

Dr. Iosmar Álvarez  
2019 SEJ Nominee Questions  
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The 2020 SEJ Questions for an Episcopal Nominee  
Rev. Dr. Iosmar Alvarez—Kentucky Annual Conference

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

Everything about my journey to this point is a testimony to the UM understanding of social and personal holiness. My entire life has been a reflection of Prevenient, Justifying and Sanctifying grace. I was born in the Cuba of Castro in 1974, where we never went to church, never read the Bible. We lived with a communist ideology over our family and most importantly over our souls. Yet, God was not left without a testimony in Cuba. Nuri, our neighbor, used to come every Sunday to our house to invite me to church. She used to take all the children in the neighborhood to church and always taught us about the importance of dedicating our lives to Christ. I remember her with so much love and appreciation for her witness. I see now how God's prevenient grace was operating in my life through her ministry.

As a young adult, God's prevenient grace continued hovering over my life. I identified myself as a scientist who only believed in what I could see, touch or smell. I lived a life governed by unbelief, pain and pride. Oddly enough, I thought of myself as a free, self-sufficient, educated and professionally successful man. However, I could not satisfy the emptiness of my life. Little did I know that the deepest void of my soul was about to be filled with the power of God's justifying grace. This transformational impact began on August 4<sup>th</sup> 9:30pm in Cuba on a hot summer night in 2001. When I received Christ as my Lord and Savior. I vividly remember how I felt endless waves of God's liquid love coming down from heaven overwhelmingly convicting me of sin and offering me forgiveness. It was a revival night when I was invited to church once again by Nuri our neighbor. This time was different. I was too tired to run.

I came to Christ in the Peter Knox Methodist Church. The church was full of people thirsty and hungry for God. The pastor made the altar call inviting us to come to Jesus and I surrendered! Shortly after, on December 12, 2001, I left the country to come to the United States to follow my professional dreams. I was full of hope for the first time in a long time. Now I had Christ in my life and the impossible seemed possible.

In late 2001, I moved to Louisville Kentucky where my sister lived. Soon after my arrival, I sought out a United Methodist home church and joined Preston Highway UMC in Louisville. The church had been praying for a Hispanic leader to reach the fast-growing Hispanic population. Rev. Avis O'Connor, our pastor, asked me to help teach an English class to reach the Hispanic families around the church. Then, I was asked to teach a Bible study. Later, the church asked me to preach. In summary, the need was so great that even though I had been a believer for only six months, I was preaching the gospel to the Hispanic people in Kentucky.

A year later, I became a local pastor for that congregation. God was smiling at me from heaven because I had found a missional United Methodist Church I could call home. People were coming to the church in droves, receiving Jesus as Lord, and getting baptized, and our first church plant was born.

Finally, Sanctifying grace reaches us to help in this powerful transformational experience with Jesus. Our journey to perfection and sanctification is a process for most of us, where day by day we grow into the stature of Jesus. Receiving revelation of God through experience, scripture, tradition and reason. As well as from our story, not because of our own self-merits but because of grace through the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The opportunity to serve as a pastor has been a means of God's sanctifying grace in my life.

## **2. How do you Describe your record of pastoral fruitfulness in the local church?**

As a pastor, I have a fire in my soul for creating spaces for transformation where the hurt and the broken find healing and hope. I have been called to establish new spaces for communities of faith that will grow to become United Methodist churches. If I were to say to you that I knew what I was doing when I planted the first church in 2002. I would be lying. Yet time and again, I was led by the Spirit to start new churches, partner with faithful people who shared the same burden, all with the purpose of making disciples. Today, all the churches I had the privilege to plant are in existence and continue making disciple for the transformation of the world. As I shared before, out of my connection with Preston Highway UMC, a new church was born. That church grew rapidly and became the fastest growing Hispanic church plant in our Conference. The church grew to seventy members in 6 months. We had forty five professions of faith, twenty five adult baptisms and fifth teen infant baptisms. By the end of 2002, the church averaged over a hundred people in worship with the majority being new believers joining through professions of faith or baptism. This same group organized into new ministries, especially outreach efforts to serve the poor in the community.

As you will soon discover, the Kentucky Annual Conference was committed to reach the Latino population throughout the state. Therefore, the New Church Development office approached me once again, to plant a new church in Hopkinsville Ky at St John UMC in June 2003. The church was planted in 6 months, and once again the Lord blessed us with new souls who were thirsty and hungry for Jesus. In my time there, we grew the church to a hundred in attendance in four months. Fifty six people came to Christ, sixty three people were baptized, ten new small groups were formed, and a new church was established. The church impacted the community at large, as we actively launched new ministries to reach the marginalized. We organized immigration services, migrant community outreach, after school programs and food ministries. In 2003, my late wife Janet passed away in a car accident as we were planting this second church. I was devastated! On October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2003, at my wife's funeral at St John UMC, the church responded with incredible love and support! We continued to grow.

I was appointed in June 2004 as the senior pastor of "Fuente de Avivamiento" (Springs of Revival), in Lexington. The congregation reached 400 in worship attendance in 5 years, with 70-80 people baptized every year for those first 5 years. The church grew larger than I ever expected or imagined. It became the congregation with most professions of faith in the Conference for

three consecutive years. I also received The Denman Evangelism Award in 2013 as a result of this blessed and fruitful work. As a net result of that effort, new leaders began to emerge, and new churches were planted. We launched a second campus with 60 people in worship attendance in this first year and House churches were also planted around the city and beyond impacting Richmond, Georgetown, Springfield, and Winchester Kentucky. Springs of Revival UMC was recognized as the biggest and fastest growing church of the Conference and the Jurisdiction.

### **3. How have you demonstrated the spiritual gift of leadership?**

To begin with, I would share that in my own experience leadership is both a gift of the Spirit and a skill. A leader needs be able to discover, develop and deploy passionate spiritual disciples into the marketplace.

**DISCOVER:** As the Lexington District Superintendent, I launched the Lexington Disciple Making Network with the purpose of creating a platform to launch all our district initiatives for Church Health, Church Collaboration, and Church Multiplication. Our first effort was to create a system to discover leaders and churches to start new dinner churches. As result of this effort, we launched ten new dinner churches. Likewise, we reorganized the need for the district to function as one church with seventy congregations. The structure also involves the recruitment and development of four Assistants to the DS as an extension of the DS office missional work. The missional and administrative work for the District is led by our District Operational Team (DOT). In turn, our DOT leads and supervise our twelve Covenant Band leaders. In short, all our 70 clergy are connected and meeting together in twelve covenant bands around the district, which includes: American, African and African Americans, Bi-vocational and Hispanic bands.

The other area of attention for our district is the discovery and development of young leaders; a District Youth Team was formed and launched reaching a hundred youth in attendance. We see our large churches as sponsors of medium and small size congregations. Our Large Church pastors' band meets monthly to organize efforts to collaborate with other congregations. In 2020, our goal is to join with New Church Development and our large membership churches in launching multi-sites for those large membership churches. I have also led the district on fulfilling our mission covenant to the district and the conference, with a 99% percent success rate.

**DEVELOP:** I also pursued a Master in Leadership to harness the gift of leadership I have received from the Lord. I graduated in 2011 with all the tools to take my leadership skills to the next level. The leadership education I have received has helped me to lead with a team rather than being a solo heroic leader. In 20 years of active ministry, I had intentionally developed leaders inside and outside of the local church, whom I have sent also into the mission field to plant three UM churches.

**DEPLOY:** Among the leaders I have developed as local pastor, you will find many who have become ministry leaders in the local church as Elders, Deacons, Local Pastors, and church planters. Wonderfully, these leaders have understood the importance of community impact and church growth. In this new season of my ministry, the Lexington Disciple Making Network I founded has become our missional outpost to deploy our 70 churches into the community for the

transformation of the world. In summary, this step of the system involves first the deployment of disciples, then leaders, and then local churches.

**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?**

Accountability levels the field for us all to hold each other accountable for our behaviors regardless of titles, positional leadership, or ministry experience. I have practiced accountability, not only in my own personal leadership development, but also in the process of developing cross-cultural staff, non-paid staff and volunteers. As a District Superintendent our goal is to grow our district number of churches 10% in 4 years from 70 churches to 77 through practicing Church Health, Church Collaboration and Church Multiplication. This mission requires spiritual accountabilities such as the practice of our Wesleyan means of grace: weekly worship, the reading of Scriptures, partaking the sacraments, daily prayer, weekly fasting, Christian conferencing, and participating and creating discipleship bands. As I shared before, I am a part of these discipleship groups, where I weekly report my spiritual development. I belong to four covenant bands that hold me accountable for spiritual and professional growth: bishop, cabinet, our district team and the Spiritual Leadership Incorporated lead team.

Missional Accountability: I arrived at the conclusion that there is not such a thing as discipleship and leadership development without accountability. To this end, a personal development plan (PDP) and a ministry action plan (MAP) need to be in place for every ministry leader and church we serve. This has been a critical part of the first year as a DS and has allowed us to build the infrastructure we need to accomplish our mission. For example, our first goal for the first year was for every clergy to have a PDP, and we did so through accountability and follow up done by our covenant band leaders at our leadership bands. I was able to confirm the success of this first this year at appointment consultations. We now turn to the second phase of our plan in 2020 is for every church to have a working Ministry Action Plan in our district.

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

As an ordained elder in the Kentucky Annual Conference, I remember the words of my bishop as he prayed over me, to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. “Iosmar, take authority as an elder to preach the Word of God, to administer the Holy Sacraments and to order the life of the Church” For me as an elder, doing the right thing in difficult situations is a matter of integrity as I live out my calling in the world. I have to confess that this doesn’t come naturally, especially with people dear to my heart. Therefore, I have worked hard under the leadership of many spiritual directors on developing strong boundaries to build my character as a leader. I don’t go into difficult situations with a Messiah Complex trying to save the day; or, allow co-dependency to rob me from making the right decision at the right time.

As a local pastor I have been in different difficult situations “seventy times seven.” At the beginning of my ministry, I had to organize the church for maximum ministry impact. However, I knew that such a thing would not be possible without un-inviting one of the matriarch family of the church from all leadership positions. Needless to say, I was demonized, attacked and accused of not loving Jesus. However, I remained calm, and hold my decision for the benefit of the

church. As a net result of this painful action the church doubled in size. After that family left, we grew from seventy to a hundred and fifty in 8 months.

Another good example of doing the right thing was the decision to exit one of my associate pastors in 2015, who helped me tremendously in growing the church. I sent him to start our second campus in another city in the vicinity. The church was established and disciples were being made, but he also got involved in a sexual affair with one of our church members there. I invited him to a private meeting, confronted him in love, but also firmly holding me accountable for his actions. It was a very sad outcome for everyone, but especially for that pastoral family. I kept walking with them by offering counseling and pastoral care, but also keeping the course of the decision of exiting him from ministry.

As a new District Superintendent, I realized that one of our leading African American churches was in steep decline. The church had an unhealthy pastoral environment, as well as toxic member relationships. Together with Bishop Fairley, we met with the leadership and began a partnership with a coach from SBC 21 (Strengthening the Black Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) to help the appointed interim pastor to lead effectively and prepare the way for the new pastor in a year. The 18-months process has been hard because a core group of people who led the church into their current decline, left the church after verbally attacking me and the interim pastor in our meetings. Throughout this period, I chose to be a non-anxious presence. I kept pressing forward by listening, asking questions, and building consensus. At present, the new lay leadership in place is leading the church forward, while working as a team. As a result, worship attendance increased by forty percent and new discipleship groups have been formed that meet weekly outside the Sunday worship time.

#### **6. What has been your exposure to the Annual, Jurisdictional and General Conference?**

As a District Superintendent I have been exposed to our conference in a whole new way, in comparison to my local church pastor days. I have the privilege leading 70 churches with different backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities. In order to be effective, I began my work doing a lot of surveys, peer to peer interviews, onsite consultations, and I met with every single church SPRC team to gain an understanding of the culture of my district. I met with all of our conference staff to discuss polices, structures, alignment, legal administrative processes for all type of cases of personnel and church management. In fact, the implementation of the appointment process itself taught me a lot about the ministry life of our Annual Conference and the internal culture of our churches.

During my 20 years of ministry in the Kentucky Conference, I have served as a bridge between cultures, serving as an ambassador in our conference for the silenced. In similar manner, I have been a member of our New Church Development Lead Team for many years. I have served in our Annual Conference Nomination Team. I am also the Cabinet Representative to the Board of Ordained Ministry. In addition, I have served with the Board of Laity.

I founded The Hispanic Christian Academy in partnership with United Theological Seminary and the Kentucky Annual Conference. Today, this Academy is training leaders nationwide through USA.

In regard to General Conference, I was privileged to serve as Kentucky Conference Delegate in 2016, 2019 and 2020. I have led church revitalization, church planting conference-wide, and cabinet level projects in Western North Carolina, Great Plain, Florida, Kansas Central Texas, and Northwest Texas Conferences. Also, I have led projects dealing with leadership development, disciple-making systems and conference alignment. I have been an SLI coach for more than 12 years. Besides I have been exposed to a myriad of Hispanic-Latino projects at the district and local church level in partnership with Path1. Those projects were in the California-Nevada, Mountain Sky, and Northern Illinois Conferences. In short, I have had and continue to have plenty exposure throughout the connection as a whole.

**7. Based upon your experience, how do you relate to the global United Methodist Church communion?**

I am a proud United Methodist who considers himself a leader with a global exposure, not because I am great, but because the UMC is great! My relationship with our key global United Methodist agencies shaped my leadership worldview to understand the work and culture of other United Methodist Conferences globally. In my passion to follow my missionary zeal, I have grown tremendously on developing cultural competency by serving the UMC around the world in short term mission work teams to: Korea (2 times), Dominican Republic (4 times), Canada, Colombia, Kenya, Cuba, Vietnam.

Vietnam: In 2010 in partnership with West Ohio Conference, I traveled to Vietnam in a short-term mission trip. I witnessed one of the most successful church planting movements that has produced 120 churches in 10 years, under the leadership of Rev. Hut of the UM Vietnamese Church. I was deeply changed by the perseverance of our Vietnamese brothers and sisters.

Cuba: In 2014 In partnership with the Methodist Church in Cuba, and Bishop Rev. Ricardo Pereira, I had the privilege to train 600 missionaries and pastoral families to go back and plant and remission churches. It was epic! I left the island as a baby disciple with only 6 months as a believer and God brought me back as an Elder, totally equipped and on fire for the Lord to train all the Cuban clergy on the island.

Publications: I have published a book with the GBOD Viral Multiplication of Hispanic Churches

**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:

As a district superintendent, I am called to serve and lead all my churches regardless of their positions on the issue of human sexuality. If elected bishop, I intend to continue doing so. As a covenant person and an ordained elder, I vowed to abide and uphold the Book of Discipline. I support the historical teachings of the United Methodist Church on this issue. However, I also accept people with love and genuineness regardless of differing views. I can put an arm around a person who has a different view than me on any issue and love them as my own. I also want to

re-emphasize that I came to the United States from Cuba, a country where the state government is an oppressive one. I left my country behind in pain which I continue to feel to this day. In spite of that, I refused to deny my faith. My freedom to voice my thoughts in all areas of life was too vital for me. There is a quote, I treasure in my heart until this very day by John Wesley “Never dream of forcing men into the ways of God. **Think** yourself and let **think**. Use no constraints in matters of religion.” It is my conviction not to impose on others what was imposed onto me.

In conclusion, I know first-hand the pain, frustration, degradation and invalidation that comes from a Heteronomous Culture, a culture where an elite dictate what other people groups should or should not think; a culture where the few (whoever they might be) enforce how the many shall think and live. Thereby, if elected bishop I, I will respect people for who they are and what they believe.

b. Local church closures and establishing new faith communities:

I want to clarify that my ecclesiology does not allow my mind to rest with the reality that local churches are closing in an alarming rate in 2019. Hear me well, every time any church is closed or sold my heart aches with a profound pain. In the name of Christ, I celebrate the ministry of every local church that has closed their doors in my conference or elsewhere because we are one church. At the same time, I say to you, I am passionate about planting new faith communities, even as we are closing others. The Church of Christ is never dead, never closed; it might be asleep, but never dead. I have hope because I believe that The United Methodist Church is alive, and for that, I honor all clergy and laity everywhere in our UM connection for our 250 years history of faithfulness; making disciples for the transformation of the world.

c. Next generations leaders:

The God we serve is a generational. The God of Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel is a generational God. In light of this biblical and theological framework, I believe that in order to be truly missional, we must find ways to intentionally impact the next three generations. The pioneer generation that founded Methodism inherited a movement that led them to be disciples with consistency, integrity and character. They have supported our congregations faithfully, spiritually and emotionally for years. So, I am convinced that it is not possible to think about future generations without investing in the present one. All of us have witnessed many discipleship plans offered by our conferences to our local churches, but in reality is that it is not and never has been about the plan. It’s all about people; the people called Methodist are God’s plan. I propose to continue doing that by planting Disciple Making Churches for the transformation of the world. The responsibility is with us! Let’s stop trying to figure out the next plan and let’s start moving into active disciple making with the present generation to produce the next wave of passionate spiritual leaders.

d. Impending death tsunami:

Dr. Lovett H. Weems, Jr in his prophetic manifest about this subject makes a very profound evaluation of the current context of the United Methodist church regarding its rapid membership

decline, huge financial burden from church daily operations; staff salaries; mortgages, and mission covenant. I could not agree more! As a district superintendent, I have found his assessment to be valid in my context where we are battling the same challenges that are keeping us from achieving church growth. However, I have hope we can turn this situation around. After all, the local church is the place of most potential for transformation in our connection. I come from a context with very limited resources where I have learned that God's vision never lacks resources. In many cases, I have proposed and implemented, with the help of my bishop and the local church leadership, some of the solutions offered by Dr. Lovett.

First, a focus on church health. Every church must have a system to make disciples and a team of two or three to run the system. In other words, we are holding churches accountable for church attendance or membership, but not for having and implementing a disciple-making system. We know that when we correct the congregational culture to focus on discipleship and leadership development, fruit will come. Second, we need to focus on financial reset. As a prevention step, we are evaluating church building projects very carefully to make sure churches can continue doing ministry and keep their missional covenant after they acquire any mortgage responsibility. For example, in three of our large churches we have been able to implement a financial reset as new pastoral leadership have been appointed. The purpose of this missional strategy is to recover financial viability, pay off debts, and in many cases, to reestablish missional covenant giving. In addition, we are taking a hard look at church staff which is another area of huge burden that must be addressed. We are proposing salary caps in an effort to ease the burden that comes from long tenured employees and clergy.

e. Guaranteed appointment for clergy:

The Book of Discipline "assures" appointment. In light of that reality, I want to clarify that guaranteed appointments and itinerancy are not only to address clergy ineffectiveness or job security, it has the purpose to guarantee that every UM church in the connection would have a pastor to preach the word and care for the flock. Guaranteed appointment has allowed clergy who disagree with bishops to have an appointment and for women and ethnic minorities in conferences to have a place to serve. As a district superintendent, I have led many conversations with our congregations to create awareness and acceptance of clergy from all walks of life, races, gender and color.

For this very reason, I believe that we need to have more conversations around this issue to make sure we are addressing it from all angles. This is an adaptive issue, which means, no one person has the answer. The appointment process has progressed and needs to continue to evolve to address the present challenge. We need to come together and revise our present values, behaviors, results and actions, in contrast with the desired culture, values, behaviors and results we want around this issue.

f. Term episcopacy:

Leadership is always a challenge, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many books have been written about the relative importance of the solo leader versus teams ministry as determinative of the success of an organization. I believe it's not either/or but both/and. I would encourage more conversations about this issue before we make a drastic decision. I know it is frustrating to have ineffective leadership at any level in the organization. At the same time, we have to be careful that in our attempt to address the perceived ineffectiveness of some bishops, we do not end up limiting those who are effective leaders. I have learned that a long tenured appointment is not a guarantee for pastoral effectiveness, but neither does a short appointment guarantee pastoral ineffectiveness. In this reckoning, bishops need time as cultural and missional agents to a particular conference and, most importantly, be given the opportunity after the administrative experience is gained. In my opinion, we are still figuring out the right appointment process for the church in the life of our denomination. It would be unwise to address this issue now in 2020 when we have such significant issues still open.

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

The United Methodist Church is uniquely positioned to make a difference in the world, precisely because of the global nature of our Church. The current Book of Discipline contains the opportunities and restrictions for global United Methodism to make adaptations to the BOD as needed. These guidelines reflect local ministerial application and the necessary legal structures to allow central and annual conferences to pursue our mission of making disciples for the transformation of the world.

The General Conference, as our lawmaking body, provides the space for global voices to vote and be heard regardless race, gender, color, context or economic status. The challenge, on the other hand, is to continue the arduous work needed to determine the global application of the BOD in every context. In summary, what parts of the BOD are essential to bind us all as one, and at the same time allow space for adaptation in our various contexts within the United States, Africa, Europe, and Asia are yet to be determined. I am looking forward to General Conference 2020 as we continue legislating on this important issue. However, we must determine the right course of action to allow particular contexts flexibility with church property, land ownership, supervised election, and tenure of bishops. Lastly, our current structure helps we face the social giants of the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as hunger, extreme poverty, illiteracy, sexism, and racism.