

**Autura Eason-Williams, Memphis Conference  
Questions for Episcopal Nominees**

**How Do You Reflect a Life Rooted in Wesleyan Theology, Spirituality and Practice?**

In *Five Means of Grace: Experiencing God's Love the Wesleyan Way*, Elaine Heath says the means of grace open us up to love God and neighbor with intention and helps us to live more hospitable, merciful and just lives.<sup>1</sup> I know this to be true for me as I continue to be formed in a clergywomen covenant group, practice the means of grace with my husband, and lead and teach them in my congregation. I am currently piloting a daily devotional text group using the Upper Room Disciplines with a small group of church members. I enjoy the discipline of lectionary preaching and listening for the word of God, calling us to become transformed in ways that make the world different.

For more than ten years, I had the great privilege of walking along side seminary students at Memphis Theological Seminary as a facilitator of Formation for Ministry groups. We held one another accountable to the spiritual disciplines of prayer, devotion, silence, Sabbath keeping, exercise, creation care, being with those made poor, and Christian conferencing about difficult concepts such as poverty, race, gender, privilege, and power. For example, I continue to be shaped by the sharing of racial autobiographies in these groups, with a diversity of ministers from a variety of denominations, ages and ethnicities. With a great deal of grace, we shared thoughtful, and often painful, reflection about how the sin of racism and intersectionality is experienced in our lives. Facilitating these holy and healing conversations has created in me a desire for more opportunities to listen and share these often hidden stories.

**Describe Your Record of Pastoral Fruitfulness in the Local Church**

For eighteen years, in four appointments, God has used me to help lead churches to seek right relationship with God and our neighbors in the neighborhood through ministries with children, youth, families, seniors and the poor. At Centenary, as an Associate Pastor, I led youth ministry and started an outreach to children and youth that included a Homework Help Center, Club HERO youth group, and Club HERO Summer Day Camp through partnerships with Junior Achievement, AmeriCorp Vista, Metro Office of Urban Ministries, Memphis Police Department, City of Memphis Employ Youth Program, Shelby County Schools Summer Lunch Program and Urban Youth Initiative. At Calvary Longview, we experienced numerical and spiritual growth. We had the first confirmation class held there in years, connected our young people to Conference Youth Ministry, and to Black Methodists for Church Renewal's SEJ Harambee.

As an Associate Director of Connectional Ministries, I helped connect more small churches and diverse churches to the conference youth ministry. I supported seniors, single adults and small churches with Christian Education needs. With African American churches in the Memphis area, I helped bring together the gifts and leadership of volunteer youth leaders to start a youth group in the Memphis area that was supported by black clergy.

Twelve years ago, I received a cross-racial appointment to Capleville. The congregation no longer looked like its community but was hosting two neighborhood associations, an AA group,

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Heath, *Five Means of Grace: Experiencing God the Wesleyan Way*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 59.

Girl Scouts, and a diverse group of Cub scouts and Boy Scouts. As part of a pilot for a renewal of the Communities of Shalom initiative in Memphis, we incorporated the threads of shalom in our ministry context. The principles of shalom are:

- Systemic, sustainable change;
- Health, healing, harmony, and wholeness;
- Assets-based community development;
- Love of God, self, and neighbor;
- Organizing for community transformation; and
- Multi-faith, multi-cultural collaboration.<sup>2</sup>

With these values in mind, we have gone into the community, become better neighbors in our neighborhood, partnering with schools, the public library, businesses, an apartment complex, and other churches to lead community cleanups and ministry with children and youth.

In addition, Capleville hosts an award-winning food pantry in partnership with St. Mark's UMC and Peace Tree UMC with volunteers and contributions from all three churches, as well as volunteers who are pantry participants. At Thanksgiving we celebrate our joint ministry with a turkey give-away and worship service. During Advent, we offer Christmas gifts to the neediest children served by our pantry. We are in our 10<sup>th</sup> year of ministry together.

Weekly senior activities, English as a Second Language classes, and middle school coding classes are led by church members and neighbors from our neighborhood. Our members and neighbors go out into the community as Arise2Read coaches at two elementary schools, celebrate student and staff birthdays at Crump Elementary, teach adult computer classes and host family story hours at East Shelby Library.

We set up a free book exchange in our neighborhood that includes free library boxes at two churches and community bookcases at two barbershops. We are currently piloting a Neighbor Engagement Center that features the sharing of the gifts of our neighbors and fellowship activities, while offering Christ through the ministries of the church.

While we are committed to being a multi-ethnic community of faith, as we welcome more people and say goodbye to others, usually as a result of death, we gradually look more like our community with younger and more ethnic people.

### **How Have You Demonstrated the Spiritual Gift of Leadership?**

For me, spiritual leadership is about listening to the Spirit's movement in the people God has sent me to serve and supporting them in discerning and living out their vocation. Through Shalom zone work, we learned to listen, watch and say "Yes" to the opportunities and gifts God stirred up in our neighborhood. For example, we had teenagers in our summer programming in the apartment complex who told us they were breaking into cars and selling drugs because they needed money. So we began to work on a youth entrepreneurship program.

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<sup>2</sup> "Why Shalom?" Center for Transforming Communities, accessed February 17, 2020, <http://www.ctcmidsouth.org/why-shalom->

I remembered growing up with boys in our neighborhood who cut yards in the summer and wondered if that might be a vehicle to teach entrepreneurship. I shared the idea with our team and began pulling together potential partners. I talked to Capleville's lawn care provider Bill, owner of Webb Lawn Service, about teaching the boys the lawn care business. He said "Yes," and then told us about Tadarral, a Muslim friend of his who owned an auto detailing business. With Tadarral's "Yes," we ended up with two businesses to teach the kids. We needed someone to help supervise and transport the young people, our district partnered with us to pay for a monitor. We wanted a mentoring component that would teach Christian character. Ross Road Church of Christ's Pastor Gerald Jackson had written a Bible-based Principles of Manhood curriculum that we paired with the youth entrepreneurship program. We had a 8 boys show up to work with varying degrees of commitment, but we had twice as many young men come to Principles of Manhood to listen and ask Pastor Gerald questions about God and what it means to be a man!

In 2015, United Methodist Churches in the Nashville Episcopal Area resolved to be involved in a reading program at an elementary school. We had a few people who were willing and available to become reading tutors but most couldn't because of work or health issues. We wanted to offer an opportunity to involve families in a reading program that would build on the work Governor's Early Literacy Program and the Dolly Parton Imagination Library by rallying neighborhood support for early literacy in our neighborhood through a book club. Samaritan Community Reading Project was piloted in 2017 as an eight-week Saturday summer program that led to neighbors in our community saying "Yes" to reading books to children, leading comprehension activities, sharing reading autobiographies, and setting up free libraries at churches and community bookcases at barbershops. I recruited teachers, storytellers, photographers, chefs, ministers, doctors, youth, college students, non-profit leaders, politicians and children; and they invited Spanish language translators, local civil rights leaders, sorority sisters, authors, neighbors and friends.

The more we engage our neighbors the more we see God already at work everywhere in our neighborhood. One Saturday we met 6 year old Nathaniel, who originally didn't come to the library for our book club. Instead, Nathaniel had invited his class to meet him at the library so they could read books together. He pushed a grocery basket with 5 or 6 books in it up to the door just outside the Children's room at the library, but none of his friends were there. He joined our book club and later one friend Jayden joined us as well. At the end of the craft, Nathaniel's dad Dave asked if Nathaniel could read one of his books to the book club participants. We said "Yes!" Nathaniel started by telling us he was reading on an eighth grade level, then he read beautifully *Sergio Makes a Splash!* The Holy Spirit works within us and without us to make the Kingdom of God real and even moves 6 year olds to start their own reading projects!

TechForAll started with a church member David who had an idea to use our computer lab to teach coding classes to middle schoolers. We said "Yes!" In partnership with the church, he gathered the gifts of neighbors to help update the lab and teach the classes. Because of our relationship with the library, TechForAll offers adult computer classes at the church and at East Shelby Library. One of the TechForAll leaders told me about a friend, Francisco, who teaches English as a Second Language classes and asked if we could have classes at Capleville. I said,

“Yes!” We have two church members and another neighbor who help support Francisco and the class.

Cynthia, who began visiting Capleville because of the ministry she saw us doing in the community, started out volunteering in various ministries in the church. She is now piloting a Neighbor Engagement Center at Capleville that features the sharing of the gifts and voices of neighbors and building relationships through fellowship activities while offering Christ through the ministries of the church.

### **How Have You Demonstrated Willingness to Be Held Accountable and Hold Others Accountable for Results?**

I have demonstrated a commitment through my relationship and partnership with my district superintendent, staff parish relations committee and mutual accountability in the Order of Elder, as well as my participation in the connection on boards, agencies, and committees. Under my leadership at Capleville, we hold one another accountable in quarterly Administrative Council, trustee, finance, and worship committee meetings.

As a coach for Center for Youth Ministry Training, I helped churches to set a mission and vision, goals and objectives for their youth ministry, and in partnership with pastors, coached youth ministry interns and their team to live into that work.

As chair of the Memphis Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, we work with board members and candidates to practice accountability throughout the licensing, commissioning and ordination process through residency in ministry groups, interviews, evaluations and conference relations matters.

### **Doing the Right Thing in Difficult Situations**

As a member of the Board of Ordained Ministry on both the district and conference level, I have been part of tough decisions as candidates navigate the process of discerning their call to ministry. We have exercised great care and compassion in delivering unwelcome news to candidates. Other times we have had to discontinue persons who articulate a call that is more consistent with the role of laity. Sometimes we have had to offer additional support to candidates before they were ready to be moved forward. More often than not, candidates have initially resisted the extra support, but once they satisfy the contingency, they almost always realize the benefit and express gratitude.

In every appointment, I have had to manage difficult situations. In one appointment where I was responsible for youth ministry, I had a brand-new member who wanted to work with youth. On the day of one of our annual events the member apologized for not being able to help because of a previous commitment made to a spouse. The member left the church and came back fifteen minutes later having resolved the conflicting activity, at which point I informed them of the six-month rule. They had no children in the ministry and could not apply to volunteer until they had been members for six months. I encouraged them to resume their family plans. They kept creating opportunities to be around the kids and started trying to get close to them relationally. I kept redirecting them and educating the parents and youth about our safe sanctuary training. They didn't make it six months before moving on. The most difficult part about this story for me

is that behavior may have gone somewhere else that was less vigilant or prepared to manage boundaries.

### **Exposure to Annual Conference, Jurisdictional and General Conference**

Annual Conference leadership roles include an appointment to Connectional Ministries, as Associate Director, Christian-Ed and Age-level ministries and kept our conference connected to jurisdictional and General church youth ministry. I have served on conference boards and agencies, including Wesley Senior Ministries, Lakeshore United Methodist Camp and Retreat Center, Wesley Foundation University of Memphis, Hannah's Hope, United Methodist Neighborhood Centers, New Church Development, and District Committee on Ministry. For many years, I led conference youth camps, confirmation retreats, and spoken at events for Church Women United and UMW. I have even preached at a Conference United Methodist Men event!

I have served on the Board of Ordained Ministry for three quadrennia: four years as conference relations committee chair, six years as vice-chair and two as chair. I am a member of the extended cabinet and the New Annual Conference Advisory team that is creating a new annual conference from the Memphis and Tennessee Annual Conferences.

At the 2019 Memphis Annual Conference, I was elected lead clergy delegate and head of the delegation to the 2020 General and Jurisdictional Conferences. Previous service includes 2019 General Conference first clergy reserve, 2016 General Conference first clergy reserve and delegate to Jurisdictional Conference. I am serving my fourth year as secretary of the Southeastern Jurisdiction Council on Finance and Administration.

### **Based on Your Experience, How do you relate to the Global United Methodist Church?**

I have been appointed to small churches with few resources, so I have focused much of my ministry on moving small local churches out into the neighborhoods where they are planted. Even my conference level work involved resourcing small and medium sized churches to imagine how they might reach new and younger people in their neighborhood.

While on Conference staff, I led conference BMCR clergy on a UMVIM trip to New Orleans, Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. I also helped resource a BMCR youth group that took a UMVIM trip to New Orleans.

Capleville contributes to UMCOR disaster response and responds to calls for health kits and flood buckets. We annually participate in Lenten Hunger Offering. We support the ecumenical work of the Heifer Project teaching children and youth to help families around the world through sustainable community development.

### **What is Your Response to These "Hot Topics" in the United Methodist Church?**

#### Human Sexuality

I respect my siblings in Christ who hold differing beliefs about human sexuality. I identify most closely with a progressive view on human sexuality, but not without wrestling for a number of

years. When my oldest son John was not even two years old, the Holy Spirit told me he was gay and I told his father. God set a gay son at my table and I prayed that God would take this cup from us. God didn't. My son is 26 years old and I have never neglected to welcome him at my table or anyone else at God's table of equity, inclusion, and justice.

I pray that all God's people might resist the many injustices rooted in biblical interpretation used to privilege a majority culture and justify stereotyping and marginalizing persons of color, women and LGBTQIA persons in the church. May God lead us to unlearn a theology of oppression in the church and culture.

### Local Church Closures and Establishing New Faith Communities

The United Methodist Church must always be looking at both the present and the future church and we will have to redefine what church looks like. Most of the time we seem to be talking about closing buildings. On Facebook, a church had gotten down to a few faithful members and the building was closed. I do not know the circumstances of the closure but despite the building being closed, the people were still meeting for worship. The church is not a building, it is people. We close buildings, not churches. The church is people who love God and one another, gather to practice the means of grace, and are sent to offer grace-filled hospitality, mercy, and justice in the neighborhood.

As we consider new faith communities, many years ago, one of my mentors Billy Vaughn, introduced me to the ministry of the Church of the Savior in Washington D.C., it is a ministry of scattered churches, each one organized around a different missional focus. Each church is essentially a small group that practices spiritual discipleship together and its own worship styles and at whatever times work for their group. It seems to me this could be one way of reenergizing the mission and ministry of any size church.

Discipleship is lived out in mission groups where members have discovered their vocation and do life with others who share that vocation. Annually members are invited to evaluate their commitment to their mission group. As mission groups grow, they split and grow and split. The church literally grows by getting smaller.

### Next Generation Leaders

Creating a culture of call for everyone in our local churches (not just the young) is the most important thing we can do to help form the next generation of leaders in the church and society. It was in ministry with college students that I became acquainted with what Greg Ellison, in his book *Fearless Dialogues: A New Movement for Justice*, calls the five hardest questions:

- Who am I? (Identity)
- Why am I here? (Purpose)
- What is my gift? (Vocation)
- What does it feel like to be a problem? (Resilience)
- What must I do to die a good death? (Legacy)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory Ellison, *Fearless Dialogues: A New Movement for Justice*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 112-114.

The church's most important work is helping people of all ages to answer for themselves these questions, understanding that the answer to the first question informs all the others. I was in my mid-twenties when I began to connect the dots between my baptism at age 9 and the rest of my life. I recently asked young adults on a college campus to answer the first question, "Who am I?" I received a lot of different answers. Several said, "I am a child of God." No one said, "I am baptized," until I asked that specific question. All of them said they had been baptized; but they seemed to think of it as I once did, as something that happened when I was younger.

A culture of call connects our baptismal identity to purpose to vocation to resilience to legacy. Last Easter, in a sermon I added a sixth hardest question, "When have I seen the Lord?" Because we are baptized, our life lived out of that identity creates opportunities for us to witness to God's movement in and through our lives, in the neighborhood, and the world.

For several years now, at Capleville, we have asked a member or regular attender to offer a Lenten witness, one each Sunday of Lent. For the last two years, we have also invited children and youth, as well as adults to do so. This season, the very first Sunday of Lent, a child stood at the pulpit and shared, among other things that he knows God is helping him with the bullies at school, because God helped his older brother. His witness is a story of purpose, gift, resilience, and legacy, wrapped in baptismal identity.

#### Impending Death Tsunami

Lovett Weems suggests that the church will have to make adjustments financial and otherwise if it is to survive the death that is not only looming but will surely have to come for new life to be resurrected. The United Methodist Church will have to reimagine both what it means to be the church and what it means to be connectional. We will have to make room for more local pastors and fewer elders, bi-vocational pastors, and informal faith communities. The General church and annual conference structure will have to get closer to the local church.

If we are going to grow, in our discipleship, we must become younger and more diverse and more genuinely missional. We will have to engage not only globally, but with the people who live next door, our neighbors. We will have to learn to love, serve and grow with our neighbors, no matter who they may be, which is our growing edge. We will have to join God in the neighborhood building relationships with people who do not see the church as relevant or necessary for their formation. Wesley started groups outside the church with people who believed in God but not religious. In small groups they learned to love God and one another more deeply; and in accountable discipleship, practiced the means of grace and mission.

#### Guaranteed Appointments for Clergy

A question about guaranteed appointments is usually about ineffective clergy. Removing the guaranteed appointment protection, which was meant to protect minority clergy, will not solve the problem. The only thing that will resolve the issue of ineffectiveness is the courage to follow the administrative processes in place to help restore clergy to effectiveness, discern renewed calling or vocation, or locate them outside of appointed status.

### Term Episcopacy

It is my understanding that term episcopacy is meant to address concerns about ineffective bishops. It takes time for a bishop to demonstrate effectiveness in an episcopal area. Bishops are tasked with tremendous responsibility, subject to itinerancy, called to spiritual and missional leadership of an episcopal area, and as part of the Council of Bishops responsible for general oversight of the global church. I support terms of 12-16 years served in one or more episcopal areas. After the term limit, a bishop emeritus too young to retire could offer his or her gifts through an annual conference appointment to a local church, conference leadership, General church leadership, or extension ministry.

### World-wide Nature of the Church: Global Book of Discipline

The first time my daughter Ayanna got on a plane, she had to get on three! In 2006, she was the Memphis Conference delegate to the very first Global Youth Convocation in Johannesburg, South Africa. At age 15, she began experiencing the significance, beauty, and diversity of being part of a global denomination.

As the United Methodist Church continues to live into a more global future, we must also provide for an equitable one, understanding that our current polity does not fit all contexts. Central Conferences currently adapt some portions of the Book of Discipline, to accommodate local laws and missional needs. The United States should have the same flexibility to adapt to laws and address missional opportunities to allow for a greater witness to the gospel.