



## Connecting Faith and Life

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### Session at a Glance

Social justice is a key biblical theme and has been an important feature of the Methodist movement from its beginning. What do the Bible and Wesleyan tradition teach us about social justice? How are Christians called to practice social justice?

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# Social Justice and Christian Faith

by Jeanne Torrence Finley and Dave Barnhart

## Social Justice and the Church

Fox commentator Glenn Beck sparked a controversy recently by declaring that church members should “run as fast as you can” away from churches that use the words *social justice* to describe themselves. Bishop Sally Dyck, Minnesota Area, responded by writing, “Mr. Beck’s political agenda is like piercing a sword right through the vulnerable flesh of the living body of Christ.” She says the church is hurt when people emphasize the divisiveness and sensitivity of terms such as *social justice* and *economic justice*.

Social justice has a long history among the faiths of the Abrahamic tradition. Dyck acknowledges that it has not been easy. She says, “It’s been a struggle since the Hebrews left Egypt, the prophets issued messages of hope and judgment to the rulers and people of Israel and Judah, Jesus gave his mission statement in the synagogue (**Luke 4:18-19**) and Paul reprimanded Christians for being greedy at the Lord’s table (**1 Corinthians 11:33-34**).” Dyck goes on to remind us of the importance that John Wesley placed on works of mercy and works of justice. For United Methodists, they are also an important part of who we are.

Many Christians today do not make the connection between their personal relationship with God and current social issues. In a 2004 General Board of Global Ministries article, Dr. Jan Love, dean of Candler School of Theology, Emory University, observed, “The dominant trends in Christianity here and abroad often promote a form of privatized religion that denies the Wesleyan insistence on the unity of personal and social holiness. To get God right, many Christians claim, is to strive primarily for personal piety, not social change. Our U.S. heritage accentuates individualism, one of our great strengths, but increasingly this drive for ever more autonomous individuals comes at the expense of our communities and creation.”

In its “User’s Guide,” *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2008* says, “Taking an active stance in society is nothing new for followers of John Wesley. He set the example for us to combine personal and social piety.” Wesley did indeed set an example, but how many United Methodists know about it?

## The Social Witness of Early Methodism

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, lived in England in the eighteenth century, a time of rapid change brought on by the early Industrial Revolution. According to Theodore Runyon, author of *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today*, as Wesley traveled throughout Britain, he observed the unemployment and

## Core Bible Passages

In **Luke 4:18-19**, Jesus announces the mission of his public ministry by reading from the scroll of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, / because he has anointed me / to bring good news to the poor. / He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives / and recovery of sight to the blind, / to let the oppressed go free, / to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

The passages from **Isaiah (61:1-2 and 58:6)** reflect the concern for justice (righteousness) that had been part of the very identity of the covenant people. Israel’s early codes of law called for them to provide for the vulnerable—the poor, the widow, and the orphan (**Deuteronomy 24:19-22**).

In **Luke 4:19**, “the year of the Lord’s favor” refers to the year of Jubilee. Every fifty years, the covenant people were to celebrate Jubilee (**Leviticus 25:8-55**), a time when prisoners were set free, debts were canceled, and land was returned to families.

When the people of the synagogue in Nazareth first heard Jesus’ words, they “spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth” (**Luke 4:22**). However, after he sat down to teach, they began to understand the implications of Jesus’ message. They drove him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff (**verses 28-29**).

poverty resulting from the transition from a medieval peasant economy to an industrial economy. Runyon writes that England’s adoption of enclosure laws had given landowners absolute property rights, allowing landowners to fence off their lands and deny access to common lands where peasants had been raising their own food. Landowners had turned to raising cash crops and carriage horses as peasants moved into cities to find work. Unemployment ran as high as 40 percent, and the available jobs were often at subsistence wages.

Wesley saw that much of the poverty was caused by inflation of food prices, especially wheat and oats. The price of grain had risen because of its increased use in the distilling industry and in the raising of carriage horses. The poor were spending their meager funds on bread and had no money for manufactured goods. Wesley noted that, as a result, small businesses employed fewer and fewer people: “They cannot [employ people], as they have no vent for their goods.”

Such were the conditions in which the Methodist movement was born. Members of Methodist societies were to minister to the poor through material assistance and providing communities of care and support. Early Methodists engaged in providing food, fuel, and clothing. They built health clinics, organized credit unions, and established schools. The poor who joined the Methodist movement were organized into societies, classes, and bands, where they learned leadership skills, including pastoral care, recordkeeping, reading, and public speaking.

Wesley’s ways of addressing poverty went beyond direct services to changing public policy. What would lower the cost of bread so that more people could buy manufactured goods? Wesley advocated prohibition on distilling hard liquor as a means of lowering the price of grain. What would lower the price of oats? Raising taxes on the carriages of the wealthy and on the horses imported to France would reduce the demand for horses and the oats they consumed.

Wesley proposed other policy changes that would affect the English economy. Seeing that the need for higher taxes was caused by the increasing national debt, he advocated reducing it by half. Runyon explains, “Wesley evidently assumes that the wealthy holding government bonds are the best able to make the sacrifices it will take to reduce the national debt, which in turn will combat inflation, increase employment, and alleviate the plight of the poor.”

## United Methodist Theology

Discipleship means participation in God’s intention for a new creation. We, having experienced the love of God in Christ and in the body of Christ, will come to love what God loves. We will join with God’s intention of righteousness (justice and peace) for all of creation.

It is with this understanding of love of God and neighbor that The United Methodist Church has a tradition of involvement in working for justice. How do we as a church love collectively? What if the “neighbor”

## The Social Creed

The story of the Social Creed began with Methodist Episcopal Church leaders who saw the need for an organization to provide leadership of social ministry.

These leaders called a meeting on December 3, 1907, in Washington, DC. The twenty-five attendees founded the Methodist Federation for Social Service (MFSS). The MFSS' work resulted in the adoption of the first Social Creed by the 1908 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It stood for worker justice, including a living wage, the abolition of child labor, and the right to arbitration.

Similar social creeds were adopted by predecessors of The United Methodist Church throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Following the establishment of The United Methodist Church in 1968, the Social Principles were written, expanding the Social Creed. In 1972, General Conference created the General Board of Church and Society and adopted the Social Principles.

In 2008, General Conference adopted "A Companion Litany to Our Social Creed" for use in worship settings. This litany follows the present version of the Social Creed. The litany concludes saying, "Today is the day / God brings good news to the poor, / proclaims release to the captives, / gives sight to the blind, and / sets the oppressed free. / And so shall we" (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2008*; pages 40–41; *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2008*; pages 130–31).

is a society? What does love look like when it moves beyond providing shelter for the homeless to addressing the root causes of homelessness?

Most congregations engage in some form of direct service, such as giving to food pantries, staffing soup kitchens, or going on mission trips. What could happen if more congregations also engaged in finding long-term solutions to social problems? What happens when a denomination such as The United Methodist Church puts love in action for the common good?

## The Social Principles

The social ethic and statements of The United Methodist Church developed because of a theology that led us to ask such questions. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2008* contains the Social Principles that have been adopted by successive General Conferences to address societal issues in a biblical and theological context.

The history of the Social Principles dates back to 1908 when the Methodist Episcopal General Conference adopted the Social Creed. The preface to the Social Principles describes them as "a call to all members of The United Methodist Church to a prayerful, studied dialogue of faith and practice." They are not rules or doctrines that each United Methodist must follow or believe but rather guidance for our reflection as we seek to love God and neighbor today.

The biblical roots of the Social Principles include the Ten Commandments in **Exodus 20:1-17** and **Deuteronomy 5:1-22**, the injunction to do justice in **Micah 6:8**, and the teachings of the prophets—for example, **Jeremiah 22:13-16**, which says that doing justice is knowing God. Among the many New Testament Scriptures that focus on justice are the Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew 5–7**, the great commandments in **Mark 12:29-31**, Paul's teachings on love in **1 Corinthians 13**, and the teachings in **James 2:14-17** about the crucial connection between faith and works.

## The Book of Resolutions

The Social Principles are expanded in the *Book of Resolutions*, which contains the official policy statements that shape the ministry of The United Methodist Church. It is an educational resource on current social issues and a guide for United Methodists, individually and collectively, to relate faith to action. The *Book of Resolutions* is also a resource for all public statements about the official United Methodist position on social issues.

The "User's Guide" of the *Book of Resolutions* states that The United Methodist Church's social policies and resolutions say, "We care!" We have them to "express our Church community's beliefs and give us evidence that the Church means for God's love to reach into situations faced each day, not just on Sunday morning." In our denomination's public witness, we ask whether an action "supports justice, love, and mercy, particularly for the poor and powerless."

## Hymns and Social Justice

A section of *The United Methodist Hymnal* gathers hymns under the category “Social Holiness” (425–50). Based on **Isaiah 6:8**, “The Voice of God Is Calling” (436) reminds us that God’s call to justice is just as real in our day as it was in Isaiah’s. It summons Christians to work to eliminate poverty, greed, and unfair treatment of workers. “What Does the Lord Require” (441) takes its text from **Micah 6:6-8** as it enjoins God’s people to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Why are these hymns often neglected? Don Saliers, professor emeritus of Candler School of Theology, and his daughter Emily Saliers, of the folk-rock duo the Indigo Girls, address that question in their book *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live*: “When music and words push us beyond our comfort zones on matters of social ethics and our larger societal responsibilities, many of us begin to squirm.” The Saliers suggest that our discomfort may be based on fear of mixing politics and religion or on fear that singing these hymns “can bring us face-to-face with truths we might rather not know.” They add, “However, when the church does not learn to sing these challenging songs of faith, it may find that the impulse to justice and freedom is heard only outside its walls.”

Our congregations may find that challenge in such hymns as “When the Church of Jesus” (592), “All Who Love and Serve Your City” (433), and “O God of Every Nation” (435).

## Love With Its Working Clothes On

“I see justice as love with its working clothes on,” wrote the Reverend Jim Lewis, Episcopal priest in Charleston, West Virginia, after the recent mine explosion in which 29 people died. Lewis pondered, “After the dust settles, the bodies are buried and the media leaves . . . will love move from its charitable and mournful state, put on its working clothes and emerge crying out for justice?”

The Social Principles and the *Book of Resolutions* call us to action to address the difficult issues our society faces today: human rights, the environment, poverty, health care, violence, and immigration. With them we reclaim our heritage as people of personal and social holiness and answer God’s call to love neighbor through our work for social justice.

### Who Speaks for The United Methodist Church?

The General Board of Church and Society is mandated by General Conference—the only body that speaks for The United Methodist Church—to advocates on issues represented by the *Book of Resolutions* and the Social Principles. General Conference, which is made up of over 1,000 delegates from United Methodist conferences all over the world, meets every four years and votes on petitions that come from individual church members, general agencies, local churches, annual conferences, and other United Methodist groups. The petitions go to legislative committees of delegates who then accept, reject, or amend them. Then the committees report their recommendations to the General Conference for a vote. The adopted petitions are gathered into the *Book of Resolutions*.

The *Book of Resolutions* is organized into seven sections, the first six of which correspond to the divisions of the Social Principles: The Natural World, The Nurturing Community, The Social Community, The Economic Community, The Political Community, and The World Community. The seventh contains other resolutions that are broader or more theological in scope than any one of the other sections.

*Jeanne Torrence Finley is director of Collegial Communications and an elder in the Virginia Conference.*

*Dave Barnhart is pastor of outreach and member care at Trinity United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.*

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## Social Justice and Christian Faith

How are Christians  
called to practice  
social justice?

### CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your  
group members and  
your group time,  
choose from among  
the OPEN, EXPLORE,  
and CLOSE activities  
or from “Teaching  
Alternatives” to plan  
the session.

## OPEN the Session

### Pray Together

Ask the group to read silently “Behold a Broken World” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, 426) as a prayer. Then reflect silently on how God may be calling Christians to repair the broken world.

### Define Social Justice

Ask: What comes to your mind when you hear the phrase *social justice*? List participants’ responses on a markerboard or a large sheet of paper.

## EXPLORE the Topic

### Discuss Individualism and Faith

Read “Social Justice and the Church” (page 1). Draw attention to the quote from Jan Love, and ask: What does Love mean by “privatized religion”? What factors in our culture contribute to the disconnection between personal piety and social change? Do you agree with Love that there is an increased drive toward personal autonomy that discourages the valuing of community? Why or why not? How does individualism affect religious life?

### Explore the Methodist Tradition of Social Witness

Review “The Social Witness of Early Methodism” (pages 1–2). Ask: What features of eighteenth-century life in England are similar to life today? What were John Wesley’s concerns? What can we learn from the social witness of early Methodism? What relationship did Wesley see between personal piety and social holiness?

### Study Scripture

Form small teams. Ask each team to read Luke 4:18-19 and “Core Bible Passages” (page 2). Compare this text with Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6. Then read the story of Jesus’ rejection at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30), and discuss: What led the people in the synagogue to speak well of Jesus when they first heard the reading from Isaiah? Why did they change their response? What makes it difficult for a prophet to be accepted in his or her hometown?

### Discuss United Methodist Theology

Review highlights of “United Methodist Theology” (pages 2–3), and discuss the questions raised in it. Then ask: How would you explain the differences between direct-service ministries and ministries of justice? How does each fulfill the commandment to love God and neighbor?

### Study the Range of the Social Principles

Form six small teams. Give each team a copy of one of the six sections of the Social Principles to study. If you do not have a copy of the Social Principles, you can find them on the website of the General Board of Church and Society ([umc-gbcs.org](http://umc-gbcs.org)). On the top menu, click on “Leadership Development” and then on “The Social Principles.”

Ask each team to give a brief report to the larger group on the range of topics covered in each section.

## Learn About *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church*

Review “*The Book of Resolutions*” (page 3) and “Who Speaks for The United Methodist Church?” (page 4). Ask participants to work in pairs to develop a reply to someone who asks, “Why did the General Board of Church and Society take a stand on \_\_\_\_\_? They didn’t ask me or my congregation.” Invite the pairs to share their responses with the larger group.

## Do an Overview of Board Resources

Provide an overview of the resources on the website of the General Board of Church and Society (GBCS). Note the following:

- ◆ “Faith in Action,” containing current news and commentary on social concerns ([umc-gbcs.org/fia](http://umc-gbcs.org/fia)).
- ◆ The “Prophet-Driven Campaign,” a resource to help United Methodists make the poor a priority ([umc-gbcs.org/prophetdriven](http://umc-gbcs.org/prophetdriven)).
- ◆ “Four Focus Areas of Ministry,” which explains how the GBCS works with the Connectional Table, the Council of Bishops, and other United Methodist general agencies in four key initiatives to focus the church’s mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world: the eradication of poverty, global health, leadership development, and church renewal ([umc-gbcs.org/priorities](http://umc-gbcs.org/priorities)).
- ◆ Peace With Justice Sunday (May 30, 2010) ([umcgiving.org](http://umcgiving.org)).
- ◆ God’s Renewed Creation, the Council of Bishops’ call to hope and action about the three interrelated threats to God’s creation: pandemic poverty and disease, environmental degradation, and the proliferation of weapons and violence ([hopeandaction.org](http://hopeandaction.org)).

## Consider Hymns of Justice

Invite participants to look through the “Social Holiness” sections of the *Hymnal* (425–50) and *The Faith We Sing* (2170–90) and list hymns that your congregation sings regularly.

Ask: How many do you know? Encourage participants to choose a hymn and interpret it in terms of current social concerns.

## CLOSE the Session

### Read The Companion Litany

Provide copies or a projected copy of “A Companion Litany to Our Social Creed” (*Book of Resolutions*; pages 40–41; *Book of Discipline*; pages 130–31). Before reading the litany responsively, invite the group to read it silently and consider ways it might be a statement of commitment to action.

### Pray Together

Sing or read “This Is My Song” (*Hymnal*, 437) as a closing prayer.

## Teaching Alternatives

### Study the *Book of Resolutions*

A few days prior to meeting, ask volunteers to make a presentation from the *Book of Resolutions* that includes the following:

- ◆ a review of the “Users Guide”
- ◆ a list of current topics addressed in the resolutions
- ◆ an in-depth description of at least one resolution

### Study the Biblical Roots of the Companion Litany

The Reverend Clayton Childers, GBCS director of annual conference relations, has written a resource for group study of the biblical texts related to each declaration in the litany ([tiny.cc/4hkde](http://tiny.cc/4hkde)). Use the study to learn more about the Companion Litany.

## Next Week in FAITHLINK

### Coal Mining Safety

The mining disaster in West Virginia has caused us to think again about the safety of the workers who mine coal. How dependent are we on coal? What more can we do to protect workers? How can our faith inform our actions?