

Episcopal Candidate Questions and Responses for 2022
South Central Jurisdiction
Laura Merrill

1. Why are you willing to be considered for the episcopacy?

As the first-elected clergy delegate for three quadrennia, I've had the question of candidacy for bishop come around more than once. Through deep, prayerful discernment and the encouragement of clergy and lay colleagues, I've come to see this challenging yet hopeful day as one for which God has equipped me to serve.

I bring personal gifts that include a spirit of cooperation, joy in working with groups, the ability to listen and to speak difficult truth, a knack for problem solving and defining purpose, and relentless hope that springs from my life in Jesus Christ. In addition, I have worked in the church for 35 years, in roles that span nearly every part of the church's life. My experiences include time as a church secretary and as a young adult missionary in Chile and on the Arizona-Mexico border, service as a local church pastor, and terms as district superintendent on the Texas-Mexico border and in Austin, and work on the Rio Texas Cabinet as director of connectional ministries and assistant to the bishop. I have a good sense of how this church works and doesn't work.

2. How should the United Methodist Church go forward into the future? What are the most critical issues? How would you respond as a bishop of the church to these issues?

I believe the UMC must move forward with a spirit of hope, openness, and trust in the power of God to do a new thing. The world has changed dramatically since 2020, compounding already-critical issues of incivility, injustice, and violence. This context continues to shift and deepen, leaving people of goodwill divided, exhausted, and demoralized. We must be shaped by faith in a God whose Spirit leads us through and beyond fear and hurt, to offer the embodied love of Christ in tangible ways in our communities.

Our denominational impasse over human sexuality and the role of LGBTQ persons in our ministry has reached a critical point. Much of my work as DS recently has been to help congregations and their leaders navigate the treacherous waters of disaffiliation with integrity. Looking to the future, I believe our exclusionary language regarding these members of our family should be removed from our Discipline, opening pathways to full ministry to all and ending our systematic injury and marginalization of LGBTQ people. Also central to our future is the issue of pernicious racism in church and culture, especially in the US context. The past two years have called us to learn and be honest about the ways injustice is held in place and our role in it. We must become willing to receive from God the courage to be agents of truth, equity, and reconciliation, in our lives and our communities.

If elected to this role, I would seek to hold before the church a vision of fruitfulness and core questions of identity and purpose. How are we different, as people of Christ,

transformed by his grace? Given the needs and opportunities we see right now in the world around us, what do we believe God is calling us to risk or to sacrifice for the sake of others? In a time seemingly defined by decline, scarcity, and fear, how can we use what God has already given us to do faithful, fruitful work? And how will we know if we're on the right path? Working to answer these questions is a unifying and energizing task, and I would seek to keep the body together and focused on that work.

3. Where do you see God at work on the margins of the world? How would you embrace and encourage new, emerging forms of church among new people?

As a member of the committee that drafted these questions years ago, today I would say that where the “margin” lies depends on where you're sitting. But if we mean by that word the edge of the circle of influence reached by the church, I would say I see God as present and active there as anywhere inside the church, and sometimes more so.

God is at work among the poor, most of whom are not full participants in our churches' ministry. My time as a missionary gave me the gift of humility and respect for poor, marginalized, sojourning people. At humble tables and in immigrant homes, I learned the meaning of generosity and abundance. In the lives of the hardest-working people, I saw God give hope, faithfulness, endurance, and ingenuity. Recent efforts in the church to see people living in poverty and vulnerability as partners in ministry and not targets, with gifts and skills of their own, show great promise.

God is at work among the young, whom we often begin to lose from active church participation once they become older youth or young adults. The human yearning for healing and community is strong, and I have found that young people are ready to engage the gospel and even Christian tradition when it's unhooked from the requirements of particular forms or expressions. As our culture increasingly rejects institutions and organized religion in general, our listening to and learning from young people is one way God will use us to create the new church.

Finally, I believe God is at work in the hearts and lives of the neighbors who do not attend our church and see no compelling reason to do so. Some of them assume or have heard clearly that they would not be welcome. Others just see little evidence of a community transformed by the saving love of Christ. These neighbors are our mission field, part of God's call to us as Christ's body. I think of the self-professed atheist who was nevertheless drawn to help with a nearby congregation's home rebuilding project and felt led to call them “his church.” Or the wedding where the unchurched, pierced, tattooed photographer was touched and fed at the table for holy communion, because she heard she was welcome; she left wanting to learn more. The prevenient grace of Jesus Christ is already at work in the world in the hearts of individuals outside the church. He is waiting for us to catch up, and when we go where he calls us, we will meet him face to face, and that will change us. I truly believe the world will trust the invitation of a church that looks and acts like Jesus.

To do this work, we will need to use what we have—buildings, leaders, institutions, relationships and social capital in our communities—in new, creative ways. In this past

year as district superintendent in Austin, I have taken a crash course in these topics, working to flip aging properties for new, missional purposes and looking with new eyes to map the assets we haven't yet recognized. While it will take work and will involve loss, the possibilities for growth in this moment exceed our imagination.

4. How would you lead the church in reaching its mission field across divisions of age, economics, ethnicity and culture? Share how you have done this in your current ministry setting.

Most of the people in the majority of our churches are whiter, older, and wealthier than the communities around them. The movement of racial reckoning and truth-telling that accelerated in 2020 shined new light on the need for Christians to listen to and learn from the witness and experiences of people who are not like them.

As a local pastor, district superintendent, and conference staff person, I have actively used the power to convene, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds for common work, prayer, or simple conversation. As DS in South Texas, I brought together Hispanic and Anglo pastors and laity who had lived side by side with little church connection. Through community outreach, youth work, and lay and pastoral networks, we built a bank of shared experience and trust that would form the foundation of the new conference. Now as DS in Austin, I have begun an asset mapping process for the district and its churches, to identify potential lay leadership and ministry partnerships, and to show congregations an accurate picture of their context. The final phase will be to determine action steps in response to the information gathered.

5. What risks have you taken in ministry? How do you leverage what you learn from failure and success?

My risk-taking normally arises from acting on a personal vision or call and trying to translate that for others. Sometimes it doesn't work but has taught me what might work better. Conference clergy wellness programs, for instance, require feedback from clergy themselves on what they actually need most. The offer of "time off" for exhausted clergy during Covid didn't work until we dug into the actual barriers to their rest. Other times, risks pay off. Once I proposed changing my church's tradition of buying and dropping off Christmas gifts for immigrant families at their trailers. Instead, I asked that we deliver the gifts at a *tamalada* party, where we would all sit and celebrate together. I was still in my first year there, following a very popular pastor and trying to build trust in a place where they had "always done it this way." Unsure whether any families or church members would show up, I rejoiced when over 100 people gathered in that small congregation's fellowship hall, speaking a beautiful border mix of Spanish and English and beginning to live into a whole new way of being neighbors.

I have learned, especially from failure, important lessons about myself and the people I serve—what motivates and engages us, and how to effectively communicate and execute an initiative, including the important work of taking initial steps and then building on them. Leveraging these lessons normally happens for me in evaluation and follow up with a team, maintaining both institutional memory and a long view of the future. Connecting success or failure to clarity of purpose is key.

6. What types of strategies would you emphasize to accomplish the mission of the church in two areas: To strengthen annual conferences? To increase the number of healthy, vital congregations effectively making disciples of Jesus Christ?

To strengthen the annual conference, especially in our current day, again we have to look to vision and purpose. We can expect some resources to shrink in the coming years, as the institution finds its way. That will cause us to ask what the essential work of the annual conference should be. Lovett Weems has called it the basic unit of the connection, so what is most important about that body and its task? Communication of vision, networked relationships focused on ministry and mission, creative and inspired lay and clergy leadership, basic best practices for healthy administration—we will need to tighten our focus and resources around these goals and continue to question which ones hold priority.

Increasing the number of vital, disciple-making congregations will also involve a purposeful focusing of resources, shifting each church's focus from the center to the places in the world where God is already doing a new thing. Creative use of property; support of innovation with a commitment to a "research and development" approach, including less expensive models, early benchmarks, and willingness to risk and fail; an emphasis on prayerful listening and active love for communities; and intentional leadership development for laity and clergy all will be central to a leaner annual conference's work fostering strong congregations and communities of faith.

7. One of the greatest struggles in appointment making is access to sufficient numbers of effective clergy. How would you work to recruit new, effective clergy? How would you address the issue of ineffective clergy?

Each time I attend a candidacy summit, I am amazed and grateful to see that God continues to call persons to ministry in these changing times. Trusting that God is at work, our task is to open the door to many forms of ministry and to help folks discern their role in the body of Christ as they help share his gospel. Internships and experiments with effective leaders and programs provide opportunities and encourage good church DNA. We also need a fresh approach to the education of local pastors and laity, one that is more affordable, accessible, and attuned to the challenges of contextual, adaptive, innovative leadership.

In my Cabinet roles, I have held multiple supervisory conversations with ineffective clergy. It's important for district superintendents and other conference leadership to keep good records of issues and conversations as they occur, intervening earlier rather than later and pointing to the facts of "what is," to determine what changes or growth a clergy person is willing to attempt. When change does not occur, and suitable appointments are not available, we have to engage with the clergy person in a timely way, to determine appropriate vocational steps.

8. What is your philosophy of appointment making?

I was shaped as a district superintendent by the concept of the mission field as the

ultimate “client” of our work. This means asking what sort of appointment will help the church serve and bless its community. As the cabinet makes its assessment each January, we gather not only the counsel of the local church and reflections of the pastor, but also good data on the surrounding community. Local demographics, trends, and possibilities for partnerships and outside resources all contribute to a picture of the mission field. On the clergy side, gifts to be considered include not only professional pastoral skills but also qualities like emotional intelligence, willingness to learn, and spiritual maturity. All of these should stand alongside personal and congregational needs when matching a pastor with a church.

9. Describe how you work in partnership with the laity in the planning and execution of ministry. How would the laity you work with describe your work in this partnership?

The future of the church will be lived out in the lives of everyday disciples in the world, and raising them up as leaders is a core responsibility of the clergy. This means working to utilize the gifts, wisdom, and connections of laity in visioning, planning, executing, and evaluating ministry. I believe former parishioners, district members, and other lay partners in ministry would say I am collaborative in my leadership style and committed to their growth as leaders.

10. Describe your understanding of the inclusive nature of the church. In what ways have you lived up to and fallen short of that understanding?

The church of Jesus Christ is inclusive by its nature as his body. As modeled by his radical table fellowship, we are in spirit and across time and space a community where Christ has said that each person has a place. The challenge for us today is living into this identity in the real world. We know that, on average, the members of our denomination in the US are older, richer, whiter, and better educated than the rest of the country. A commitment to inclusivity in the church means in part asking, “Who’s not here, and whose voices do we not hear?” The challenge is that we can’t know the answer to that question without talking with other, different people. The lived experience of people of color, the call of God upon LGBTQ persons and young people, the wisdom and care of God that abides with the poor—these are gifts in the world, places where Jesus is present and calling the greater church to stretch and to grow.

In my life and work, I am energized by people different from me and by the promise of a church filled with the beauty of that diversity. I’m fluent in Spanish and grateful for the Mexican-American branch of my family tree. I’ve developed sensitivity to who speaks and who’s silent, who’s visible up front and in decision-making, and who isn’t. I have at different points given energy to the development of Hispanic clergywomen as essential resources for Rio Texas and to mentoring young adults. I also led in the creation of the Rio Texas Bishop’s Task Force on Race and Culture and serve as its coordinator.

That said, I have read and sought to learn more since 2020, in a process that has been both enlightening and painful. As one who has always believed myself committed to justice in my life and work, I seek to continue to grow and risk, for the sake of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

11. What do you feel has been the most significant contribution or difference you have made toward fulfilling our mission as a church in the local churches you have served? In your annual conference? At the general church level?

In the local church, I served and preached with authenticity, encouraging my community to talk to and learn from others, as a primary discipleship pathway. My leadership has placed high value on relationship and has focused on an ethic of grace and humility, lived out at the table of Christ. At the annual conference level, I have tried to use the goodness of our order and connection to leverage and enhance the mission of the local church, rather than burdening it. I've recognized the power of sharing a common vision. And ever since my missionary days, I've sought to build bridges with the general level of the church, especially enlivening the connection between the needs and reality of the local level and the work of our agencies. I am grateful for the resources and wisdom that have come from that part of our connection.

12. John Wesley is often quoted as having said, "In essentials, unity, in non-essentials, diversity, in all things, charity." What constitutes the essentials for you?

Our essentials include a trinitarian faith in God as the gracious giver of life and creator of all people; Christ as love incarnate, who redeems our sin and opens the door to new life; and the Holy Spirit as energy and power that calls us together as the church and moves us toward the future. Other essentials are listed in our Articles of Religion, which have been much discussed during this period of disaffiliation. I also believe our social context has elevated the last part of Wesley's statement, "in all things, charity," to its own status as an essential. These four words serve as a mark of Christian character. To refuse to demonize or dehumanize another, to assume the other's good intention and pray and even act for his or her well-being—these practices are the heart of charity, and in this day they are extraordinarily countercultural. This Wesleyan, Christian pattern of life will be fundamental to navigating the days to come in a way that glorifies God.

13. How would being elected and assigned impact your family? What challenges might it present and how will these be addressed? Are there health, financial, or other issues that could possibly affect your ability to serve as a bishop?

My daughter, Caroline, is a college junior in San Marcos, Texas, and my son, Joe, is in graduate school in Boston. It is a joy to maintain an active relationship with them both, and if elected, I would continue to do so from wherever I am assigned. I am grateful to have no health or financial challenges at this time.

14. Under the current rules, how many quadrennial terms would you be eligible to serve?

I would be eligible to serve until 2032—this partial term, plus two full ones.

15. How do you understand your obligation as a bishop to uphold the Book of Discipline?

I have ample experience with and investment in the ways our Discipline provides order, protection, and clarity of identity for our common life. I understand upholding the Discipline as a task of the bishop that requires wisdom, respect, care for the members of the body and the body as a whole, and obedience to the call and will of God in each particular situation.

16. If you could change any section or provision in the Book of Discipline, what would you change?

I have already mentioned my hope that we will change the disciplinary sections on same-gender weddings and LGBTQ clergy. Beyond that, I hope for a revision of our Discipline that lightens our structure and makes our common rule less confusing and cumbersome. I hope we can move toward a flexible system that allows for contextual ministry, maintaining the core of our identity and enlivening a connectional system that runs more horizontally than vertically.

17. When is the last time you led an individual to a profession of faith? Tell us about it.

My last occasion to lead a person to a full profession of faith was as a local church pastor. At that time, I formed a pastoral relationship with a retired man whose wife was dying and who had no attachment to the church. He had what he believed were good reasons to doubt both that the church would accept him and that he could accept or find meaning in the church. Through conversation around the death and funeral of his wife, welcoming his hard questions and connecting him to others in the congregation, I was grateful to see the Holy Spirit open his heart to a new life of devoted discipleship and service that continues to this day.

Much more common in my life and central to my personal sense of mission is the joy of opening the table of Christ and the word of life for people I meet but may not be able to shepherd long-term. I know from personal experience how a brief, grace-filled encounter can change a person's heart. So the man on the plane whose marriage was falling apart and was moved to speak about it for the first time; the immigrant teenager at the detention center who crossed himself as he took bread from a woman "priest"—I cannot count these as people I led all the way into a Christian life, but I know Jesus met them through our encounter, and I regularly find these opportunities. I trust Christ's goodness and his power, and I hope always to serve his church in a way that shares that embodied truth.