

## **Responses to SEJ Committee on Episcopacy Questions**

**Rev. Dr. Glenn D. Conner, North Alabama Conference**

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

My first memories of worship were attending a small, one room, Methodist Church, which was near Wheeler Dam in northern Alabama. And then, as I began Elementary School, we moved to Muscle Shoals and were a part of founding the First Methodist Church in that town. It was in this church that I was baptized at the age of ten. Church attendance, participation in UMYF, and singing in the youth choirs were a staple in my youth years. I was then blessed to receive an athletic scholarship to Athens College which was a United Methodist institution at that time. The cumulative effects of these events shaped me as a person and were the overwhelming guide of my theology. It was in the chapel of Athens College, as I touched the feet of Jesus in a life-size wood carving that I first said yes to the calling I felt from God toward ministry. I was given the blessing of serving as a youth minister at my home church while in college and had often felt the tug upon my spirit to consider ministry. The guidance of my home church pastors, professors in college, and friends in ministry helped me to answer my call to ministry with great joy even though the thought terrified me.

My theology and spirituality has always been formed by God's great love as we know it in prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace. There were so many touches of God and the love of Jesus as I was growing up. We faced some difficulties as a family, but were always strengthened by the presence of Christ we felt in worship and the family we called the church. I came to believe that Jesus was the savior of the world and was intently interested in my life as well. I was loved into a commitment to want to be a disciple of Jesus.

I was blessed to go to Emory University and attend Candler School of Theology. At Candler, that my theology and spirituality was shaped, pulled, tugged, and nurtured so that I could see the work and love of God for the entire world. Candler offered a place that my biblical understandings were strengthened and challenged. This growth has continued as I have been in ministry these 43 years. In particular the Emmaus Walk where I have served many times as a spiritual director has allowed me to be saturated in grace theology. Another place of growth came as times of study/travel across the world with the Methodist Education Leave Society (North Alabama Conference). These times of study in the Holy Land, Greece, Rome, and in other settings continue to mold

my understandings. My years of being a pastor have given me the opportunities to practice social holiness as we have served the poor, cared for those in trouble, and relied on the Holy Spirit for guidance in day to day ministry. Ministry always pushes us to live in the real world with the living hope of Christ. Wesleyan theology and our Methodist understanding of grace have been the guides and encouragers as I have lived among God's people. It is in that hope that I offer myself as a candidate for the episcopacy.

**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.)**

There are many facets of fruitfulness in ministry. I have had a long record of serving in a multitude of settings. In every local church setting there were baptisms, professions of faith and growth in attendance for worship and for study. These are the metrics I have used to measure fruitfulness. I have served several churches for tenures of 3-5 years because I always signed my forms as available. I believed that I was itinerant and under the direction of the Bishop and cabinet and could be reassigned to wherever they chose, whenever they chose. Because of this, I have served in rural settings, county seat churches, large downtown churches and as superintendent of two districts.

My first appointment was during seminary and averaged 33 people in attendance. The next appointment was to a larger congregation as an Associate Pastor with responsibilities for some preaching and youth ministry. My third appointment was significant in that it was a larger congregation with a high liturgy and I learned skills in administration and pastoral care as I watched a great Senior Pastor. Then there was a series of five appointments in ever increasing size and skills required. In every appointment there was growth in all the metrics.

My next appointment was a large church with a long history. Again, we grew in membership and outreach. However, this was my shortest appointment as I was brought into the cabinet by Bishop Will Willimon. While in the cabinet, I was instrumental in the re-drawing of district lines and assigning churches as we moved from 12 districts to 8. My district also became a leader in apportionment giving. From the cabinet I was appointed to Huntsville First UMC and have been there for 11 years now. This has been a great time of growth in this church. We have added two new worship services. Worship attendance has increased by over 200. We have received over 1500 new members with over 500 professions of faith. In 2011 we were

recognized by Outreach magazine as one of the top 100 fastest growing churches in America. During this time we have also added 21 new study groups and multiple small group opportunities. We have also increased or mission area work fourfold. We have groups in mission and ministry both at home and across the world; groups working for justice for incarcerated immigrants, the homeless, those addicted to drugs and alcohol, and many more. As is always the case, growth in the church is accomplished as a partnership with laity. Often, my gift in this area has been to enable others to do their ministry. While this last appointment has produced the most obvious record of fruitfulness, I count it a gift in my life to have seen growth in every church I have served.

**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 the Kingdom task.)**

I currently serve as the Senior Pastor of a large downtown church in a fast growing part of north Alabama. Our church is growing and in order to meet the continuing need for ministry leaders, we have added new clergy, (both part-time and full-time). In these eleven years we have discovered, developed, and deployed people from our congregation into roles as clergy and lay leadership. We have continued to be a place where young clergy can serve as Associates and then continue their roles as pastors of other congregations. We have more than 50 Stephen ministers and 17 First Care ministers involved in congregational care after receiving training. However, the greatest areas of growing leaders has happened as we have helped facilitate and support many missional programs and projects which have had a Kingdom impact on our community and across the world. We had leaders start a backpack and classroom buddy program which sends food home to more than 200 elementary students each week. We have provided for missionaries to go to other parts of the world and to answer lifetime callings to places here in the U.S. I have also used my gift of leadership here in Huntsville to lead a staff of 45 to work together and use their gifts to help the church grow. We have started two new worship services and multiple new expressions in the area of recovery ministries.

As a superintendent, I was able to use my gift of leadership in two districts. The first district was rural with many small congregations. It was a constant search to find good leaders for small churches and to nurture them as they grew. The second district was a large area, partly in Birmingham, and partly rural. It consisted of large and small congregations. I was able as a superintendent to work with the cabinet and Bishop to place the best leaders available into these churches. It was as a superintendent that I also helped to streamline our conference as we re-districted. While this was led by our

Bishop, all of the superintendents worked together to make this work in deploying our clergy.

At the local church level, where leadership for ministry really happens, I have been blessed to be a part of nurturing young people in almost every church as they were called by God to ministry. It is always a joy to see the excitement of a young person and to see how the Holy Spirit moves within their life as they discern a call. I think it is necessary for a pastor to spend time with the children and youth as a part of this process. I have always taught a Confirmation class in the churches and in those classes have spoken to young people about listening for God's call. We have had over 450 young people attend the Confirmation classes and then make a profession of faith and join the church. I also worked as a director of Camping ministries in North Alabama for 26 years and found the helping to lay a foundation of God's love in the life of a young person was key to them hearing a call to ministry. In North Alabama this was a sort of pipeline into ministry. Many young persons were active in the local church then came to Camp Sumatanga then went to college at Birmingham Southern or Athens College and then to seminary at Candler. It is a joy to be a part of shaping young lives and to see their contributions to the church as they grew.

**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)?**

My life has been closely tied to accountability since I was a child. All through my school years, high school, and college I was an athlete. And afterward I was an official for those games. I grew up with parents, coaches, and team mates holding me accountable for my role in each of those situations. I can call the foul and administer the penalty and I hear the critique of others about my own life and choices.

In ministry, I have been guided by the call to be effective in every situation. I have been accountable to my District Superintendents and Bishops in the process of itineracy. (I have served in twelve different situations) I have worked toward this effectiveness as I have worked with Staff Parish Relations Committees and lay leadership in the local churches. This was fairly simple in the smaller churches, but became even more significant and difficult as the church size grew. Working with staff is a joint labor of building relationships and setting goals which will make those goals achievable. In those relationships it is not just holding staff accountable, but also being held accountable by them. I push for all of us to give our very best and to expect the best from each other. I lead evaluations each year with not only clergy, but lay staff as well. It is hard, but if the process of accountability proves a person cannot meet the expectations then there has to be a change or termination.

I have served on the District Committee and Conference Board of Ministry. I have been a part of a team which has help people accountable in theology, practice of ministry, and called and disciplines life. As a District Superintendent, I was a part of a cabinet which held our clergy accountable in many different areas. We kept a constant watch on attendance, giving, baptisms, and professions of faith. I was also called upon to hold churches accountable to their support of their pastor and their support of the denominational ministries. All of this has been done by building relationships which can often bring about a unified goal and movement.

If elected Bishop, I would want to hold and be held accountable to The Book of Discipline. I would want to be held accountable to appointing the best clergy possible to every church. I would want to hold our conference accountable to the agreed upon goals of the cabinet, clergy and lay leadership. I have been blessed with close friends and mentors who have held me accountable with grace and challenge. I want to lead in that way also.

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

Having a track record of doing the “right thing” is not pointing out a few instances which were public and documented. Rather, it is the totality of a life where standing for the right and good is done so much that it is the norm of a life. I have experienced my share of moments in ministry where I have been the person to take the lead as a difficult decision is made and carried forth. The truth is that if the situation is not difficult then the decision is merely a proper choice. I believe that all along our lives we have to make the tough but right decision. I was raised to make decisions with a thought toward how it would affect others and did it line up with who I wanted to be as a follower of Christ. I have been the one to share the difficult message to a ministerial candidate who was not being put forth for ordination... tough but right decision. I have stood with a young female associate who almost destroyed her ministry with an overly sensitive and revealing magazine article. When the rich and powerful called for her to be removed, I stood with her, physically, emotionally, spiritually. As a District Superintendent I had to remove clergy for a variety of reasons... tough but right. I believe this question cuts at the heart of integrity in a person. It doesn't happen in a few fits and starts, but happens over a lifetime. Standing for the right does not mean destroying the other person, but can open an opportunity to love someone deeply. Sometimes doing the right thing means standing with someone who has so thoroughly messed up their life that the church would just as soon have them leave. However, grace calls us to bear that burden by loving when it is not easy. For example, I had to

call a halt to a wedding plan recently. There was a problem of addiction which had to be addressed. This meant standing with the couple as they told family, as they called off the wedding and faced vendors and friends. Doing the right thing happens often. I pray I have stood well in the difficult situations.

**6. What has been your exposure to Annual, Jurisdictional, and General Conference? (For example, cabinet experience, service on a committee, board, or agency, etc.)**

**General Conference leadership includes:**

General Conference Delegate 2020 (Lead)

Jurisdictional Delegate and alternate General Conference Delegate, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2019

**Annual Conference Leadership includes:**

District Superintendent, Central District 2006-2008

District Superintendent, Jasper District 2005

Secretary of Cabinet, 2005-2008

Cabinet Representative Board of Ordained Ministry, 2005-2008

Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, 2004-2016

Conference Committee on Episcopacy, 2004-2008

Conference Board of New Church Development, 2010-2019

Conference Board of Camps and Conferences, 1980-1992

Director of Elementary Camping 1978-2003

Trustees- Huntingdon College 2007-2010

Athens State University Board of Development 2016-present

**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 have related to the global church mainly through the equipping and sending of short term mission teams from the local church. Huntsville has 41 mission partners, many of whom are United Methodist related in foreign countries. We regularly send at least two mission teams a year to Haiti, Africa, and India.

I have personally participated in mission teams and their journeys by raising funds and packing supplies. I have served on short term VIM teams several times. Also, I have led every church I have served to support the General church offerings and to pay apportionments at a 100% level each year. I have lead in the local church as there is

often a love/hate relationship with General Boards and agencies. The local church longs for boards and agencies to be servants and supporters of the local church but are seen as small kingdoms unto themselves with out of touch staff.

**8. What is your response to these “hot topics” in the United Methodist Church?**

**a. Human Sexuality:**

Human sexuality continues to be a divisive issue for The United Methodist Church. I agree with The Book of Discipline statement that “sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons” and that “all persons are individuals of sacred worth” and that everyone is called “responsible stewardship of this sacred gift.” I affirm the statements which are a part of our current Book of Discipline and I am committed to upholding those precepts. Everyone has a place and my welcome is to all. I want everyone to feel safe and honored.

I am committed to loving my neighbors who are a part of the LGBTQ community. I hold the tension of what the scripture says about homosexuality and the call to be like Christ in all relationships. This is a difficult stance but not a new stance for The United Methodist Church. I welcome everyone to our church, and our leadership is open to everyone. It is not the churches job to reject people or condemn people, but to be in ministry with and to all. I do believe that scripture holds reservations on ordination in relation to the issue of sexuality. It is my hope that our General Conference will provide a way for all of us to move forward with ways to overcome our division on this issue and the Book of Discipline should be held on the stance as decided.

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

Now is a critical time in the life of The United Methodist Church in our country. Every statistic is shouting to us that we must do something to turn the church around and give ways for the church to grow. As a Superintendent, I was a part of closing several churches in my district which had already died to their ministry and purpose. I believe the trend of small churches closing will continue as population patterns move more toward the larger cities. It would be the responsibility of the Bishop and Cabinet to work with congregations on their viability being realistic on their faithfulness and fruitfulness. I am not convinced that closing churches should be a defining part of our strategy for growth.

I am convinced that we must establish new communities of faith using viable research and skilled leadership and not just throw some more money at

new church situations. I believe that all new church plants need to be connected to a “mother church” for strength and accountability. There are numerous areas in each Conference where growth is possible, so let’s put our best people there with appropriate resources to establish new congregations. Simply starting more new congregations is not always better. Better resources will produce better congregations and in today’s world people are not looking for mediocre worship or programming. I believe we should use all the tools and research available to us and recruit leadership to make new faith communities successful.

**c. Next generations leaders**

I believe we are facing a crisis in leadership for the church, especially in young people entering ministry. Part of this is due to our lack of stability on the future of the church, but there are other issues which come to play also. The rising cost of seminary training, the relatively low minimum salaries, and the difficulties of itinerant ministry are all factors in the dwindling number of persons entering ministry. All of our churches must be over attentive to inviting new people and moving new leadership into our church culture.

I believe we must identify young leaders and hold training groups for young people to learn about the work of a congregation. I believe we must lift up ministry as a calling which God is still offering to young people. This calling must be offered in multiple ways and those who are considering a call must be nurtured and encouraged. I have worked as a Residence in Ministry trainer for the last several years which gave me the opportunity to invest into younger ministers. I have also participated in a large church pastor group which identified younger pastors and allowed them time to go to several of our large churches to learn, ask questions, and be preparing for the time when they will move up.

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

Dr Lovett Weems certainly put a compelling case before the church with his work on the “death tsunami.” His work calls for the church to reconsider how much money the church will have, how the church will spend that money, and a push to focus on using our funds to reach new and younger people as the church reaches more diverse people. I serve a church that currently has 55 funerals a year with that number increasing every year. We are also facing rising

costs with fewer giving units making a pledge. Every year we have to be more creative and make changes to continue a growing church and budget.

I believe we have the opportunity to face the future, not with fear, but with a strong belief that the Holy Spirit is moving and challenging the church to reach out and bring in those who will take the place of those who are dying. I believe the church must focus on making disciples and changing lives in order to be seen as the “place” to put one’s heart and efforts. I believe that General Conference must hear the call to refocus our spending so that it reflects our mission of reaching new people more than ever before.

**e. Guaranteed appointment for clergy**

Most people would not understand this issue clearly without sitting in a cabinet session as well-meaning superintendents try to make appointments of clergy who have once again been ineffective but are guaranteed a place to receive a salary. The guaranteed appointment is not provided for local pastors and as such does not take their leadership as seriously as it should. Sometimes our better pastors are passed over due to an elder with a guarantee of appointment. I believe that General Conference will be moving to remove this guarantee but there will be a struggle to do so.

The guaranteed appointment was placed so a pastor would have freedom of the pulpit and there are times when that security is needed. No pastor should fear their appointment because of race, gender, or prophetic leadership. However, it is far more often used to prop up clergy who are not fulfilling the task of ministry and leadership. Sometimes the clergyperson is simply incapable of doing the work well. Sometimes it is a lack of effort. A bishop and cabinet must be strong and truthful in the processes of evaluation and review which allow for clergy to be moved out of ministry for ineffectiveness.

**f. Term episcopacy**

Since I authored legislation for the 2012 General Conference which would have placed a two term limit on the Episcopacy, I must say my thoughts haven’t changed. A life-time episcopacy is giving major authority to someone who may or may not need to continue as a bishop. Also, I believe it has set up the episcopacy as a separate order (from the elders and deacons) which has allowed a lack of accountability by the local church and in some cases by the Jurisdictional and Annual Conferences. We have moved toward electing bishops

at younger and younger ages which can see them then change their perspective from that which they were elected to uphold. I am committed to holding and teaching our Wesleyan doctrines and discipline. I will hold to our scriptural teachings and understandings as the primary source of our standards for faith and practice of ministry.

A second thought is that those who are chosen for the role of bishop would have much to offer their annual conferences when they returned back into the ministry of the local church. A term episcopacy would allow our best and brightest to serve for a term/s and then return to lead our strongest congregations as needed while allowing others to experience the leadership of the general church.

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

Our vision statement is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” The UMC needs to be a global church which unites in this overarching call. It grieves me that our global church concept has been and continues to be a political pivot point as the dissention in the United States has grown over the issue of human sexuality. We should be asking what is best for our sisters and brothers across the world rather than how do we use those votes or exclude those votes to get what we want. I believe in the worldwide church and as a part of that church I believe that there are times and issues which must become secondary so that we may together partner to reach the world.

Surely, we need each other and can learn from each other. Our overseas partners need the benefit of resources from the U.S. and we certainly need to hear, learn, and celebrate how our overseas neighbors are making disciples. I support the work of a global book of discipline which holds The United Methodist Church together and in our covenants already made. I grieve that we have committed for so many years to be in ministry together, but now are willing to separate the church out and make it “regional” in order to change our U.S. stances on social issues. Our commitments and covenants call for us to become even stronger in our witness across the world.

