

“Our Social Principles”

Remarks to the California-Nevada Annual Conference

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Greetings in the Name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It's an honor to be with you this afternoon. I want to express my thanks and appreciation to Bishop Shamana for her leadership of the General Board of Church & Society. Some say it's not easy being president of the board, but she and I know GBCS is the most popular and beloved of all our general agencies!

The central theme of our life as United Methodists is grace. Grace is the Holy Spirit at work in our life, initiating and sustaining us, assuring us of God's forgiveness and giving us a spirit of obedience and faithful response.

Prevenient grace, the grace of God that goes before, that precedes us, is at the center of our theology. As the statement on “Our Doctrinal Heritage” puts it in the *Book of Discipline*, “This grace prompts our first wish to please God and our first glimmer of understanding concerning God's will.” And that means that the people called Methodist are called, in Mr. Wesley's admonition, “to reform the nation, particularly the church, and to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.” As I understand that task, and as I think United Methodists have traditionally understood it, the three emphases are equal in importance: to reform the nation, to reform the church and to spread scriptural holiness.

Now, we United Methodists have over time developed what we call Social Principles. I believe one reason we as a church have done so is because we know we are constantly in danger of becoming captive to the predominant values and popular opinion of our culture and adopting Social Principles is one way we declare our hopes for it to be on earth as it is in heaven.

It is said one of the gifts John Wesley gave to the people of England was that of teaching them how to live in a rapidly changing industrial society. Through our Social Principles we encourage people not to drink, smoke or gamble not so as to deny them pleasure but because we believe it is unhealthy and denies God's will for us. Beyond the personal temptations and dangers booze, tobacco, and gambling represent we recognize that entire industries based on death and addiction can and have taken root in order to destroy the ethic of a good life.

We urge people to avoid falling prey to consumerism and materialism not in order to deny people an abundant life with adequate shelter, food and clothing but because we understand that for a new creation to be a reality through God's work in Jesus Christ, God's true people are those who obey God's will, not merely boast about themselves and their own goodness.

We oppose the death penalty not because we believe murderers should run free but because we believe in God's redemptive power and know that violence begets violence. We express concern about the need for higher fuel economy standards and oppose drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife refuge not because we

believe Sport Utility Vehicles are inherently sinful or because we support any political party but for the reason that we cannot focus solely on individual salvation when God's very creation is in peril.

We have periodically supported boycotts of corporations not out of a desire to destroy them or a particular economic system or theory but because we support migrant laborers, healthy working conditions, and freedom from tyranny.

We believe war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Jesus Christ and we oppose preemptive war not because we desire to see tyrants prevail but because we know peace is the way of Jesus Christ.

We witness to powers and principalities in state capitals, Washington, D.C., and at the United Nations not because we seek special favor or legislation for the UMC or believe that salvation is derived from lobbying but because our faith in the risen Christ compels us to call institutions to accountability on behalf of the children, the widows, the weak, and the impoverished.

Our advocacy in the halls of power is biblically based. Moses was the first social justice lobbyist of the church, called by God to demand freedom for the Israelites before Pharaoh, the leader of the government. Queen Esther, who hid her Jewish identity to marry King Xerxes, exposed the plot hatched by the Prime Minister, Haman, and saved her people.

When we cross the street to meet with Members of Congress in Washington, we do not offer campaign contributions, threaten to turn elected officials out of office if they do not vote in accordance with our principles, or pray for the death or illness of any Supreme Court justices. No, we offer a polite, firm, moral and ethical witness in the halls of power on behalf of the last, the least, and the lost in the Name of Jesus Christ.

I believe we United Methodists want to live holy lives. We don't want to buy clothes made in sweatshops that exploit their workers, or drink coffee grown on land that should feed its hungry people, or pump deadly toxins into our bodies and homes, but we do it every day. Our lives are intimately bound up in a moral-spiritual crisis of profound dimensions. We have the ability to feed, clothe, shelter, and educate every living person on God's earth. We can fight major diseases and clean up the environment. This is not a fantasy; it is a fact.

Where is our outrage at war and poverty? Can we not see the human face on the receiving end? Do we not know these people? Can we not imagine Christ's response? Do we not understand the implications of Christ's teachings?

Are we Christ's Church or does UMC really stand for Upper Middle Class? Faith without works is dead. As your own Garrison Keillor says, "You can become a Christian by going to church just about as easily as you can become an automobile by sleeping in a garage."

Can we imagine a new future? Ours is the first generation with the ability to feed all the world's people, provide housing and education and health care for everyone, combat disease, hunger, and poverty. The World Bank estimates it would cost \$15 billion to provide universal primary education for children in the poorest 88 developing countries. The World Health Organization says it would cost \$21 billion to provide

basic health care in these countries. Giving school children lunch in 44 poor nations would cost \$6 billion annually.

Why aren't we providing primary education and school lunches and basic health care? Why aren't we upset about it right here and now? St. Luke reminds us, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."

Our church has changed since I was a boy. Most of our people are no longer Methodist born and Methodist bred and when they die they're Methodist dead. Can I get an 'Amen'? People move across denominational boundaries much more freely than they used to. This means in the local church laity and clergy must be more intentional about explaining and teaching our theology, doctrine, history, polity, customs, traditions, and practices.

Many of our new members may not know much about the UMC, but by and large they feel comfortable in the broad Protestant middle. They like the fact we are a church concerned about the world in which we live. They know they are not in a Pentecostal or fundamentalist or Unitarian or Roman Catholic or Mormon church. We should never compromise our identity as United Methodists or water it down.

It goes without saying—still, it must be said again—we do not separate ourselves from the world. If we are faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we live in love with the world because the most famous passage of the New Testament declares that "God so loved the world that God sent God's only Son into the world."

Here's a statistic for you: \$40 billion a year—less than 4% of the combined wealth of the world's richest 225 people—would provide universal access to healthcare, food, clean water, and education.

"The money spent annually on pet food in North America and Europe would more than pay for basic education and installation of water and sanitation for all who now go without, worldwide. The amount spent annually on perfume by North Americans and Europeans would nearly cover basic healthcare and adequate nutrition for all who lack. Biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann writes, 'Consumerism is not simply a market strategy. It has become a demonic spiritual force among us.'" (*The Other Side* magazine, Nov.-Dec. 2002, p. 19) The resources are there. We must liberate them and put them to use for God's purpose.

We seek God's grace and human activity working together. God's grace calls us to good works. God's grace calls forth human response and obedience. Again from the *Discipline's* statement: "We assert that God's grace is manifest in all creation, even though suffering, violence, and evil are everywhere present... We insist that personal salvation always involves Christian mission and service to the world. By joining heart and hand, we assert that personal religion, evangelical witness, and Christian social action are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing."

When I became General Secretary of the General Board of Church & Society, I outlined three major goals I would adhere to. I'd like to share those with you:

1. To connect or re-connect GBCS with annual conferences and local churches.
2. To help our people join justice and mercy in their own lives, their congregations, and their communities.

3. To continue the board's mandated role to seek the implementation of the Social Principles and other policy statements on Christian social concerns adopted by the General Conference.

More than 80 years ago, those who went before us raised the funds for a magnificent United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill. Then, in 1963, our church built the Church Center for the United Nations directly across the street from the UN headquarters. In a sense, the church said to the General Board, "Here are the Social Principles, go to work on Capitol Hill and at the United Nations to seek their implementation. We'll take care of the annual conferences and local churches." That agreement held for many years. Now however, the church is different. These days, boards and agencies have to work harder than ever to connect with local churches and annual conferences.

We must do a better job of telling the story of our church. It is a great story. I think we have lost some of our confidence as a denomination over the past several decades. Like many other churches, we have lost membership. We ask ourselves what we are doing wrong and who is to blame. We should examine our shortcomings. Too often, my experience in a church is that no one greets me, the worship service is deadly dull, and the sermon puts me to sleep. What visitor would return?! In many instances, membership loss is no mystery.

Let's not fall prey to panic and negativism as we address membership decline. I have two children, my brother has two children, and my sister has two children. My parents and grandparents came from larger families. The days when United Methodists had five, six, and seven children appear to be over. I'm not sure a church-wide program encouraging larger families would be very successful, but I say this point to some basic facts that confront us.

We need to focus our ministry. So, we are concentrating in the years ahead on starting new congregations and faith communities, being in ministry with the poor, developing new leaders, and undertaking a global health initiative.

We don't tell the story of the great things our church is doing particularly well. The church in Africa is growing by leaps and bounds. We have created an excellent university in Africa. We fight alcohol, tobacco, and gambling addictions. We generously provide assistance for natural disasters through UMCOR. We have many excellent colleges and universities and seminaries and health care institutions. Our connectional system enables us to mobilize resources and is the envy of many other denominations. United Methodists are joiners and activists. We are the denomination most involved in Habitat for Humanity, Bread for the World, and the Children's Defense Fund.

I wish every local church used a weekly bulletin insert that told the story of our denomination's ministry. Most local churches have newsletters that do a great job of providing information about the youth mission trip, the UMW bazaar, the menu for the Wednesday night dinner, but there isn't very often anything in there about what's going on in the district or the conference or the general church.

On another matter, we need to honor and insist upon the principle of a free pulpit for our clergy. The great El Salvadoran Archbishop, Oscar Romero, assassinated in 1980 for his courageous opposition to the military dictatorship in his country, once said, "A church that doesn't provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, what gospel is that? Very nice, pious considerations that don't bother anyone; that's the way too many would like preaching to be. Those

people who avoid every thorny matter so as not to be harassed, so as not to have conflicts and difficulties, do not light up the world they live in.” The Sunday sermon must be a place where our pastors give us both the pastoral and prophetic word. Many of our preachers are downright scared to preach the word because of the reaction they fear from angry laity who think they own God’s pulpit. We need to affirm the freedom for our pastors to share the Word of God with us.

We need to hold one another accountable for how we live our lives, how we make our living, how we spend our money. Too often, we put niceness above all else in the Church. You know, Jesus chose his disciples carefully. I don’t believe he chose the first 12 he came across. He chose committed people who suffered after Jesus’ death because they believed in what he stood for.

Wherever I go, I remind people that the process to reach decisions in our denomination is accountable and representative. Every local church is represented in the process. Our board is made up of bishops, clergy and laity, all elected to serve. The charge I sometimes hear is that we don’t represent majority opinion and that people are leaving for churches that do. I believe the Holy Spirit works even at General Conference because delegates seek ultimately to answer the question, “What should the Church of Jesus Christ say?” rather than, “What do I insist the church say?” There *are* churches focused more on pleasing shifting majority opinion than on the teachings of Christ. Thankfully, we have kept our eyes fixed on Jesus.

The world stands at a crossroads. And George W. Bush was right when he said we face an axis of evil but he was wrong when he said it is Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. The real axis of evil, Bill Coffin noted, is environmental degradation, pandemic poverty, and a world awash in weapons.

We need to change things. My father tells this story: “My Uncle John was a ‘shrewd saint.’ He owned the Gulf station one block south of the town square in DeWitt, Arkansas when I was growing up in the 30s and 40s. But Uncle John was too ambitious to stay in a small town and run a service station. He launched out into one entrepreneurial enterprise after another and moved all over the South. In his last year, Uncle John owned hundreds of gumball machines, the kind you see in service stations, grocery stores, small shops and drug stores. He would load up his truck with many, many boxes of gum balls, travel around, unload the nickels, pennies, dimes, quarters from his machines, massage the egos of those small-town shopkeepers, and reload the glass balls with gum. He said, ‘Gene, you would be surprised how little the IRS knows about the money that is spent in gum ball machines.’ Uncle John used to say, ‘There are three kinds of people in the world: those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who stand around and ask, ‘What happened?’ I intend to make things happen.’”

Well, we’ve already made a lot happen. We are the backbone of the great movements that have transformed this nation, indeed, the world, over the past half-century. The movements for civil rights and women’s rights, for the rights and dignity of all peoples, for economic and environmental justice, to end the nuclear arms race and the wars in Vietnam and Iraq are all moral and spiritual movements. Sometimes, the church has had to be dragged kicking and screaming to the table, but now we are one of the pillars of these social justice efforts.

Without the Church, where would the impulses have come from to dignify women, to liberate slaves, to conceive of a human community in which all persons, equal in sin and separation from God, are also equal in and through God’s redeeming grace?

Praise be to God. The central challenge facing us today is the same one that has faced Christians everywhere and always—how to make our faith real and thereby transform the world. If any one is in Christ, St. Paul says, they are a new Creation.

Substituting redemption for punishment, eliminating hunger as an inherent part of our economics systems, abolishing war as the supreme expression of hate, all of these and more are choices we must make. God has made it possible for us to do this. May the gifts of God shower and reign over the people of God. Let us dedicate ourselves to live boldly, with purpose, confidence, generous hearts, and passion. May we bear witness together to God's vision for unity and God's command that justice and mercy be known throughout all of creation. Amen.