

Questions for an Episcopal Nominee from the Southeastern Jurisdictional Committee on Episcopacy: Sharon G. Austin

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

My faith has been a deeply held, deeply felt, and deeply practiced experience throughout my life. I have always loved the Church, loved reading and praying, and applying the scriptures. The United Methodist Church taught me the importance of personal piety, which includes accountability to God, self, and others *and* piety's relationship to social holiness in the world; the two are not separate. I commit to remain in a Church which incarnates two vital aspects of our tradition.

My first encounter with Methodism occurred through serving as a chapel assistant and small group member led by my college chaplain, who was a UMC clergy, appointed to a non-UMC liberal arts college. Our relationship and his leadership began to provide a new and redemptive foundation for a fresh understanding of the authority of scripture. I commenced to trust in a faith-based on scripture and at the same time, incorporated God's gifts of tradition, reason, and experience. In this way, the quadrilateral has framed my ministry in leading people toward a more comprehensive, disciplined life of the faith. My reading of scripture, recording sermon notes, journaling, prayer life, and preaching are enriched through a quadrilateral approach to personal study and devotion. I love the *staying power* of devotional readings from the annual editions of Moravian Texts and re-reading Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals. Seasons of fasting, have been significant, both in the historical precedent of John Wesley's emphasis, but my practice.

I believe that God's love is real, and it has been the motivation that speaks to me and inspires the work of transformation of my heart, mind, and life. Justification by grace through faith has made a difference in my life, which has shaped my testimony in ministry with others. I live in the tension of desire to be in relationship with others while acknowledging my inadequacies. I bring a more profound, measured temperament to the challenges of ministry and practice active listening with others. I respect others for their journeys, knowing that God speaks into their lives, as God speaks into my life. I trust in God to love and forgive me because of my brokenness.

The Christian life modeled in the Wesleyan tradition has served as a constant reminder of the need to hold myself accountable. Accountability should always be prayerful and never resort to mercy for me and accountability for others. I make every effort to appropriately share my vulnerabilities and mistakes with others, being willing to acknowledge shortcomings, and a willingness to apologize to others. I have been blessed in recent years to become a part of an African-American clergywomen's group, which helps to provides uplift, encouragement, and accountability within the spectrum of cultural concerns and leadership nuances. I seek to live a

life of gratitude. I invite others to do the same without waiting for our lives to be perfect. My life is a work in progress as I go on to perfection, by God's sanctifying grace.

My ecumenical background (see my biographical statement) resonates with the ecumenism of the UMC. I lead in ways that seek common ground with others in the Christian community. The teachings of Jesus in Mathew 25 compel me to offer myself to a servant ministry of outreach, justice, and transformative possibilities to the least, lost and poor in spirit. I believe and want to impart that God's grace makes the difference in affording us new life in Christ.

2. Describe your record of pastoral fruitfulness in the local Church. For example, increase in worship attendance, professions of faith, small groups, missional engagement, and social justice.

I have served in the FL Conference for over twenty years. I have been inspired by the intersection of the rich diversity of the Conference and my faith and cultural journey (see biographical statement). All of my Appointments in the Conference were Cross-Racial/Cross-Cultural (including my Extension Ministry Appointments). My family and I were in the racial or ethnic minority, sometimes both and in the crosshairs of every congregation I served.

My encounters with "snowbirds" became part of my education while serving older congregations in FL. In one congregation with a recorded membership of 700, I noticed that many of the relationships self-identified by 'snow birds' were the relationships that they developed with people from the same or similar locations of their permanent residences up north. Activities such as worship, but more to the point, Wednesday suppers, cantatas, were often attended by friends who were not United Methodist back home. They contributed to a non-Floridan, non-United Methodist influence in the Church. I realized that an untapped opportunity in every Church I served was that of inviting persons to be received as affiliate or associate members.

Many of them confided that they never felt *official* in their seasonal congregation in FL. Their memberships were *not* counted as professions of faith, though their ministries witnessed the many ways in which the Church invites people to live lives of faith. I believe that their examples served as a witness for others who eventually did make professions of faith. This invitation increased the membership by twenty-five persons. I also extended an invitation to discipleship after every Sunday morning worship. I was always profoundly gratified to baptize children and parents, even apart from children baptized as a part of confirmation.

Some of these members joined Study Circles. These circles invited Church and other community residents to address places of racial inequity in the community through which their collective voices could make a positive difference. We formed a clergy collective which included a rabbi and an imam, and resourced our congregations for continued dialogue and shared mission in the community.

Despite the challenges of serving that congregation, the former youth director is now an elder in full connection, and another person whom I baptized states, “that I brought him back to the Church.” I was privileged to baptize him and his daughter, and he is now in seminary.

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)

a) In my first appointment, I met a woman whose father had been a UM pastor. She is an introvert by nature, and when we met her confidence was at a low ebb.

I’ve had the privilege to serve as her pastor twice over twenty years. She was a talented, yet reluctant leader, and always wanted to assist behind the scenes. Whenever she experienced reluctance, I would encourage her to ‘go with what she knew.’ On one occasion, a church member died whom she knew well. I knew that she could confirm this person's faith and ministry for the grieving family. During a time of sharing, I called on her to speak. She rose and began to stammer, truthfully, and beautifully about someone whom we would miss. Since that day, she has assisted with several ministries in her current church trustees, nursery, children, Latino worship, and Annual Conference. She now coordinates an income-generating ministry in her current congregation, using gifts and skills that she did not think she possessed.

b) In my last appointment, we arrived at a season of discernment regarding the vitality of the congregation. I can attest to the strain for myself, my family, and the congregation. The SPRC chairperson was reluctant to continue in her leadership capacity. We were near the end of a spiritual gifts discernment gathering, and she came to me and confided that she just didn't think she could continue. I told her that I understood and told her not to serve'. I thought she was going to burst into tears. I don't think she realized that saying “no” is an expression of spiritual gifts discernment. She spoke to me later expressed and her gratitude for that support. She became a leading voice for justice in our Study Circles.

c) During my tenure as District Superintendent, I experienced an opportunity to work with a local pastor serving a small congregation who had leadership gifts that blessed our district for five years. She ‘was gifted in many areas, with her primary gift being that of a joyful, spiritual countenance and a love of people. We served a district of multiple, significant challenges even by the bishop’s standards. I watched her love of Christ, and faith that death must come before the resurrection is possible. Her mother was a spiritual director, and she was raised with the example of faithful, gracious leadership. She invited congregations to revisit their history highlights, which were celebrated and assured them of God’s love for them when the tide of their effectiveness began to decline. I requested that the bishop grant her sacramental privileges. I sensed an opportunity to gather grieving members in worship. Worship alongside meetings would provide an incarnational opportunity during a season of congregational fragility. She is a seminary graduate who initially felt she needed to limit herself to Local Pastor status. As the years transpired, I encouraged her to consider Elders Orders or the Associate

relationship. Boom recently approved her as an Associate Member. Her ministry has blessed the local Church, district, Conference, and my vocational life.

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 served a small congregation, which included a couple who were loving Christians and faithful members. When I arrived at the Church, I learned that they took the offering home following worship, counted it, and then make the deposit on Monday mornings. The practice seemed to occur without incident, which made it all the more difficult to have a conversation about the impropriety of the situation. I received pushback from several members, in part due to their panic about who would replace them. I tried to explain that the issue was not their willingness, time, or efficiency. I helped them understand that when we care about people, we don't place them in situations of suspicion or scrutiny if something were to happen. We were able to arrange for others to count the money at the Church, put it in the safe, and then the couple would come to the Church on Mondays and make the bank deposit. Fiscal responsibility was an opportunity to honor their service, teach church polity, and invite more members to serve in leadership.

A part-time paid staff person served one of my congregations. He was a United Methodist member of a neighboring church. Every Tuesday morning, he would regale me, and anyone who would listen, with an unsolicited review of incredible worship and meetings at his Church. He may have been accurate. He began to tell me how wonderful ministry was at my Church under the leadership of a former pastor and a few of his predecessors. He reflected on the days of flourishing ministry at my Church, led by a previous pastor who was charismatic and talented and who blatantly had an affair with the church secretary. They subsequently divorced their spouses and married each other. A pattern began to emerge where any former pastor and any indiscretions in ministry were more valuable and acceptable than mine. When I called his attention to the pattern, he didn't see a problem, *which I thought was a problem*. I explained to him that I had a concern with his persistent recall of the litany of pastors, even those who leveled great harm on the congregation and others. I also explained that it was unhealthy for a staff person to berate the ministry that paid his salary. I saw an opportunity when he stated that he wanted to serve on the Finance Committee. He couldn't have a vote in his capacity at my Church, but he could vote on Finance at his Church. He seemed amazed that there was an outlet for his voice. He was eventually terminated; however, it precipitated the opportunity for him to serve in the place where he was invested.

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

The most difficult decisions have required me to self-differentiate myself from work and people's feelings—differentiation, *not* disassociation. I have learned to remain focused amid professional attacks and the circulation of misinformation. *Hurting people hurt people.* I believe it to be essential to provide folks with a lens through which to view their actions and the consequences. The lens aids them in appreciating that a different course of action would have led to a different outcome. I recall having a talented and influential volunteer in my Church, who became a voice in the anti-gay movement. He became convinced that we should terminate a staff member due to the individual's sexual orientation. He began to wonder if the challenges experienced by our Church were due to God's displeasure that our Church had not formally declared this lifestyle as sin. He wanted to terminate the individual despite the years of accomplishment and faithful service. I began a conversation about his lack of acceptance of LGBTQ persons and moved to the lack of integrity and illegality of this course of action. I widened the circle of dialogue and set up a meeting with the Conference Chancellor and an employment attorney who echoed the same sentiments. The member appeared defeated and resigned to acceptance following the meeting. I even became aware that he and his spouse met with another area UM pastor whose views were more in keeping with theirs. I committed to serve as their pastor for the duration of my time at that appointment.

It could be a unique challenge to provide supervision to clergy colleagues. The anger and disappointment, which often accompanied chargeable offenses or generally unacceptable behavior, signaled a desire for some to expect pastoral care to supersede supervisory authority. I came to realize that my consideration of a pastor and congregation might include the need to guide an SPRC chairperson to stand behind a pulpit on Sunday morning and enjoin the prayers of the church family as the pastor and spouse faced impending divorce. This work included caring for a clergyperson and spouse regarding counseling and medication for erratic, violent outbursts, knowing that anything remediations toward healthy ministry would also make for a healthier personal life. I always hoped for a redemptive, preserving the integrity, safety, and missional focus for the pastor and congregation.

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

I have been privileged to serve on the following ministry cohorts:

- a. BOOM (2004-2008) and Cabinet liaison to the BOOM 2008-2011)
- b. Serving my thirteenth year on the FL Conference Cabinet during which I have served with two remarkably gifted Episcopal leaders. I am currently the FL Conference Cabinet member with the longest tenure. I served as a District Superintendent for five years, with 90 churches and missions located within the complexities of rural, suburban, and urban communities. I served as dean of the Cabinet my last year. My current role is that of Director of Connectional and Justice Ministries, which includes co-leading the Annual Conference planning team.
- c. The General Board of Discipleship which included the Division of Ministry With Young People and Upper Room Ministries (2008-2012)
- d. Host District Superintendent, 2012 General Conference in Tampa, FL.
- e. The SEJ Committee on Investigation (2012-2016)
- f. The SEJ Committee on Coordination and Accountability which oversees the Jurisdictional Ministries (2013-2020)
- g. SEJ Secretary's staff and assisted with ballot tallies during the 2016 SEJ Conference
- h. One of the US Consultation teams sponsored by the General Board of Church and Society as the agency prepared to re-write the Social Principles (2015)
- i. Secretary, General Board of Church and Society (2016-2020).
- j. Chair, SEJ Directors of Connectional Ministry (2018-Present)

k. Treasurer, National Association of Directors of Connectional Ministries (2018-2024)

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.)

- a. The BOOM candidates reflect the investment made through Connectional children and youth ministries, camps and campus ministries, and UM institutions of higher learning as pipelines to future clergy and lay leaders.
- b. Connectional and Justice Ministries enables the Conference teams to express the vision through resourcing local churches as they focus on the primary task of making disciples. My role also relates to the global UMC by designing partnerships between SEJ ministries, the local Church, and General Agency staff, through grants, curriculum material, global UMC initiatives. Additionally, the Church has benefited from the exchange of ideas around best practices between the FL Conference and agencies.
- c. General Board of Discipleship, which included the Division of Ministry With Young People, was an opportunity for me to learn from and support the hopes and dreams of youth across the connection. Our young people are bright and faithful, and they have much to teach us even though we have set a fractured Church before them. Upper Room Ministries call us all to the importance of spiritual formation in the life of faith and invites us to read scripture, pray and celebrate the opportunity to immerse ourselves in a formational journey with friends around the world each in their languages. I have written for The Upper Room Daily Devotional in the past. Our Conference is among those who still offer the Five-Day Academy.
- d. Host District Superintendent of the 2012 General Conference in Tampa, FL, which served as an opportunity to extend hospitality to members of the global UMC, and to experience our community and its diversity through fresh eyes.
- e. The SEJ Committee on Investigation (2012-2016). I was grateful that circumstances did not require that the SEJ COI become active during my quadrennium of service. I appreciate the fact that the SEJ committee helps provide accountability for the office to which I now offer myself.
- f. The SEJ Committee on Coordination and Accountability which oversees the Jurisdictional Ministries (2013-2020).

- g. Served on the SEJ Secretary's volunteer staff. Provided administrative support to the secretary, received the ballots for recording, experienced, and learned more about the inner workings of the SEJ Conference (2016).
- h. Participated on one of the US Consultation teams sponsored by the General Board of Church and Society as the agency prepared to re-write the Social Principles (2015)
- i. Secretary of the General Board of Church and Society (2016-2020).
 - 1. Served on one of the writing teams for the Revised Social Principles to prepare this work for GC (2015).
 - 2. Included in the GBCS video explaining and endorsing the proposed global Social Principles.
 - 3. Responded to the request of GBCS to review and hold Public Conversations on the Social Principles. I facilitated FL Conference participation at a level enabling it to become the Annual Conference with the highest number of responses in the Global Church, during our Social Principles Public Conversations held (2018).
 - 4. Traveled to The Democratic Republic of Congo last month as part of a small delegation of clergy and GBCS staff, invited by Bishop Daniel Lunge, to teach the Proposed Social Principles.
- j. Traveled to Africa University with a FL Conference delegation. Sponsored the AU choir at Annual Conference. Helped raise funds toward an endowment (2014).
- k. Chair, SEJ Directors of Connectional Ministry (2018-Present). One of my professional blessings and space for learning has been the privilege of the SEJ cohort. This group represents one of the best examples of lay, deacons, elders, voices around the table with an equal sharing of views. Our working relationship of shared resources, prayers, encouragement, programs, and commitment to work on racism and the history of civil rights has been inspiring.
- l. Treasurer, National Association of Directors of Connectional Ministries (2018-2020). I continue this role and consider my affiliation with this broader group of DCMs to be a way to contribute to and receive a more comprehensive exchange of ministry vision within this season of the life of the Church.

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

God has created a beautiful mosaic of humanity, of which we should celebrate! I would begin by inviting every United Methodist to read the Preamble to *The United Methodist Revised Social Principles 2020*. This proposed version of the Social Principles will come before the 2020 General Conference. The Preamble frames the spirit of the Principles and not just the statements of the Principles. In the current statement of Social Principles, we considered two phrases in ¶161. G) and ¶162. J) to affirm the sexual personhood that we now find succinctly stated in the proposed Social Principles, The Nurturing Community, C. The evidence of our goal and transition of thought is through the use of a phrase, found in ¶162. J) of the current Principles, " Equal Rights *Regardless of Sexual Orientation*." We did not include this phrase in the proposed Principles.

We currently serve in a Church with more differences than we can know. Over the years, the Church has identified people groups as problematic; Black people, equality, ordination and appointment of women, the existence, ordination, and marriage of LGBTQ persons. We have incorporated language as well as policies in the Church, which excludes and does harm to our siblings. We do not all understand, agree, or practice the same as others. Vilification and restriction of their personhood as creations of God are beyond the bounds of our purview. We have also perpetuated generational trauma and a loss of promising leaders to other denominations. Our current systemic Biblical ostracism and marginalization of LGBTQ persons is reminiscent of the use of the Slave Bible in the 1800s and its removal of Galatians 3:28. I uniquely understood the depth of this ostracism, when I received a letter asking, "why do we have to have these people in our churches?" I'm uncertain how we expect to fulfill the mandate of the Great Commission by making *all* mean *some*. I believe that everyone has the right to share, receive, and serve the cause of the gospel.

b. Local church closures and establishing new faith communities

New places of ministry should develop a living will at their inception. The benchmark conversations with congregations always elicited a myriad of emotions. Anger, disbelief, betrayal, (sometimes quiet relief), to name a few. The discontinuance of congregations is 'heartfelt heartbreak.' I would tell anyone that this work feels as personal to the members as if the bishop (and by extension) the district superintendent and Cabinet walked right into their living rooms and began loading personal belongings in a moving van, right before their eyes. It is always important to reassure people that:

- a) Their faith is not being questioned; instead, the Church (mission or another ministry) has reached the end of a long runway.
- b) That in most cases the changes were gradual, almost imperceptible

- c) There *may be* a new life for their ministry or property/other assets, but there is new life for the membership.

I also learned that if leaders understand that Church's decline is (not just about money, in other words, is expressed as more than lack of money), than you need to be prepared to hold the line on health and vitality. I have recommended the discontinuance of churches that were broken in spirit, in vision, in mission, people, property, and financial resources. I have recommended the discontinuance of a church that had ministry potential and an approximately \$1 million mortgage. I have also recommended the discontinuance of a church that had cash and property totaling millions. I led the district to gift a historical property to a downtown congregation (which was the offspring of the historic congregation) in the midst of considerable controversy. To date, the property has been repurposed and redeveloped. It missional outreach flourishes as a gathering and meeting place for the community and with a mission to homeless and unemployed men.

c. Next generations leaders

We can learn so much from young leaders! Upon the inception of my current appointment, I accepted an invitation to have lunch with two clergywomen who sensed a gap in our Conference resourcing concerning the development of a Children's Resource ministry. They desired my acknowledgment of this deficiency and support in planning to create a space for this development. They knew their bandwidth in creating this ministry, and they knew when to hand it off. Next-generation leaders have a vision and move toward it more quickly, sometimes without having all of the funding, logistics, and permissions in place. They are driven by Kingdom 'urgency' and are willing to fail, fall, get up, learn, and gather fellow travelers, and keep moving. They make better use of organic strategies and social media than organizing their work around committees.

Our 2020 Annual Conference theme is *In Christ, For Others: Transformation through mentoring and reverse mentoring* attends to two of the Four Areas of Focus of the UMC, Leading where God calls and Making New Disciples in New Places. It also reflects the aspirations and goals for my leadership as I self-describe as a life-long learner. The Church will grow when it practices the wisdom offered by younger generations and affording them the Church that they deserve *now!*

d. Impending death tsunami (Dr. Lovett Weems)

I spoke with a colleague who will begin her new appointment on July 1 when her current appointment will transition to part-time. She shared with me that her modestly sized congregation lost nine members to death in 2019 and 8 in 2018, the year in which Dr. Weems said the death tsunami would escalate. It would appear that we have reached the place of diminishing marginal returns in the Church. People gave more money for years, and now we realize that the most critical needs for ministry don't begin with money. In the mid-2000s giving and expenditures declined. The rising death rate due to an aging population would

require asking fewer people to give more money just to help us maintain our current level of need. Even if this were possible, it would be unlikely.

I served a congregation where one couple underwrote one-third of the total budget. It was challenging to help people understand that generosity was not a strategy for sustainability. They retired, move out of the area, and the Church fell off a financial cliff and transitioned to part-time. Some congregations faced a *missional vision* tsunami years ago, and now an increasing number are facing a death tsunami and at an alarming rate. We will have to find ways to *decrease the cost of the ministry* of traditional ministries. We will need to invest in people and not buildings. Ministries, i.e., Fresh Expressions, to reach out to young, diverse, and underserved people, if we intend to achieve levels of ministry and missional engagement that point us toward a future of hope. In this, we will *Lead Where God Calls*, which is one of the *Four Areas of Focus*.

e. Guaranteed appointment for clergy

Guaranteed appointment for clergy may not be a system that we can sustain. However, it has mostly fulfilled its goal by providing sacramental leadership, missional stability, and continuity for the Church. I think in some ways, it has honored the vocational call of clergy who have substantially participated in and trusted a system from which they have also benefitted. It has also considered the sacrifices made by their families. Those who have been willing to serve Cross-Racial/Cross-Cultural Appointments and/or are women have been “otherized” by the Church. They have traditionally made profound sacrifices by the willingness to serve CR/CC appointments. Some clergy have served amid threats to their safety and that of our families.

There are at least two issues that lie at the heart of challenges to guaranteed appointments. The first issue presenting a challenge is concern about the ability to sustain a system that we can no longer financially support in the same way. I assume that guaranteed appointments were a different discussion when finances weren't an issue. The second concern is clergy effectiveness. Growing Churches are more likely not to focus on this issue because they have resources for ministries and believe missionally effective clergies are leading them. *The Book of Discipline 2016* addresses the appointment system in ways that allow for both the continuation of appointments to elders in *good standing* and an itinerant system which allows for full or less than full-time service. Engaging both conversations helps the Church find its way to more fully live into the mission of the Church.

f. Term episcopacy

Mandating a minimum age for election to the episcopacy could become one method of managing a term. Minimum age would obviously create a structure in which we might not have bishops younger than their fifties or sixties. The more obvious way to control the limit would be to cap the term or number of terms, regardless of the age at election. The fact that we haven't accomplished this might suggest that the Church would prefer to maintain the current system, and instead cultivate healthy elders who become eligible to be elected to the

episcopacy. In fact, it may be time for the entire Church to explore the consistency of terms limits for the global Church.

In the final analysis, the core issue of term episcopacy is that of being a unique expression of guarantee accorded to a relatively few clergy. The Church would be much less likely to express concerns about the term(s) if people felt that the leadership of bishops was consistent with the authority entrusted to them by elections. Every profession contains people who may occupy a role assessed to be too long for some and too short for other people. We elect bishops and, as such, bear responsibility for selecting those whom we believe can lead with vision for any term.

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

The United Methodist Church is global in vision, outreach, geography, governance, and representation. Our challenge is creating synergy around discipleship and mission, given the distinctive nature of people, countries, communities, and the inequities of resources. The Church is growing exponentially in places where there are diminished resources and declining in areas of most considerable wealth. The time has come for us to discern how we might bring balance to these realities. This work will involve alignment with sustainable missional priorities and values. Decline and need for resources may provide an impetus for us to examine how we dignity all United Methodists voices and realities, and connect around honest conversations while honoring the diversities of cultures in others.

Our Global Church will require us to explore ways in which ministry and mission reach people for Christ and cultivate leaders. Addressing difficult issues such as the exclusion of LGBTQ persons, and the historical realities of colonization and slavery will be imperative! Our honest assessment and faithful effort are imperatives to more fully live into the people that God has called in this season. The work on our Global Book of Discipline and Global Structure will only become as vital as we allow the redemptive power of God and the trust of one another to undergird us the process.

Created by the Executive Team of the SEJCOE
10.19