 784 more clergy than positions needed in the church. I have experienced how the guaranteed appointment limited the capacity of the bishop and the cabinet to exit ineffective pastors. Under our current system, it is extremely difficult to exit clergy. The church does not exist to serve pastors; but pastors to serve the church. Clergy who are qualified should be granted ordination. Bishops should appoint clergy only as needed, not because of the present requirement.

**f. Term episcopacy:**

There are a variety of “term episcopacy limits” which presently exists. In the United States, bishops are elected for life and serve until retirement. Central Conference bishops are usually elected for a specific term. Effectiveness is not determined by the length of service. What matters to me (if elected an Episcopal Leader), is I will do my best by the grace of God to serve The United Methodist Church faithfully through prayer and discernment. That commitment extends to whatever term the General Conference determines.

As an Episcopal leader, I am committed to teaching the Wesleyan doctrine as expressed in The 2012 Book of Discipline, and our “Articles of Faith.” I will hold to the integrity and primary authority of Scripture as the standard for faith and practice. I feel called to offer a hopeful perspective in order that we can be a unified and thriving denomination which is committed to the renewal and affirmation of the Wesleyan spirit.

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

The mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. For over 25 years, several study groups and General Conference reports have grappled with issues concerning the World-Wide Nature of the Church. We have discovered that our work on the World-Wide Nature of the Church is chiefly a conversation about geography and church structure. The denomination’s real work is about understanding the theology of a global church and seeking ways to do mission in new areas. It involves how the several Central Conferences govern themselves and how they find ways to do effective ministries. Also, it establishes groundbreaking ministries in their own context while remaining a part of the connectional system that serves to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

I embrace the work of the 2012 General Conference that calls for The Global Book of Discipline (§ 101) and the Covenant for the World-Wide United Methodist Church (§ 125) as starting points to this great work. I affirm the process which will allow the entire United Methodist Church (on a worldwide level) to begin to live and minister into a new reality. “The Standing Committee on Central Conference Matters, in consultation with the United Methodist Committee on Faith and Order, will bring recommendations to the 2016 General Conference that focuses on parts and paragraphs in Part VI of The 2012 Book of Discipline which are not subject to change or adaptation.” I support Social Principles which are succinctly, theologically and globally relevant. I commend the efforts of the Central Conferences to make contributions to the General Administration Fund and the world-wide support for theological education that enables leadership development. The ongoing worldwide church emphasis will allow The United Methodist Church to become stronger and make our global witness visible.