

Rev. Autura Eason-Williams
Memphis Annual Conference

Statement of Call

Since accepting my call to ministry twenty-four years ago, I have prayerfully leaned on God and my neighbors as I have offered myself as a Christian disciple, as a United Methodist minister, and now as a candidate for episcopal leadership. Over the years, I have been encouraged by my family, church members, colleagues, and neighbors in the church community to consider this role as part of my journey in faith and faithfulness. Since offering myself as a nominee, I have been blessed by the support I am receiving from laity and clergy willing to help me take each faithful step and thank God for the many ways they nurture and help me grow in ministry.

I have been affirmed in leadership roles in the community. In 2012, I chaired the New Southeast Elementary School Advisory Board for a new neighborhood public school in our community, Belle Forest Community School. In 2015-2016, I served on the Achievement School District Neighborhood Advisory Council as an advocate for neighborhood schools in Southeast Memphis. For the last couple of years, I have enjoyed coaching second graders through the Arise2Read program at Ross Road Elementary and celebrating Birthdays every month with children at Crump Elementary.

Annual Conference leadership roles include an appointment to Connectional Ministries, as Associate Director, Christian-Ed and Age-level ministries and three quadrennia on the Board of Ordained Ministry, which I currently chair. At the 2019 Memphis Annual Conference, I was elected lead clergy delegate and head of the delegation to the 2020 General and Jurisdictional Conferences. Previous service includes 2019 General Conference first clergy reserve, 2016 General Conference first clergy reserve and delegate to Jurisdictional Conference. I also serve as secretary of the Southeastern Jurisdiction Council on Finance and Administration.

I deeply believe that God is transforming my life and preparing me for episcopal leadership through the many ways God has already called me into service and accountability. For over twenty years, I have been formed in a clergywomen covenant group; practiced the means of grace for my own spiritual development; and for over ten years practiced the means of grace with seminarians at the intersection of difficult concepts such as poverty, racism, sexism, privilege, and power. I trust that God is doing a creative and fruitful work in me and through me in communion and community.

I am an African-American woman, raised in the United Methodist Church, born at the intersection of racism, sexism and classism in a “new” denomination in a “new” society that was trying to figure out what it means to be inclusive. I was born fourteen years after the first women were ordained and just two years after the Central Jurisdiction was dismantled. I was born after Dr. Martin Luther King was killed in Memphis, Tennessee during the Sanitation Worker’s Strike. I remember being a child in Sunday school and UMYF being taught against xenophobia, only to grow up, answer a call to ministry and find the United Methodist Church still turning a blind-eye to racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ageism, and ableism. I yearn for the church

to embrace a renewed understanding of love of God and neighbor that welcomes all people at the table of God's grace.

Love expressed as right relationship spans the whole tenor of scripture. Jesus came to restore people to right relationship. When asked which commandment was the greatest, Jesus described right relationship by boiling Ten Commandments and 613 Levitical laws down to two: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:36-40). A church for all people is what Jesus stood up in a synagogue in Nazareth to proclaim as he read from the scroll of Isaiah: The Spirit of the Lord is on me, to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19). The author of 1 Corinthians 13 describes love as a commitment to right relationship- a more excellent way.

A church for all people is what John Wesley imagined as he emphasized not only orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxis (right action) but also orthokardia (a right heart), which calls us to right relationship with God and one another. For Wesley, the Christian life should be motivated and propelled by the love of God. He insisted that "he who loveth God, loves his brother also. And he accordingly loves his neighbour as himself; he loves every man as his own soul."¹

As I examine the United Methodist Church during my lifetime, we have not worked hard enough at being in right relationship with God and neighbor. I have had the privilege of working toward a vision of right relationship in the community through innovative ecumenical ministries like The Congregation Health Network, an outreach of Methodist Lebonheur Healthcare, which resources a network of 600 faith communities that address health disparities in the neighborhood and work on relationships between the hospital, the church, and the urban community. This ministry has been used as a model for health systems across the nation. I was part of a team that revitalized the Communities of Shalom movement in the Memphis Conference, The Center for Transforming Communities, which led to Capleville UMC anchoring US Making it Happen Shalom Zone for seven years.

For seventeen years, God has used me to help lead churches to seek right relationship with God and our neighbors in the neighborhood through ministries with children, youth, families, seniors and the poor. Our work as part of a shalom zone helped Capleville become neighbors in our neighborhood, partnering with schools, the public library, businesses, an apartment complex, and other churches. With neighbors, we offered an apartment ministry and a youth entrepreneurship program. With neighbors, we host a food pantry; senior activities; English as a Second Language classes; and a computer ministry that includes coding classes for youth and software classes for adults that meet at the church and at our neighborhood library. We are currently piloting a Neighbor Engagement Center that features the sharing of the gifts of neighbors in our community and fellowship activities while offering Christ through the ministries of the church.

¹ John Wesley, *The Character of A Methodist* (Philadelphia: Printed by Johnston & Justice, at Franklin's Head, 1793), 8.

I am answering a call to episcopal leadership because I believe God has been preparing me to help lead the United Methodist Church to do the hard work of right relationship in our connection that includes all the people in our neighborhoods. Through my experience as a church and community leader, informed by the Communities of Shalom movement, God has given me a vision of the local church as the Body of Christ moving into the neighborhood as a neighbor who sees all the neighbors in the neighborhood as gifted, regardless of their needs; and creating ministry with neighbors that meets needs and makes disciples, who do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).