

Message: Unity in Diversity**What’s a principle?**

I’m not talking about the leader of a school. That’s spelled differently. Dictionary.com defines a principle as “a guiding sense of the requirements and obligations of right conduct.”¹ 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.”² 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 we 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. Sometimes 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 or civil government. We follow the principle because we could be injured (or injure others) if we drive through red lights. And 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 United Methodists, 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. It’s the short-form of the

¹ www.dictionary.com

² *Ibid*

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 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 May 2016 in Portland, Oregon.

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 either un-Christian or un-United Methodist. The Social Principles are guidelines our community lifts up as an example of how we take risks interpreting God's love, taking a stand and calling 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. That's what discipleship is.

Please join me now in reading our United Methodist Social Principles out loud. [pause] 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? Have you had a recent experience of God’s love that relates to our social principles? Take a few minutes to share with one another. [pause] 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 what our social responsibility is 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 in this regard.

The second set of principles focuses 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 time or what God will do after time. Instead, we're focused on the presence of God in the world of our day and the divine possibility of renewal and revival. That's consistent with our United Methodist mission “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”³ That means engaging 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 or political capital. Regardless of your political or economic beliefs, we're called to come together in unity, recognizing God's authority over all economic and political systems. 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. Reports tell us that 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

³ 2012 Book of Discipline

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 locations included a mirror, a desk or the coffee table, someplace where you'll 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 them shape what you believe. Think and pray about your faith, your Christian identity and the ways our beliefs call us to live our lives in a loving, meaningful and active way. If you do that, 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.

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.

* 2012 Book of Discipline

Psalm 67 (NRSV)

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us. May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Matthew 25:37-40 (NRSV)

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’