

### **Message: Act Together**

#### **What’s a principle?**

I’m not talking about the leader of a school. That’s different. Dictionary.com defines a principle as “a guiding sense of the requirements and obligations of right conduct.”<sup>1</sup> It implies a principle is “established as a general or fundamental truth that may be used in making a choice or in deciding how you’ll behave.”<sup>2</sup> Principles are used in science, math, medicine and philosophy, among other disciplines. For example, the “laws of nature” are actually principles. Principles apply to all aspects of life. We like people with good moral principles. They’re people who act ethically and are good role models. They’re dependable and who know what to expect from them. One common phrase we use is when we refer to someone who “sticks by their principles,” meaning someone who follows a truth or standard.

**Principles are important.** They act as standards, meaning they tell us what to do in certain situations. For example, we follow traffic laws and stop when the light is red. That has nothing to do with the nature of red light. We follow the principle because we could be injured (or injure others) if we drive through red lights. It’s a good practice. We don’t want a ticket, either. Some principles are seen as laws requiring enforcement for the health and safety of civil society. Other times, principles serve to describe the cause of actions. That’s often the case in the natural sciences. For example, most of have heard of the principle that “every action has an opposite and equal reaction.” That’s more descriptive in nature, rather than judicial. Our Social Principles are intended to serve as standards, showing us how United Methodists as a whole, have determined we should act.

**Today we’re focusing on what we, as a community of faith, believe about relationships.** We act according to what we believe and what we believe is shaped by the way we act. We’re a community of believers who believe in life-changing relationships with God, other people and all of creation. These are our most fundamental relationships. Our Social Creed is a summary of our Social Principles. Our Social Creed is a

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<sup>1</sup> [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

summary of the six Social Principles found in our Book of Discipline. You have a bulletin insert that gives some context for our principles as a community of faith, with a very brief summary of each of the principles.

**These principles are defined and affirmed by the highest authority of our denomination, the General Conference,** which is a gathering of laity and clergy from around the world once every four years. The General Conference is the body with the authority to set the doctrine (or truths) of our denomination, make decisions, set our laws and guidelines, and speak to the heart, mind and spirit of our faith. Our next General Conference is 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

**One important note: our Social Principles are not binding laws.** They’re not at the same level of importance as fundamental Christian truths, such as our belief in Jesus as our Savior, the Son of God. For example, if you don’t believe Jesus is Lord and Savior, you’re not a Christian, clear and simple. However, if you disagree with some of the economic or political positions of our Social Principles, for example, that doesn’t make you un-United Methodist or un-Christian. Our Social Principles are the guidelines our community lifts up as an example of how we interpret God’s love, take a stand and call others to respond, even in the areas that are complex or controversial.

**The Social Principles are statements of how God’s love for the world is active and engaged, seeking justice and peace with compassion.**

We believe we’re called to be more than casual observers. We’re called to care enough about God, other people and the world we live in to think and act on the basis of our faith. You can’t do that if you’re passive, if you isolate yourself from the world or if you see your faith as personal, separate from community. Being a disciple of Christ means walking the path Jesus showed us and being transformed by sanctifying grace. A big part of transformation is coming together and experiencing God’s love in community, learning from others and from creation as we serve.

Being a follower of Christ means we imitate Jesus, who lived and served in community on earth and is eternally in relationship with God Almighty and the Holy Spirit right now.

**Please join me now in reading our United Methodist Social Principles out loud.** I invite you to turn to the person seated next to you and briefly share one thing that speaks to you from this set of statements about our shared social responsibility. Is there something in what you read that resonates with your heart, mind and spirit? What attracts you? Take a few minutes to share with one another. Thank you for sharing. I invite you to continue talking to one another about the nature of social responsibility this week. I invite you to talk about our social beliefs with your family and friends.

**When we share the different ways we experience God’s love with each other, we’re all inspired, refreshed and built up.** We all come from different families, heritages and families. We read the Bible and our Social Principles with different eyes and we hear the words with different ears. When we’re able to be open about what we see and hear, about the ways God’s Word calls us to action, we all grow through the deep, rich tapestry that our lives make when we come together. We truly become the body of Christ when we’re unified by our love of God and our neighbors, while celebrating the diversity of our personal lives.

**Our Social Principles are focused on the natural world and five different aspects of the community we live in.** The first principle speaks to our responsibility to be good stewards of God’s creation, this wonderful world God made for us to live in. God has abundantly blessed all people, particularly those of us in southern California, with richness. Where else can you go to the beach in the morning, the mountains in the afternoon and the city in the evening? Yet we pollute and abuse God’s creation in so many ways it makes God’s heart sad.

**The next five principles reflect different aspects of what it means to live in community together.** The first two principles focus on what it means to care for each other in community, helping every person to reach their fullest potential. As a nurturing community, our stance is to lean forward. By that, I mean we’re actively involved in creative new ways to help others gather and grow together. We support new ideas and new groups that build us up and inspire people to be better. We do so in an open, inclusive way. We seek to move beyond the challenges of bias, which we all have, and overcome the bondage of discrimination.

We seek to lift people up, not oppress them, and affirm the rights and equality of all people everywhere. We have much to do.

**The principles next focus on the economic and political aspects of community.** This is where United Methodists differ from other faith groups. There are denominations, groups and believers who don't believe in engaging with the political and economic forces of culture. Fifty years ago, Richard Niebuhr wrote a famous book titled *Christ and Culture*, where he gave five different views of how we see the relationship between Christ and humanity.

I believe in the view that Christ transforms culture, meaning we're less focused on what God did before or what God will do later. We're focused on the presence of God in the world today and the divine way renewal and revival happens. That's consistent with our United Methodist mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”<sup>3</sup> It means we're called to engage in discussion and debate with others as advocates for a worldview based on God's love and the life it gives, rather than the coldness of a profit and loss statement, political statement or desire for celebrity and attention.

Regardless of your social, political or economic beliefs, we're called to come together in unity, recognizing God's authority over all systems. We aren't called to a book, a building or committee meetings. We're called to follow Jesus. We're the voice of Christ in the world when it comes to people's basic rights and freedoms. That voice is not intended to dominate discussion, but neither should it be absent.

**The final principle shifts our perspective.** We're called to pledge ourselves to a global view of our faith and social responsibility. So much of our time and energy is focused on the western world, meaning the United States, North America and Europe. That's due to the incredible economic, political, cultural and media power of the west. But that's a picture that was never intended to be exclusive. In fact, it's a view that's changing. The body of Christ is most active and growing in the southern parts of the world – China, Africa and Asia.

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<sup>3</sup> 2012 Book of Discipline

Reports tell us there are 30,000 new Christians in China each week! We need to seek out these new brothers and sisters in Christ, walk on the path of faith with them, and invite them to the Lord’s table as full partners. We have much to learn from each other, for God is at work in marvelous ways. Let’s not let our fears divide us and threaten our relationship in Christ.

**Last week, I invited you to put the Social Creed someplace where you’d see it during the week.** Some of you may have put it on the refrigerator or the coffee table, perhaps your desk, someplace where you’d see it regularly. I invite you to put the Social Principles in that same place this week. When you see them, please reflect and meditate on our social responsibility as disciples of Jesus Christ. Let these principles shape what you believe and know deep in your heart. Think and pray about your faith, your Christian identity and how we are called to live our lives in a loving, meaningful and active way. If you do, then you are on the first steps of a journey that will lead to a life filled with wonderful experiences of God’s inspiring love. That’s a life worth living!

I pray God’s grace fills your heart, mind and spirit with love and gratitude this Sabbath and every day. May we be a blessing to the world in Jesus’ name. Amen

## **United Methodist Social Principles\***

### **Preface**

The Social Principles are a prayerful and thoughtful effort of the General Conference to speak to the issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation.

### **Preamble**

We affirm our unity in Jesus Christ while acknowledging differences in applying our faith in different cultural contexts as we live out the gospel.

### **Social Principles: The Natural World**

All creation is the Lord’s, and we are responsible for the ways in which we use and abuse it.

### **Social Principles: The Nurturing Community**

We believe we have a responsibility to innovate, sponsor, and evaluate new forms of community that will encourage development of the fullest potential in individuals.

### **Social Principles: The Social Community**

We affirm all persons as equally valuable in the sight of God's sight. We reject discrimination and assert the rights of minority groups to equal opportunities.

### **Social Principles: The Economic Community**

We claim all economic systems to be under the judgment of God no less than other facets of the created order.

### **Social Principles: The Political Community**

We hold governments responsible for the protection of people’s basic freedoms. We believe that neither church nor state should attempt to dominate the other.

### **Social Principles: The World Community**

God’s world is one world. We pledge ourselves to seek the meaning of the gospel in all issues that divide people and threaten the growth of world community.

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\* 2012 Book of Discipline

**Micah 6:1-8 (NRSV)**

Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.” “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

**Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSV)**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”