

**Response to Questions for an Episcopal Nominee from the
Southeastern Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy**

**Rev. Fred S. Britton
Mississippi Conference**

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

My earliest memories of worship at my home church, Pleasant Grove UMC, are filled with heartfelt preaching and singing. I am grateful to God for my Mother, who was a faithful member and attended worship services every Sunday with her five children. Through her faithfulness, I came to hear the good news of Christ. The messages proclaimed through both preaching and singing gave me great concern and hope. I recognized my need for God's forgiveness and gift of salvation and was given hope through the grace-filled sermons and songs. Often our congregation would sing the hymn "Amazing Grace." I strongly identify with the spiritual journey found in its words of the hymn. The second stanza begins "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear." John Wesley taught that prevenient grace is the divine love that surrounds all humanity, convicts us for having sinned against God, and moves us toward repentance and faith. I am grateful for our Wesleyan theology and emphasis on God's redeeming grace. It was through the hearing of God's amazing grace, while a youth, that I turned to God and received by faith His justifying grace. Our Wesleyan theology embraces the promise that we can receive assurance of our salvation. This is a scriptural promise that the Spirit "bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." It was through experiencing God's grace that my fears were relieved and replaced with a joy whereby I could join the congregation and joyfully sing "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see."

When I was about twelve years old, I became aware of God calling me into ordained ministry. At the age of eighteen, after years of God tugging at my heart and the nurturing love of individuals and clergy, I answered the call to ministry. During my sophomore year in college, I entered the candidacy for ordained ministry. Several months after the completion of candidacy, I accepted the position as youth director in the church where my candidacy mentor was pastor.

With the heart of a true Wesleyan, striving to move on toward perfection, I seek to live Wesley's General Rules by doing no harm, doing good, and attending upon all the ordinances of God. Seeking to grow deeper in God's grace, I practice the spiritual disciplines of daily prayer, reading the scriptures, Bible study, fasting, and being in a covenant group. As a district superintendent, I am grateful for the joy of attending weekly worship services with different congregations. I have been blessed over the years by participating in acts of mercy through the church's missional work. In these acts of mercy, I have shared and received the love of Christ.

My aim in life is to serve God and live a life worthy of the high calling of Christ Jesus. I desire to grow day by day in God's sanctifying grace which draws us toward Christian perfection. John Wesley described this gift as a heart "habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor." I seek to give Him my best and serve Him by sharing His love and His amazing grace with others.

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.)

During 39 years of ministry, I have served churches from one of the smallest to one of the largest. They were located in settings described as small communities, county seat towns/cities, major city suburbs, college towns, coastal community, and large downtown city church. In each of these contexts, in collaboration with the lay leadership, I have focused on the immediate pressing needs and concerns, if any, and developed a plan to strengthen and grow ministry. The knowledge and skills acquired from my business administration degree, especially in the areas of personnel management, accounting, finance, organizational strategies, and communications, have enabled me to be more effective in developing, implementing, and growing ministry.

In the churches I have served, professions of faith were made, ministry grew, mission work was strengthened, and support of mission shares increased. To adequately support the work of the church, I have always emphasized the need for a church to have a strong stewardship program.

I had the privilege to serve at Tupelo First UMC for four years. Early in my ministry at Tupelo, the SPRC and church leaders identified several areas that needed growth and improvement. One of the major areas we addressed was the need to expand the number of active councils and committees from six to twenty-five. Within six months, we created additional committees and councils to strengthen ministry in many areas. We added more individuals to some of the areas, such as stewardship and missions, to develop and grow more effective ministries. Through this expansion, over two hundred individuals would find a place to serve in the ministry and mission work of the church. The expanded Stewardship Committee's efforts reversed the decline in giving. With a renewed focus on stewardship, the 2019 annual budget grew to over \$2,500,000.

During my ten years of ministry at Philadelphia FUMC, we saw growth in many areas. Working collaboratively with the SPRC, we envisioned a plan to grow our children's and youth ministry. With an emphasis on small covenant groups, we experienced growth in our young adult ministry. Because of the strong emphasis on stewardship, giving to our annual budget increased by 25% during my tenure. In addition, the church successfully completed a \$1,000,000 campaign, twice the annual budget, for renovating the sanctuary and education building. This campaign is noteworthy because it was successfully completed in the midst of the major economic downturn of 2008.

While serving at Philadelphia, God laid it on my heart to create a ministry to provide clothing for children and families in Philadelphia and Neshoba County. This led to one of the most exciting missional endeavors with the creation of God's Closet. In July 2013, God's Closet launched and quickly became a vibrant ministry of the women of FUMC to help provide for the basic needs of the school children of Philadelphia and Neshoba County. Clothes and school supplies are provided for the children of approximately 500 families each year at no cost to the families. Each child is allowed to select items in a number of categories every three months, including two shirts, one pair of pants, and a new pair of socks. Also, each child is given a backpack, a pair of shoes, a belt, and two jackets each year.

To support God's Closet financially, I rallied and organized United Methodist churches in Neshoba County to gather twice a year at FUMC for a worship service called Mission Songfest. During this worship service, each participating church provides one selection of special music from ensembles, adult choirs, or children choirs. Together they celebrate the difference God's Closet is making and give a special offering supporting the ministry of God's Closet. Members of the congregations of area United Methodist churches, as well as other denominations, have united together and embraced God's Closet as a means to serve Christ. They give of their time and treasure to make a difference in the lives of those who are struggling and in need. God's Closet is a place where individuals are blessed to receive and blessed to serve.

Dantzler Memorial UMC, located on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in the Seashore District, was a participating congregation in the Singing River Cluster. During my ministry at Dantzler Memorial, the cluster focused on supporting the Russia Initiative and elected me to lead the cluster's missional effort. In collaboration with the lay leadership and clergy from churches in the cluster, we organized and held Fall Mission Fairs. During the mission fair, members of all cluster churches attended a fellowship time where hors d'oeuvres were served while displays were viewed of district mission efforts as well as the mission projects of various churches in the district. Afterward, a worship service was held and an offering received for the Russia Initiative. Over two years, the Singing River Cluster raised over \$75,000 in support.

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)

One of the greatest joys in my life is being a pastor. I love working with individuals. It is a privilege to hear each person's story, see the person's potential, and then encourage the person to serve Christ through His church. While walking with them, I had the privilege to encourage, nurture, and support them. It is fulfilling to watch individuals grow as servant leaders. Throughout my ministry, it has been my aim to develop, train, and equip spiritual leaders. I believe it is in the mobilization of laity in the life of the church that I have been most effective.

When I was appointed to serve as pastor of Philadelphia FUMC, I was informed the average age of the congregation was 39. It was exciting to serve such a young congregation! When the committee on nominations and lay leadership convened that fall, I had a conversation with them about the need to encourage the young adults to serve on committees and prepare them to move into leadership roles. The committee considered the gifts and strengths of young adults and placed many of them in positions where they could thrive and grow in servant leadership. The co-lay leader usually served for one year and then move into the position of lay leader. The committee became very intentional about rotating individuals--women and men, young and old--into the position of lay leader and other key leadership positions as well. It was exciting to nurture these young adults and watch them thrive as servant leaders!

As a District Superintendent, I now have the opportunity to remind church members how vital the work of the Committee on Nominations and Lay Leadership is in determining the future of their congregations. The work is more than simply filling positions with names. It is an

opportunity for the church to recognize the spiritual gifts of individuals and invite them to use these gifts in the work of the kingdom. In my response to the previous question, I commented on the creation and expansion of councils and committees to support, strengthen, and grow the ministry and mission work of a church. As a result of this expansion, over two hundred individuals found a place to serve in the work of the church. Many lay people expressed how grateful they were to be asked and were excited to use their gifts in God's kingdom.

I currently serve as the District Superintendent of the Tupelo District in the Mississippi Annual Conference. As an extension of the office of the bishop, I assist by giving spiritual leadership to both laity and clergy in the annual conference and in particular the Tupelo District.

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)?

Throughout my ministry, I have been willing to be held accountable for results and have held others accountable. I believe being held accountable is important for growing as an individual and achieving results in ministry. Accountability relationships are vital to achieving growth in one's personal spiritual journey and in achieving the purposes of our collective ministry. When accountability groups or partners are absent from their covenant relationships, growth will be limited or nonexistent. Accountability relationships provide us an advantage as we strive toward excellence in personal spiritual growth and our collective ministry.

Early in my ministry, I had the opportunity to learn about accountability from a layperson who chaired the Council on Ministries. Betty left an indelible mark on how I viewed the importance of being accountable in the life of the church and, most importantly, my walk with Christ. At the beginning of meetings, she reminded us why our work was important. Ultimately, we were serving Christ as we served others. That was our motivation in serving and serving well. In effect, she was creating an informal covenant with the council. We were to give our best to complete our assigned tasks. Everyone left the meetings knowing what was expected of them. Assignments were never vague. Between meetings, she followed up with individuals to ensure work was being completed on time. At the next meeting, individuals would report the progress on the work completed. Because individuals were motivated to give their best, giving an account of the work completed was not seen in a negative way, but it was seen as a step to ensure success.

In the churches where I have served, I have used those basic accountability principles with committees, councils, boards, and staff members. Individuals are more likely to complete their work and to do it well when they know what is expected of them and that they will have an opportunity to give an account of their work.

I have developed accountability relationships with colleagues and friends whom I trust and respect. We have challenged each other to grow spiritually and in our roles as leaders. These relationships are cherished blessings to me. I have encouraged my colleagues to enter into accountability relationships. The district leadership team is encouraging every clergy to join a covenant group to help them in their growth as individuals and spiritual leaders.

As a district superintendent, I hold ongoing and annual consultations with clergy. Some of the questions I ask during those conversations relate to personal spiritual growth, time management, leadership, and fruitfulness.

I am a member of the Mississippi Leadership Team. The MLT is in a covenant together to grow as a team of spiritual leaders. Some of the essential elements are confidentiality, trust, commitment, and a willingness to be held accountable. Through our covenant, the team has created a culture of accountability. The intended outcome is for every member to be committed to give his or her best to achieve our team's goals.

Members of our appointive cabinet and extended cabinet hold each other accountable for results. They do so in grace, seeking to help each other grow and achieve as individuals. It is with the expectation of challenging and holding each other accountable that we will excel in our work as individuals and the cabinet together. Our motivation is to serve Christ and His church to the best of our ability.

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

The book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* discusses how to manage difficult disagreements and other issues through crucial conversations. The authors indicate the three ways we face crucial conversations: avoid them, face them and handle them poorly, or face them and handle them well. If we don't confront the difficult situations, they will not go away and often times become more difficult without any hope of a positive outcome. Described below are some of the difficult situations in which I have strived to do the “right thing.”

--I have confronted staff members about their unprofessional behavior, such as unwillingness to be a team player, insubordinate attitude, improper use of time, and disrespectful attitude toward staff members. In most cases, behavior greatly improved. In two situations, the staff members resigned their positions within a year.

--I have confronted church members to welcome diversity. While serving as a youth director in the early 1980's, a family was unhappy that a youth of a different race was attending the youth program. They pressured me to discourage the youth and make sure the person stopped attending. There was an underlying tone of “If you don't take care of this, you will lose your job.” I told them that as long as I was the youth director, I would encourage this individual and everyone else to attend youth meetings and worship services. Everyone is welcome. I reported this to the senior pastor, and he was very supportive of what I had told the family. While the youth group did not know about this incident, I am proud to say they were very welcoming to this youth and others who would also attend.

--I have held clergy accountable. Each year the DCOM interviews local pastors, reviews their Course of Study progress, and makes recommendations on their continuation as a local pastor. As the DCOM chairperson, there were several occasions I had the responsibility to inform local pastors they would be discontinued if they failed to stay current with the course of study work.

On one occasion, I had to inform a local pastor that he was not recommended for continuation because he had failed to fulfill the necessary course of study work. In my role as a district superintendent, I have had crucial conversations with clergy about their commitment to give their best as full-time clergy.

**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.)**

It is my joy to serve Christ through His Church. During almost four decades in ministry, I have had the opportunity to actively serve at the cluster, district, annual conference, jurisdictional, and general conference levels.

DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

Tupelo District (2019-present)

GENERAL CONFERENCE

2020 General Conference Delegate, First-elected Clergy, Leader of the Delegation

--Conferences Legislative Committee member

2019 General Conference Delegate

2016 General Conference Delegate

--Conferences Legislative Committee member

SOUTHEASTERN JURISDICTION CONFERENCE

2020 SEJ Conference Delegate

2016 SEJ Conference Delegate

2016 SEJ Conference Nominating Committee

2008 SEJ Conference Reserve Delegate

MISSISSIPPI ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Council on Finance and Administration, 7 years (2012-2019)

Imagine No Malaria Fundraising Committee, Mississippi Annual Conference Mission Focus,
2 years (2016-2018)

Administrative Review Committee, 7 years (2012-2019)

Board of Ordained Ministry, 8 years (2004-2012)

--Commissioning Interview Team

Seashore Assembly, Board of Directors, 3 years (2002-2005)

--Finance Committee, Chair, 2 years (2003-2005)

Native American Ministries, 5 years (2002-2007)

Wesley Foundation, Hinds Community College, Director, 4 years (1993-1997)

Good Shepherd Community Center, Vicksburg, Board of Directors, Clergy Member,
3 years (1994-1997)

Camp Wesley Pines, Board of Trustees, 8 years (1986-1994)

--Chairperson, 4 years (1990-1994)

--Vice-Chairperson, 1 year (1989)

Conference Camping Committee, 4 years (1990-1994)

Council on Young Adult Ministries, 4 years (1985-1989)
University of Southern Mississippi, Wesley Foundation Board of Directors, 6 years (1983-1989)
--Building Committee, 4 years
--Finance Committee, 3 years, Finance Chairperson, 1 year
--Campus-Director Relations Committee, Chairperson, 1 year
Clergy Mentor: I have served as a RIM Mentor, Candidacy Mentor, Counseling Elder, and a Supervising Pastor.

HATTIESBURG DISTRICT

Hattiesburg District Council on Ministries, 5 years (1985-1990)
Hattiesburg District UMVIM Coordinator, 1 year (1989-1990)
Hattiesburg District Disaster Response Coordinator, 1 year (1989-1990)
Hattiesburg District Young Adult Coordinator, 4 years (1985-1989)
Hattiesburg District Confirmation Retreat Committee, Chairperson, 2 years (1987, 1988)
Hattiesburg District Youth Council, Adult Representative

WEST JACKSON DISTRICT

West Jackson District Committee on Ordained Ministry, 3 years (1997-2000)

MERIDIAN DISTRICT

Meridian District Committee on Ordained Ministry, 9 years (2006-2015)
Meridian DCOM, Chairperson, 5 years

SEASHORE DISTRICT

Seashore District Committee on Ordained Ministry, 1 year (2004-2005)
Seashore District Coordinator of Native American Ministries, 1 year (2003)

TUPELO DISTRICT

Tupelo District Committee on Ordained Ministry, 2 years (2017-2019)

CLUSTERS

I have actively served in the following clusters: Hattiesburg Cluster, Simpson-Smith County Cluster, West Jackson-Vicksburg Cluster, Singing River Cluster, and Neshoba County Cluster.

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 am grateful for the commitment of the United Methodist Church to be the hands and feet of Christ to our global neighbors. As a United Methodist minister, I am delighted to support and encourage my congregations to support the UMC efforts to alleviate pain and suffering in our world.

Over the years, I have supported the UMCOR through special offerings for disaster relief and sending UMCOR Relief supplies, such as flood buckets and health kits, to Sager Brown Depot in

Louisiana. I have supported and helped to organize mission teams to Mexico, Nicaragua, Honduras, Haiti, Costa Rica, and the Gulf Coast.

Mississippi, as well as the other Gulf Coast states, has first-hand knowledge of the devastating destruction of hurricanes. Prior to the landfall of Hurricane Katrina, I convened a meeting of the Philadelphia FUMC hurricane shelter team to begin the necessary preparations to open the gym and fellowship hall as a hurricane shelter. Our congregation provided meals, air mattresses, and bedding to a gym full of evacuees. In the following days, I helped organize and sent work teams to the Mississippi Gulf Coast to aid in the relief and clean-up effort. Also, we sent teams to Meridian, Mississippi, and Laurel, Mississippi, for tree removal, placement of tarps on homes, and clean up. Church members and volunteers served at the UMVIM phone center located at the Meridian District office. The phone center coordinated and scheduled work teams according to their expertise and the needs of the impacted areas along the Gulf Coast. While serving at Dantzler Memorial UMC on the Gulf Coast, I led a team to South Alabama to assist in the clean-up effort in the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan.

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 United Methodist Church through the Social Principles addresses the human issues in our world. In the midst of the ongoing conversation concerning human sexuality, it is good to review and study the affirmations and positions presented in our Social Principles.

“We affirm that sexuality is God’s gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift.”

“We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self.”

“The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers the practice incompatible with Christian teaching.”

“We affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us.”

I support these principles and positions which are based on a sound biblical and theological foundation. Also, I support the language of the Discipline concerning human sexuality and will uphold it. Everyone is in need of God’s grace and the fellowship and ministry of the Church. As a United Methodist minister, I will strive to share the good news of God’s grace and love with all individuals.

b. Local church closures and establishing new faith communities

During our annual conference, a report is presented on the closing of local churches. For all of us, it is a reminder that The United Methodist Church in the United States is in decline. Lovett H.

Weems, Jr., along with other leaders, many years ago gave a clarion call for the United Methodist Church to recognize our decline and make changes while there is time. He states in his book *Focus: The Real Challenges That Face the United Methodist Church* that “The future does not look bright, but it is in times of hardship that new visions often emerge.” In this book that was published in 2011, he warns about squandering “the next decade just trying to sustain things as they are.”

I am grateful and excited that many annual conferences are actively planting and growing new places for new people. In 2015, the Mississippi Annual Conference created Faith Community Formation to plant new faith communities and revitalize existing churches. While we still hear about church closings at annual conference, it is exciting to hear about new fresh expressions, church revitalization, and updates on our recent new church plants. This intentional commitment to reach all individuals for Christ is refreshing and exciting and gives us cause to celebrate.

To engage the churches in my district to intentionally explore and create the formation of new faith communities and revitalize existing congregations, I formed the Tupelo District Faith Community Formation Committee this past October. If we are to have more celebrations at annual conference, we must intentionally focus our efforts on reaching individuals in the communities around our churches and establish new faith communities in new places. As Weems reminds us, “Reaching new people is a challenge for most churches. They do not need the extra burden of waiting for people who do not exist to return to church. In the days ahead, churches are most likely to be fruitful in reaching others if they understand who the people are around them and develop ministries to reach those constituencies, especially those represented in the communities but not in their churches.”

c. Next generations leaders

The United Methodist Church recognizes our active clergy members are aging. Over fifty percent of our elders in the U.S. are between 55 and 72. By the end of this decade, the vast majority of these clergy will retire. In the 2019 Clergy Age Trends Report, the Lewis Center reveals a major downturn in the number of elders under 35. While the report identifies several conferences within the United States that are attracting larger numbers of young clergy, every conference must be committed to fostering a culture of call.

Studies have shown that new congregations attract younger people more than older existing churches. The most important factor in starting a new church is a strong energetic leader who can organize people into forming a new faith community. If we are to reach younger people and form new faith communities, we must invest in our young clergy leaders.

d. Impending death tsunami (Dr. Lovett Weems)

Membership in our denomination has been steadily declining for decades. Even though our membership has declined, financial giving to the UMC has continued to increase until recently. This continued increase in giving is the result of fewer members willing to contribute more money. It is anticipated that between 2018 and 2050, the baby boomer generation death rate will

climb. Obviously, this generation with their faithful service and contributions will no longer be here.

Dr. Lovett H. Weems, Jr., gives a bleak analysis about the future of the United Methodist Church unless we make some important changes. He says, “As with any organization facing the future after 45 years of unabated decline in its constituency, there must be a stepping back to a new and lower baseline in order to move forward. Otherwise, all energy must go to maintain the old unrealistic financial baseline. The purpose of resetting the financial baseline is to free the preoccupation from money to reaching people for Christ through vital congregations. The criteria that matter going forward must be around reaching people, and the whole system needs alignment toward that goal.”

I agree with Dr. Weems; we must intentionally prioritize our resources to fulfill the commission of Christ to go and make disciples. We must give our best efforts on creating new faith communities, revitalizing churches, and recruiting and equipping the next generation of leaders.

e. Guaranteed appointment for clergy

The Book of Discipline (Par. 334.1) states, “Every effective elder in full connection who is in good standing shall be continued under appointment by the bishop....” Ending guaranteed appointments for clergy is not about removing effective pastors; it is about discontinuing complacent and ineffective pastors. While there is a disciplinary process to remove ineffective clergy, it is time-consuming and difficult. Usually, an ineffective clergy is moved from one appointment to another. This is not fair to the churches who receives them. Instead of doing away with guaranteed appointments, I would like to see the implementation of a simpler fair due process to discontinue ineffective clergy.

f. Term episcopacy

I support term limits for bishops. Those elected should serve no longer than sixteen years. After sixteen years, those not of retirement age would return to their home annual conference to serve as an Elder until retirement.

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

John Wesley proclaimed, “The world is our parish.” This motto reflects an important core value of United Methodists. I believe in a connectional worldwide church and support a Global Book of Discipline. Because we are globally united by doctrine, discipline, mission, and our Wesleyan way of serving Christ, we are making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. While there is a need for some regional contextualization, we must be careful what is adapted and avoid jeopardizing our global unity to ensure the continued growth of ministry worldwide. I believe the greatest years of our witness as a global church are ahead of us. My desire is that we commit ourselves to take advantage of the unique opportunity of global growth as we live by the motto “The world is our parish.”