

**SEJ Committee on Episcopacy  
Questions for Episcopal Nominee 2020  
Sharon L. Bowers, Holston Conference**

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

I am a proud Methodist from the cradle and have carried my home and church training with me throughout the globe. I am a member of historic Pruitt Hill United Methodist church where Rev. Sandra Johnson, former Holston Conference delegate and District Superintendent is the pastor. My Wesleyan roots run deep. I am a fourth generation Methodist. My great grandmother established a Christian benchmark for her family after the period of enslavement. My grandmother faithfully attended her one room school in the Methodist church. My mother was determined to find a welcoming place and space in the United Methodist Church and they all, being influenced by Wesleyan theology, forged a pathway to Christ for my siblings and me. They instilled in me the will to fight for social justice and equality for all. My days spent in Sunday school, vacation bible school, confirmation class and seminary paved the way for me to have the opportunity and privilege to serve as an elder in full connection and an endorsed episcopacy nominee. I am committed to sharing with others what it means to be Wesleyan. I have never known a time in my life when church and living out my faith was not a major priority and a shared way of life for my friends, my family and me. My Methodist community has always loved and encouraged me throughout my life to express risk-taking love for God and God's people. God's grace as exacted in Wesleyan theology is the basis for my theological perspective. I am proud to claim the proclamation in Ephesians 2:5-8, I celebrate God's great love for me because it has made me alive with Christ and saved by grace.

I am committed to practicing the spiritual disciplines. My rule of life is "God First" and I am committed to the ongoing practice of life-long spiritual formation through the use of spiritual direction. I am a Christian leadership coach and I am currently working on a certificate in spiritual direction. I journal and I write a daily Facebook post, *The Prophetic Edge: Defining Words in Difficult Times*. Also, I am part of an Emmaus community and practice spiritual retreat and observe a weekly Sabbath day as part of my personal self-care. I offer spiritual direction to others and believe in the power of fasting and prayer.

I embrace the Wesleyan spiritual conceptualization of the quadrilateral and rely heavily upon the scriptures to inform my theology along with reason, experience and tradition. I wholeheartedly believe that it is important to gather in community, specifically small groups, attend bible study, experience times of confession and the maintain the continuous practice of keeping the ordinances paying particular attention to the sacraments.

I have always been a champion for social justice, equity, inclusivity and ecumenism. I strive to live my life creating opportunities for all people to be spiritually formed in the image of God. I believe in my heart of hearts that I was created to do difficult things and under the unction of the Holy Spirit, I endeavor to be a change agent for God. My foundational guiding scripture is found in a Psalm 34:1-3 as I am committed to bless the Lord at all times and everywhere, glorying in the Lord and imploring others to join me in this great work!

**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.)**

From the time I was a student pastor, God has been faithful in giving me creative ways to add souls to the kingdom. I believe that people come to church and to Christ based solely on relationship. In the local church my motto has always been “raise up leaders, raise up a church.” I use a three-prong method for church growth and increased vitality: leadership development, small group creation and spiritual formation. My leadership model also includes calling people into a relationship with Christ and others built on character development. I do not believe that people will follow a leader they cannot touch. Leaders must be accessible and accountable to others. As key leaders, our priority is to “only say what we mean and mean what we say.” I have been blessed to author several books regarding character development and leadership. *Mark the Perfect Man: Leading and Living With Character* is one of those books and is currently being used by leaders in various ecumenical settings. This book promotes leadership development centered on ten key principles: belief, purpose, integrity, right response, commitment, dependence, courage, determination, humility, and giving.

My record of pastoral fruitfulness in the local church involves increased attendance, regular professions of faith and missional outreach that involves social justice. I have been blessed in small membership churches, rural churches, inner city churches and large university campus ministry to experience overall vitality and growth. Each church I served experienced spiritual, programmatic and numerical growth with an emphasis on multiculturalism and community involvement. I firmly believe that God is calling the church today to live in community with one another. Each church I served developed spiritual markers of increased giving, diversity, Character Based Leadership development, social justice advocacy and sustained spiritual formation. Our faith communities planned, developed and implemented sustainable programs for children, youth, families, seniors and leaders. My skills set includes grant writing and program development, which greatly benefits the churches I serve.

In my first appointment, I was the first female pastor of a one hundred year old church. I developed a strong lay servant ministry and one of the lay servants that I mentored is now a certified local pastor of that church. Also, as a result of my early leadership development, the church has sustained growth and is one of the more racially diverse churches in the conference. I also served as the chaplain for the Holston Home for Children providing pastoral care for hundreds of at-risk and displaced children and youth

and offered pastoral oversight to all staff members. Many children, youth and staff came to know Christ in a more personal way.

While a student pastor, I was assigned two small churches that were three hours away from my seminary. The commute was challenging and the churches were in personal crisis and in need of a pastor who would help in the healing process. These churches needed to believe there was hope and light at the end of the tunnel. At both of the churches, we experienced numerical and spiritual growth. This was the first time in many years that both churches gained a greater sense of confidence regarding who they were and who they could be as a church. Together, we discerned what kind of contributions we could make in God's kingdom. Several members became lay speakers and are currently serving in that capacity. We started a charge Bible study with a special emphasis on the development of youth and young adults. We found that within the larger community, we were able to set aside our denominational differences and build stronger communities together. We formed a co-ed praise teams, reformed the choir and created a ministry for senior adults. The overall community was ignited. Both of the churches I served received conference awards as churches of excellence during my tenure.

I believe strongly in itinerancy and after seminary I was appointed to a large African American church in Southwest Virginia that had never had a female pastor. I used my previous experience to build individual support and created a leadership institute that allowed many leaders to be developed with the emphasis on growing lay servant ministers. Our congregation grew and our youth ministry tripled while I was the lead pastor. I also created an ecumenical ministry alliance that is still operating today that embraced community ministry. One flagship ministry that was developed while I was the pastor was a women's conference that is in its tenth year: *Those River Women*. To date, the annual conference has attendees from various churches from four or more states. I think one of the marks of true leadership is when you build systems and ministries that last. Currently, leaders from this church serve on various committees throughout the conference. Also, during my tenure at this church, I laid the groundwork for a successful merger of two churches.

In my first inner city appointment, I emphasized outreach as our primary leadership strategy. I was able to identify and train several leaders to become certified lay ministers and serve in specific capacities within the church. In this appointment I was able to reinstate leaders who had either left the church or withdrew from leadership due to perceived previous leadership challenges. I also formally mentored four lay servants who are now serving churches as local pastors. Also, I was the lead pastor in a five-point charge (Parish Ministry) that developed leaders who continue to serve at the district and conference level.

I am currently serving as the Executive Director and lead pastor of the University of Tennessee Wesley Foundation in Knoxville, Tennessee. When I arrived there two years ago, we had major capital challenges: leaking roof, asbestos in the building, broken commercial stove, water heater cited by authorities as inoperable and a very small board. With the help of a new board chair, Rev. Leah Burns and many others, we have resolved

all of the above issues on a very small budget. I believe that prayer changes things and God gave us favor and we were able to fundraise and to friend raise to meet and exceed the challenges set before us.

One of the strategic goals at the UTK Wesley Foundation was to increase the diversity of our student population. When I began the appointment, the student population was one hundred percent White. Two years later we are a diverse group of student leaders making a difference on and off campus. We have been awarded several grants and our flagship program is a community dinner church with the Wesley House, a historic afterschool program funded primarily by the United Methodist Women.

Also, I am working with the district lay servant ministry and the conference vocational discernment committee to foster opportunities for college students to discern their call to ministry. We have had one student become a lay servant and four others will be attending the next lay servant training. We are poised and ready to recognize leadership sightings and celebrate them in both big and small ways. We have received a Lily Grant to build an intentional community whose primary task is to discern their vocational calling. This involves eight young adults living, working and discerning in community.

**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)**

My life long endeavor has been in pursuit of leadership. I have written several books on leadership development and believe strongly in the power of mentoring others and modeling strong leadership skills. My gifts and graces have allowed me to discover leadership gifts in others and cultivate and stir up the gifts that lead to transformative changes. I have mentored several individuals and have helped them travel the often-difficult journey from the pew to the pulpit. I mentored four individuals who have completed local licensing school and are now serving in our conference, one of which is in a cross racial appointment (black woman serving in a white three-point church) three hours from her home town. I have successfully mentored both men and women and have routinely grown cadres of lay servants and certified lay ministers.

In seminary, I served as the student government president. I also served as the alumni president of an ecumenical seminary in Atlanta Georgia. I worked to empower officers from various denominations to work together as a team for the common good. I have participated in various leadership development programs such as Leadership Greeneville, Leadership Holston, and Metagem Spiritual Direction, GBHEM Coaching and have served on both the district and conference Board of Ordained Ministry and helped to deploy kingdom builders.

My District Superintendents, Rev. Brenda Carroll and Rev. Richard Patterson saw the best in me and held me accountable and taught me to look for some of the same leadership traits they recognized in me in others. I have a successful track record of recognizing leadership gifts and graces and have helped people by giving them both roots

and wings to answer their call to ministry. I am skillful in helping others walk the path from the pew to the pulpit with measurable success.

As lead pastor at the UTK Wesley Foundation, we develop leaders using a spiritual direction model. Our creative Bible study is centered around the exposure to various spiritual disciplines. One bright spot is that after a spiritual discipline session on ‘fixed hour of prayer,’ four male students (freshmen/sophomores) decided to meet each morning before class to pray. This is now growing and we now have 4-7 students attending daily without the lead or associate pastor in regular attendance. “Raise up leaders, raise up the church!”

**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)?**

I have planned, developed, and written a book about *Character Based Leadership*. This leadership model holds all who use it to be accountable to God and one another. Key leaders are asked to help create and foster a leadership atmosphere filled with the following leadership skills:

1. Listen to the people and build trust.
2. Establish a cultural of care and gratefulness.
3. Foster an environment of fun, fellowship and feelings of security and safety.
4. Encourage risk-taking evangelism.
5. Plan activities and events outside the church.
6. Creating small group membership that fosters a sense of belonging.
7. Celebrate success and reward positive behavior at all levels and repeat!

I participate in a district missional hub clergy group. I belong to several accountability circles and I am a member of a book club that meets regularly. I also meet regularly with my board chair. I meet with my associate pastor and student leaders seeking feedback and strategies for continuous improvement as part of an ongoing quality initiative. We use a model of evaluation utilizing two simple questions after every encounter or event, “What went well and what can we improve or do differently the next time?” I also, have hired a bookkeeper to ensure that we have transparent financial stewardship and meet monthly to reconcile expenditures. I meet monthly with an executive committee of the board to discuss strategic plans for our organization. I also participate in an ecumenical lectionary group and an ecumenical preaching group funded by a Styberg Preaching Institute Grant.

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

As a member of a socially marginalized group, I am often in spaces and places in the Holston Conference where I am the only African American. I often have to confront stereotypes and engage others in a continuous posture of utilizing anti-racist behavior. This is a difficult place to be in. As Methodist, we believe in dismantling “isms” and

leveling the playing field and allowing everyone to have access to the same resources. In my four years as Chair of the Order of Elders, I have helped several women navigate through the often choppy waters of racism and sexism to either get through the provisional, elder in full connection process. I have had to use our General Church Agencies such as General Commission on Religion and Race to reinforce information contained in the Book of Discipline.

In the 2019 Annual conference, I crafted a resolution on behalf of Holston Black Methodist Church Renewal that was unanimously adopted that calls for at least one African American to be included in the decision-making processes of all conference workings. "A Seat At Every Table" works in conjunction with the conference nomination committee to lift up names of African Americans who are qualified and best suited to work on various committees.

As the Committee on the Status and Role of Women (CSROW) Chair, I also brought a resolution to the Annual Conference previously adopted including language regarding the full inclusion of women that was also unanimously reaffirmed. I also reactivated the conference CSROW after several years of inactivity.

I have lobbied and gained the unanimous consent from the Board of Ordained Ministry to offer a mandatory anti-racism training for all clergy in 2020 and I have helped to plan, develop and implement the Eight-Year Assessment by 2020 in the Holston Conference. I continue to lead by example in uncomfortable places and spaces with intentionality to the details social justice and reform.

**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 exposure to the Annual, Jurisdictional and General Conference is somewhat varied. Over the past 16 years I have served in numerous capacities. I currently serve as the Chair of the Order of Elders for The Holston Conference. By virtue of this office, I serve on the Executive Committee on the Board of Ordained Ministry and work to ensure that diversity and inclusion are our top priorities.

Also, I serve as the Chair of the Committee on the Status and The Role of Women (CSROW) in the Holston Conference. Under my leadership our team recently celebrated Bishop Mary Virginia Taylor for making history by appointing more female district superintendents than male district superintendents in the Holston Conference.

I was selected and attended the national training offered by the Committee on the Status and Role of Women (CSROW) regarding sexual ethics. As a result of this training, I serve on the Sexual Ethics and Boundaries Committee along with four of my colleagues who planned, developed and implemented a mandatory sexual ethics training for all clergy in the Holston Conference. We recently created a video that will be available for all clergy and others to show at their churches and events that highlights the voice of

sexism and racism in our conference. In the video, our clergy brothers read unscripted authentic comments made to clergywomen in our conference. We believe this will increase awareness of the need for ongoing anti-sexism and anti-racism work in our conference.

I serve as Co -Chair of the Strengthening the Black Church, serve as a member of the Outreach and Advocacy Committee, the Clergy Convocation Design Team, the Holston Center for Well Pastoral Oversight Committee, Holston Collegiate Ministries, Black Methodist for Church Renewal, African American Ministry Task Force, and serve as Conference Clergy Mentor.

I was instrumental in reactivating, planning and developing an agenda for a vital chapter of the Black Methodist for Church Renewal that has been strong for the past ten years. Under the leadership of Bishop James Swanson, we formed a special interest task force that still operates today. The African American Ministry Task Force remains as a multi-ethnic and racial group of pastors and laity whose primary interest is to ensure that African American and other ethnic issues are considered in the day-to-day life of the conference.

Also, I took the initiative, traveled to Nashville and met with Rev. Dr. Fred Allen, National Director of Strengthening the Black Church and Rev. Michelle Morton and requested that the Holston Conference become partners with SBC21 to empower the few black churches in the conference to remain and become more viable. I co-chair this initiative with Rev. Dr. Barbara Doyle and we recently invited over one hundred people (primarily African American Pastors and their parishioners and the Bishop and conference staff) together on a cold snowy day to take an in-depth look at the current state of the Black Church in the Holston Conference and the General Church. It was an overwhelming turnout and we continue to do the work that is necessary for sustainability and growth of the Black Church.

**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 believe that it is critical to reach out to all God's people. For many years, I have considered missions a viable part of ministry. A church that does not have a vision for global missions has very limited scope. I have participated in life changing short-term mission teams to Australia, India and Africa.

Specifically, the Holston Conference has a mission outreach to South Sudan and Uganda. I have traveled to both South Sudan and Uganda with the conference mission team. Also, I was instrumental in helping a South Sudanese woman to plan, develop and implement a successful ministry (Grace Works Initiative) for women and children that is currently operating today. When I met Sis Grace Nakajje, she was a reporter and photographer for the Global United Methodist Church. After leading her in a spiritual direction and

discernment process, she is now the lead director of a much-needed ministry to women and children in Uganda.

**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**

This challenge has been extremely costly to the United Methodist church both emotionally and financially. The new Social Principles 2020 if adopted, calls for the affirmation and rights of all people acknowledging the emotional, spiritual and physical well being of all individuals. I think it is important for us to continue to enter into healthy dialogue as we navigate the murky waters of General Conference 2020 and beyond. I am committed to allowing the Holy Spirit to lead and guide me to all truths and will govern my actions according to the polity and discipline of the United Methodist Church.

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

I am a strong proponent of church mergers in order to promote vitality. It has been said that the average life cycle of a church is seventy years and if the church is to remain vital afterward, the church must experience some type of revival. I think it is imperative for churches to address their “why” effectively and find and maintain a *raison d’être*. We must constantly wrestle with the most important reason or purpose for our existence. The church exist to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world” then, now and in the future.

It is critical to foster flourishing churches that find and establish new faith communities. Recently, the UTK Wesley Foundation, we planned, developed and implemented a “Fresh Expression Dinner Church in the inner city in East Knoxville, TN. We are offering a monthly service and have had over sixty children and parents in attendance. This ministry outreach is inter-generational and involves college students, children in an after school setting and their parents. I believe that it is not the size of a church that matter, but it is the vitality of a church. I am convinced that sound biblical teaching and the invitation to be in full fellowship with Christ and others is everything that the church needs to be vital, successful and replicable.

**c. Next generation’s leaders**

It is said that Martin Luther King Jr. began to lead the boycott at age twenty-six. Young leadership matters and helps the church remain relevant. As a campus pastor, I encourage “key leadership” development. I believe we must foster service opportunities and create environments for the next generation leaders to serve. We must provide vocational discernment opportunities at all levels and help individuals to see how they can best answer the call within their relevant context. Leaders can be developed within many different contexts and we must seek to do so at all cost. We must allow for

innovation and have the courage to accept new ideas and ways to lead including technology and fresh expressions.

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

If we indeed follow the trajectory outlined by Lovett Weems and to some extent Leonard Sweet, we must be in the mode to personally assess our current way of operating. The expected death rates will greatly affect our current church model. The continued decline of church members and the financial support they give or do not give will create a dilemma that we have not adequately prepared for. If our energy is spent trying to upkeep aging buildings, and doing church the way our parents and grandparents did it, we are in for a major shock. I concur that the church has to make a decision about what is best for the church. The church will cease to exist if we continue to provide hospice care while at the same time looking for money to pay our utility bills and our buildings habitable. We must do more. We must become and remain relevant.

We must seize the moment and decide to do church differently. We must look at the context and decide to extend our parameters beyond the survival circle. As leaders, we must seek to do ministry with evangelism in mind and not the reality of death or the purse strings so often attached to it. Spiritual vitality is key to our future and we must first seek to be vital and the rest will follow.

#### **e. Guaranteed appointment for clergy**

In our itinerancy and appointment system, clergy who have invested in securing the necessary required credentials, a Master's of Divinity and Associate Members status should be able to benefit from a guaranteed place to work in the vineyard. However, guaranteed appointment for clergy should not be a "rights of passage" for the cabinet to continue to send ineffective and underperforming pastors to serve in a church just because they are elders or associate members. There must be a balance in properly maintaining competent clergy for appointments. One intendant benefit of guaranteed appointment is the concept of itinerancy. Conceptually, guaranteed appointments should help to ensure that clergy who have made it through the provisional, full connection and associate member process will not be denied an appointment based on gender, race or ethnicity. There are always opportunities to reform and or bring change to our appointment system. One thing I would like to see is to train our laity and pastors on the concept of open itinerancy as outlined in the Book of Discipline to make a more just system of appointment.

#### **f. Term episcopacy**

I believe that God calls, sets apart and equips the bishops to do the work of oversight. For me the more serious question is not so much about term limits as it is about ways to have checks and balances to ensure accountability and effectiveness for all leaders, including bishops. Leadership matters and we must ensure that there are effective ways to

measure the knowledge, skill and ability of leaders on an ongoing basis. There are ways to measure fruitfulness, accountability and effectiveness at all levels and we must not be afraid to do so. We must figure out how to ensure that bishops are not placed in places and spaces where their skill set is not appropriately matched. When this happens, we must not be afraid to seek some time of remediation to increase levels of competency. Self-awareness and other ways of accessing leadership competency should be utilized at every level of the ministry. Every leader should be subjected to oversight and scrutiny. This would promote a prescribed way to measure fruitfulness in ministry that is fair and equitable.

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

Cultural sensitivity is necessary in order for our church to operate at its best. It is important for the Church to recognize the role that culture plays in forming communities of believers. We must find clear pathways to allow for effective ministry in a global context. One way is through the current discussion centering on the need to allow the United States to adapt the Book of Discipline in its own context to encourage more equity and to counter colonial hegemonic power. When we allow the Church to face and respond to challenges in their own context, we indeed have a better church.

Also our global church helps to establish standards for sustained interactions based on gender, race, ethnicity and class. It also helps to increase opportunities for education for the marginalized and oppressed peoples throughout the globe. I embrace and affirm the worldwide connectional nature of the church and our efforts to empower and build bridges of sound theology and doctrine throughout the globe. We are a much better church when we are connected to purposes larger than ourselves.