

**Responses to SEJ Committee Questions for an Episcopal Nominee  
Kenneth L. Nelson-South Carolina Conference Nominee**

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

I believe that the church is of God and is a gift to the world. While I honor and affirm the institutional church, (the United Methodist denomination) I believe that the deepest longing in every life is for God's gift of salvation. I am committed to inviting people first to become disciples of Jesus Christ, and second to connect with the community of faith so that we might live, love, learn, serve, and grow into the body of Christ which He calls His Church.

I believe people are looking for something real, something authentic—namely to be disciples of Jesus Christ and not just members of the church. Discipleship means that our lives are being transformed by Jesus Christ and that we seek to join with God in changing the world around us (locally and globally). Therefore I believe the church is at its very best when it is transforming the lives of those within while at the very same time reaching out beyond its walls to address the needs of those who are not a part of the church or anybody's church.

I bring a deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ. I experienced the transformative power of God in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in my own life. It is a discipleship that led me through the brokenness of neglect and abuse as child to a profound sense of calling to be a follower of Jesus Christ, a husband, and an ordained minister serving in the United Methodist church.

I grew up at Epworth Children's Home, a United Methodist children's home in Columbia, SC. Epworth called forth in me my God given potential and sacred worth. I am product of a United Methodist faith that declared that the church must be actively engaged in evangelism-calling people to repentance and announcing God's offer of forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ. That same church embodied a faith that changes social conditions and structures in world so that the poor have good news proclaimed, the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, and the widow and orphan receive care! It was while I was at Epworth that I experienced this love of God that would not let me go. It filled me we a sense of gratitude that compels me to share the saving work of Jesus Christ with others. It was during those years at Epworth that I first experienced my call to ministry.

I am unapologetically Wesleyan in my theology which means that I emphasize both the personal piety and the works of mercy which leads us to avenues of service locally, nationally, and internationally. I have a strong, yet practical working knowledge of the Book of Discipline as a tool for ordering the life of a congregation. It is secondary to my reliance on scripture. Both are tools and not weapons. I have a strong commitment to connectionalism as it relates to open itinerancy, outreach, missions, and giving. I believe in formation and teaching and they are central to my ministry.

I believe that in Jesus Christ God's grace is offered to all persons. Thus, I am willing to be in ministry with all. Difference is a reality. My focus will always be on our need for God, therefore

I believe the church must be open to being in ministry with all. I believe we must offer a radical hospitality that recognizes that "God catches His fish before he cleans them." We are all a part of fallen creation in need of God's grace and it is that very grace that transforms and helps us to become a new creation.

I practice spiritual disciplines in my relationship with Christ. I find prayer and journaling fruitful. I am a part of an accountability group. I love spending time reading scripture and particularly using the practices of lectio-divina. My personal spirituality tends to be liturgically centered, but worship is about God above all else. Worship no matter its style must be done with excellence and must be about God above all else. Worship that inspires is what is most important. Worship that reminds us or helps us enter the presence of God is worship that is life giving and transformative. For some persons, worship may be their first and perhaps only encounter with a congregation. Thus worship must be planned and led with energy and excellence.

I would describe myself as a collaborative leader. My leadership style is one of building consensus. Consensus by its very nature means that we will not always agree, but that all of the voices will be heard and that we will seek to find common ground. We can even disagree without being disagreeable. Healthy conflict can even help bring about new life. Agreement does not always come, but Christ must remain at the center of all that we do. Right relationships matter! I believe that God is always inviting us into risk taking mission and ministry and not remaining in our comfort zones.

**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.)**

I have served as a pastor for 27 years in nearly every setting of ministry from small rural multipoint charges to conference staff to District Superintendent.

Specific Accomplishments in Appointments Served:

**2020 -2014, Coordinator of Clergy Services**-Coordinated the work of maintaining the records of 1,400-plus candidates and clergy members of the conference, both active and retired.

Strengthened the records retention system by transitioning from paper files to digital records keeping by moving to Ebridge.

Created SOP for organizing the work of the Office of Clergy inclusive of the creation of a Year at Glance Calendar.

Helped foster a new synergy and trust between the BOOM and the Cabinet

Helped implement the shift from individual candidacy and local pastor mentoring process to a group candidacy and local pastor mentoring process. Helped with the implementation of the shift in our database system from Access to Shelby.

Gave oversight to the paradigm shift in the culture and work of the Board of Ordained Ministry from a credentialing model to leadership development model.

**2007, Congregational Specialist for the Columbia and Hartsville District and African American Ministries.** Resourced congregations in the Columbia and Hartsville Districts for increased health, vitality, and effectiveness including helping congregations self-identify their needs, and take steps towards becoming vital. Supported District Connectional Ministries Teams. Specifically, helped congregations develop mission and vision statements and implement goals to achieve congregational vitality. Worked on behalf of the SC Annual Conference to strengthen the ministry of the 269 African American congregations in the conference. Interpreted the work the strategy of the conference and the work of the office. Founder of the SC Summit on the Black Church. Helped implement that national United Methodist plan entitled "Strengthening the Black Church for the 21st Century" in the SC Annual Conference. Served as a national coach for SBC21 coaching congregations in the South Georgia Annual Conference.

**2006, Silver Hill Memorial-**Helped congregation prepared for leadership transition after following a pastor who had previously served 11 years. Moved congregation along in its capital campaign. Created a weekly newsletter. Initiated the first Disciple I Bible Study class. Motivated congregation to pay 100% of its apportionments and direct billing. Started a Thursday night Bible Study, and stabilized a developing Sunday School Ministry. Continued to take steps to help develop the "Center for Hope" a community outreach ministry of the church.

**2002, Centenary/Kingsville Charge-** Gave leadership and oversight to major renovation of the parsonage \$40K. Established new worship times in charge, created a joint fifth Sunday worship service, re-vitalized Sunday School Ministry. Created a weekly church newsletter. Motivated congregation to use pledge cards and to move to tithing and the usage of a zero-based budget model. Paid 100% of apportionments and direct billing expenses in every year of the appointment. Dramatically improved the level of participation in Bible Study and the number persons in attendance in worship. Initiated Disciple I Bible Study in the charge. Expanded outreach ministry of charge to include engagement in cross-racial experiences as well with the poor and downtrodden. Gave oversight to the funding and purchase of new roof, steeple, and sign for the smaller church. Paid off mortgage on fellowship hall at smaller church. Strengthened the relationship between the two churches in the charge through joint fifth Sunday worship service. Started a community wide "Back to School" worship service which brought together persons from differing racial, denominational and economic segments of our community. Paid off debt on the parsonage and rental property purchased five years ago. Hired a new part-time professional administrative assistant and custodian for the charge.

**2000, St. John UMC-Aiken-** Helped congregation take a large leap towards open itinerancy in its staffing and membership. This was a cross racial appointment. Served a total of six years, as a part of a multi-staff church and helped the congregation to prepare for its first female senior minister. Helped congregation plan and implement a \$5.2 million dollar building and renovation campaign and \$600,000 organ campaign. Helped congregation develop new strategies for stewardship. Shared in a ministry where the budget grew from \$835,000 to \$1.3 million in eight years. Brought a strong sense of pastoral care, liturgical renewal, and spiritual enthusiasm to this church. Helped transition through 3 senior ministers. Left to take position at Duke University Chapel as the Assistant Dean of the Chapel and Director of Religious Life. First African American to hold this post. \*Reappointed to St. John's, Aiken in January 2000 to help with pastoral care and the completion of the building campaign and program.

**1998, Duke University Chapel-Assistant Dean of the Chapel & Director of Religious Life**

Coordinated the work of 35 campus ministers and the budget for all Religious Life Staff for the Chapel. Gave general and pastoral oversight to worship and administrative life of Duke University Chapel. Lead spiritual formation groups for Duke Divinity School and taught preaching class to student pastors in the United Methodist Course of Studies Program. Left to return to St. John's and raised a 15 year old nephew after sister became ill.

**1994, St. John UMC-Aiken-** Helped congregation take a large leap towards open itinerancy in its staffing and membership. Served a total of six years, as a part of a multi-staff church and helped the congregation to prepare for its first female senior minister. Helped congregation plan and implement a \$5.2 million dollar building and renovation campaign and \$600,000 organ campaign. Helped congregation develop new strategies for stewardship. Shared in a ministry where the budget grew from \$835,000 to \$1.3 million in eight years. Brought a strong sense of pastoral care, liturgical renewal, and spiritual enthusiasm to this church. Helped transition through 3 senior ministers. Left to take position at Duke University Chapel as the Assistant Dean of the Chapel and Director of Religious Life.

**1993, St. Mark/Mt. Zion-Sumter** -Brought a sense of renewal and unity to a divided charge. Led the Trustees in maintaining the church (i.e.) painted the church, renovated bathrooms, purchased a new church sign in one and a church van for the other. Created a plan to sell former parsonage which was no longer inhabitable. Paid 100% of apportionments in both churches. Initiated new worship traditions including Lenten and Advent studies as well as a weekly Bible study. Started a church newsletter and youth group. Attendance stronger in both. Attendance grew to nearly 100 in each church. Left the charge stronger. Created a positive self- awareness and ability for the charge to do ministry. Left after Bishop invited me to take cross -racial appointment as the Associate Minister to St. John's, Aiken.

**3. How have you demonstrated the spiritual gift of leadership? (For example, give examples of ministry context where spiritual leaders were discovered, developed, and deployed for a Kingdom task)**

I have spent most of my time in ministry teaching and forming persons for leadership as clergy and laity. As a pastor in the local church, I have emphasized placing folks in small groups for nurture and accountability. One of the gifts the church offers is community, specifically small groups where participants can gather to experience acceptance, belonging, and nurture as well as challenge and encouragement for the journey of faith. These groups often gathered around prayer, gender and age issues, parenting, and other such life issues. More importantly these groups focused how people could more passionately follow Jesus and practice their faith in the market place. Persons who participated in these small groups were those who best equipped to serve as leaders in our congregation. They were fruitful because they could own their own brokenness and redemption and were gracious in inviting others into authentic Christ centered relationships.

I have emphasized with the laity I served across the years that we were partners in ministry and that one of the best things that they could do was become clear about their own spiritual gifts.

Thus I have emphasized participating in spiritual gifts assessments. We then invited these persons to share in leadership using their gifts.

For ten years, I served on the conference board of ordained ministry where our primary focus was on leadership development. We focused our energies on helping foster an environment of call and made great strides at investing in young more diverse leaders. Under my leadership, we developed partnerships with seminaries to send students to SC to serve in our conference while they were still in seminary. Many of these persons are now serving as pastors in the SC Conference. Our board of ministry set aside funding to pay for these internships. We placed these persons in our best and strongest congregations so that they could experience healthy DNA among our strongest clergy and laity.

I have also taught in UMW Mission U, the United Methodist Men's Spiritual Life Retreats, and Conference Youth Events.

**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)?**

On a personal level, I belong to an accountability group with whom I pray, study, and struggle for life and work balance. They have been very honest in sharing with me times when I was not working very well at being intentional about work life balance. These colleagues didn't beat around the bush or soft peddle a truth that I needed to hear. They simply asked, "Are you more committed to your work than your marriage?" They reminded me that we are people of multiple covenants. The accountability came when I was asked to provide a copy of my calendar to demonstrate where I was spending my time.

As a former chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry, there have been times when I was a part of team that had to say to a candidate that he or she had not shown themselves ready for commissioning or ordination. The goal was always to hold in tension- the well-being of the candidate and the well-being of ministry setting in which the candidate might be appointed.

There have also been times when we needed to consider the readiness or effectiveness of clergy member. Sometimes the decision was to discontinue the candidate or a provisional member from their status. At other times, we have had to help ordained elders recognize that their ineffectiveness was bringing harm to a local church. Grace was offered in helping the clergy member develop a corrective action plan to address their ineffectiveness. If or when the clergy member was unwilling or unable to meet the standard, we had to help the clergy member exit ministry for the well-being of the church and the clergy member. While these circumstances are never easy, they are necessary.

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

Amongst one of the most difficult circumstances that I have encountered is having to ask for the removal a member of the board of ordained ministry who was not living up to the very principals that we were asking of those whom we were interviewing. The member was a friend of long

standing. The member was inappropriate in his conversation with a candidate. While the behavior did not rise to the level of a chargeable offense, it was conduct unbecoming of the member.

On another occasion in a clergy session, I called attention to the fact that our clergy found it “humorous” when the historic Wesleyan question about being indebt so as to embarrass you in work was being posed to our ordinands. Perhaps it showed an insensitivity by clergy members to amount of debt carried by our candidates.

It was the right thing to do when I called for a reduction in conference funding for “historic” initiatives that no longer demonstrated fruitfulness. This was perhaps not the best way to win friends and influence people, but it was reflective of my desire for better stewardship of conference resources generously provided by laity across the conference.

**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)**

My experience throughout the church is extensive and each day I continue to learn something new!

**Annual Conference**

In June of 2020, I will begin to serve in a new role as the District Superintendent of the Orangeburg District where I will serve as the chief missional strategist. My work on conference staff for the last 13 years and my previous 14 years of service in the local church and extension ministry has been great preparation for this work.

For the last six years, I have served as the Coordinator of Clergy Services and the Secretary of the SC Annual Conference. As the Coordinator of Clergy services, I have served as the administrative registrar for the Board of Ordained Ministry. I helped our annual conference focus upon leadership development. As the Conference Secretary, in partnership with the Bishop, I led the team that planned, implemented, and assessed annual conference. I gave oversight to editing and publishing the journal. Serving as the conference secretary for the last six years has afforded me the opportunity to witness the presidential duties of a bishop. I gave oversight to the transition process of moving our annual from one venue to another. By virtue of the position, I have served as ex-officio member the conference Trustees, the committee on standing rules, and the nominations Committee.

For seven years prior, I served on the Connectional Ministries staff as a Congregational Specialist. My primary role was to resource, equip, and connect local congregations for the work of ministry. This marked a paradigm shift in the work of the Connectional Ministries office from conference level programming to resourcing local congregations. This meant coming along side congregations daily to enable them to engage in vital and vibrant disciple making in their particular context. Simultaneously, I held the portfolio for African American Ministries and was the founder of the SC Summit on the Black Church. For ten years, I served as member of the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry having chaired it for five years and serving as the registrar for three.

### **Jurisdictional Level**

I was elected as a delegate to four Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference (2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020). I served on the 2016 Committee on Plan of Organization and Rule of Order. I have also served SEJ BMCR where I served as the Secretary. I am currently serving in my second term as member of the Board of Visitors for Duke Divinity School

### **General Conference Level**

At the General Conference level, I have served as a delegate to five General Conference (2008, 2012, 2016, 2019, and 2020). This year as the first elected clergy delegate and the head the delegation.

From 2012-2016, I served as a member of the Board of Church and Society. Since 2016, I have served on the Connectional Table as a member committee on the World Wide Nature of the Church. I chair Leadership Development and Community Life Committee and convened the search team for the current Chief Connectional Ministries Officer. I have been an active participant and officer in the National Black Staff Forum.

### **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 been privileged to serve as a member of both General Board of Church and Society and the Connectional Table which are both global in their make-up and in the scope of their mission and ministry. These boards and agencies have helped shape my thinking as it relates to ecclesiology and missiology. As a member of the Connectional Table, I am on the committee which focuses on the Worldwide Nature of the Church.

I have also participated on mission teams with persons across the globe in Honduras, Guatemala, Brazil, and Holy Land. These have mostly been for relief work and disaster response. I travelled to Norway as a part of the Connectional Table and experienced first-hand the vitality, life, and ministry of the church there. This engagement in mission and ministry across the globe has reminded me of both the strength of the connection but also clarified for me the need ministry to be both connectional and contextual. In all these places and ways, I have seen God at work in reconciling all things and people unto God's self. I gained a glimpse of how God and the people of the United Methodist Church are transforming the world.

### **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-** I believe that in Jesus Christ, God's grace is offered to all persons. All persons have sacred worth, thus I am willing to be in ministry with all. I also understand and appreciate those who seek to hold the church accountable for conforming to scripture and the Book of Discipline. I believe that persons have every right to work within existing structures to

change the Discipline, but never to violate it. As an episcopal leader, I will honor my vow to uphold the Discipline and continue to work for the unity of church.

- b. Local church closures and establishing new faith communities** –While I grieve the closure of any church, everything and everyone has a life cycle. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. I believe that we must help congregation honestly assess their current realities and context. I have also been a part of our conference’s forward focus initiative. Forward Focus is a process designed to help local United Methodist churches and charges study their past, present and future potential for ministry to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. I believe that we must do whatever it takes to create new spaces for new people and that will bring these persons into relationship with Jesus and the church.
  
- c. Next generation leaders**  
As the former Chair of the Board of Ordained ministry, I have been privileged to walk with many young leaders. We must be willing to listen, engage, and respond to emerging expressions of ministry. We must continue to be vigilant in our efforts to foster an environment of call. This must happen on ball fields, in high schools, at camps and retreats, and on college campuses. We must invest in our youngest leaders and be very intentional in both our appointment making and care of these persons.
  
- d. Impending death tsunami (Dr. Lovett Weems)** – Dr. Weems helped us name our currently reality a decade ago. Yet, we have the opportunity to live out of fear or respond in faith! Natalie Sleeth says it with elegance, “In our end is our beginning, in our time, infinity, in our doubt there is believing, in our life, eternity. In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.” The question is how can we better invest time, energy, and resources in younger more diverse persons and in gifted laity?
  
- e. Guaranteed appointment for clergy** – Two things are true. First, every ministry setting deserves an effective high functioning leader. We have some ineffective clergy. Bishops, superintendents, Boards of Ministry, and staff parish relations committee need to be up front and proactive with underperforming or ineffective clergy. We must use existing disciplinary processes to provide opportunity for corrective action plans and/or remove or not appoint ineffective clergy. Second, the United Methodist Church has not fully lived into the promise of *open itinerancy*. Guaranteed appointments are needed to protect clergy from being denied appointment because of gender, race, ethnicity, prophetic ministry, or theological bent.
  
- f. Term episcopacy**-All of us must be accountable to God, to one another, and to the vows that we have taken as clergy and as followers of Jesus. We should use every remedy provided in the Discipline for addressing ineffectiveness and violations of the Book of Discipline. We have Jurisdictional Committees on Episcopacy and we should trust them to do their work. We must also ask however if there are lessons that we can learn from our brothers and sisters in other parts of the connection who practice term episcopacy.
  
- g. The World-Wide Nature of the Church: Global Book of Discipline/ Global Structure.**  
Anyone who as ever attended worship at a General Conference begins to understand what it means to be a global church. In that setting we get a glimpse of God’s kingdom.

¶ 125. United Methodists throughout the world are bound together in a connectional covenant in which we support and hold each other accountable for faithful discipleship and mission. Integrally holding connectional unity and local freedom, we seek to proclaim and embody the gospel in ways responsible to our specific cultural and social context while maintaining “a vital web of interactive relationships”

We are a global church, not because we say we are, but because God intends to redeem the whole world and all of the created order. We have much to learn from one another. We must remember that God still has a mission in the world. God has a vision of a world redeemed and ordered anew. God is at work in ways that are wonderful and particular to every context. The time has come for a global book of Discipline that allows for adaptability to respond the mission and ministry in every context. In this way we can maximize our ability to make disciples of Jesus in every nation, tribe, and tongue.

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