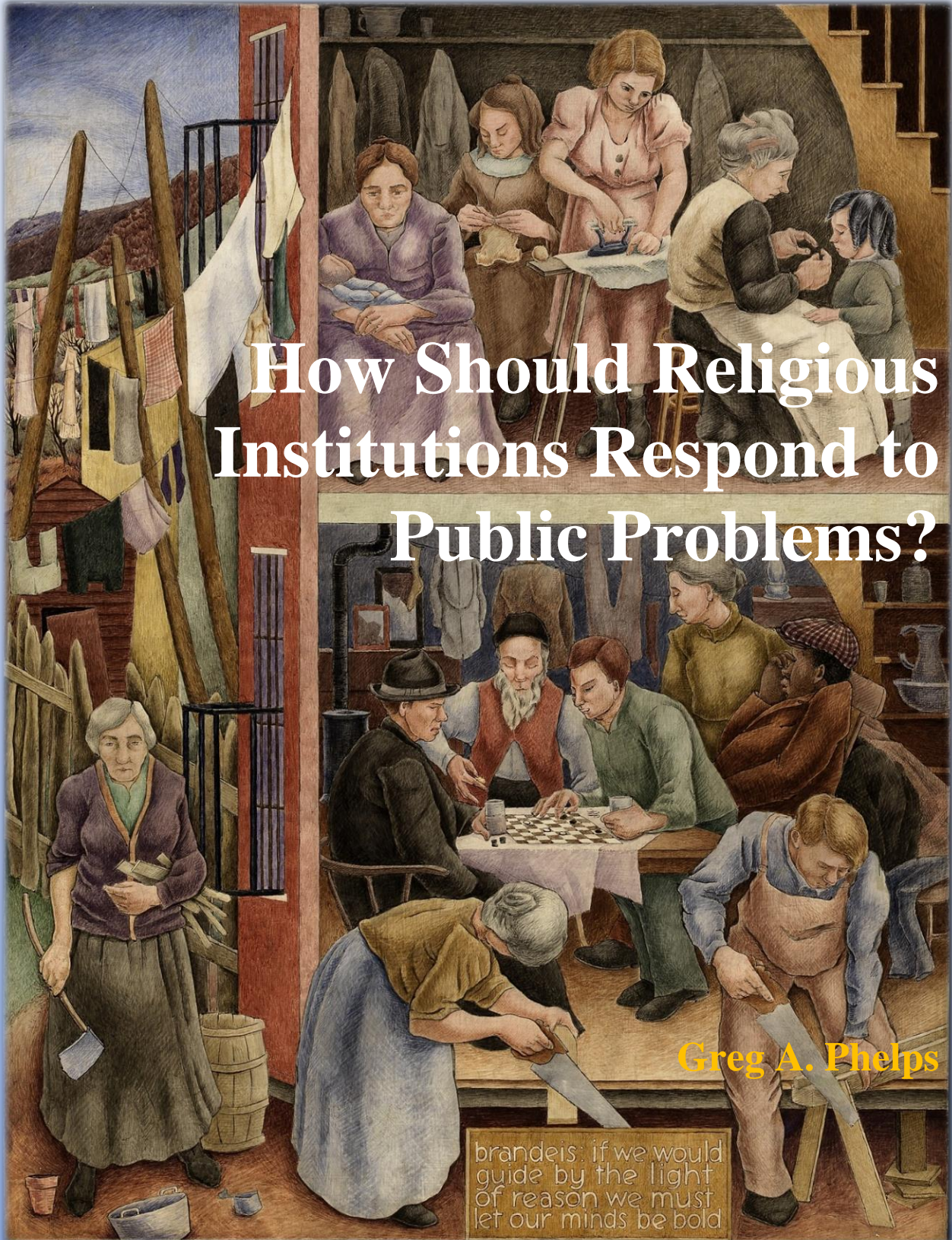


# A Social Creed



How Should Religious  
Institutions Respond to  
Public Problems?

Greg A. Phelps

brandeis: if we would  
guide by the light  
of reason we must  
let our minds be bold

# What Is Public Deliberation?

**T**his guide is about an event in the past that has contemporary relevance. It was developed by a team of educators and community members in collaboration with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation whose mission is to support the experimentation needed for the development of innovative ways to advance democracy. For more *Historic Decisions* guides please go to <https://www.kettering.org/library/publications/historic-decisions-guides>.

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If citizens are to make sound decisions, they must look at a range of options, not just one or two, and then weigh the likely consequences of those options against all that is valuable to them.

~ David Mathews ~

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Many resources are available for a deep study of public deliberation. Borrowing from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athenian statesman Pericles, Dr. David Mathews, the former CEO of the Kettering Foundation, provides a good starting point for defining what we are doing or, in any case, *should be doing* when we engage in public deliberation. He says that it is the talk in which people engage before they act to teach themselves how to act. Neither experience nor expertise is required to do this.

## How Is It Done?

**W**hat do we need to do to deliberate well with others? The answer to this question is to commit ourselves to faithfully observing some important ground rules of deliberation, such as:

- ✓ Listen generously.
- ✓ Encourage and solicit equitable levels of participation from all participants; don't allow one or two people to dominate the deliberation.
- ✓ Don't interrupt others when it's their turn to speak.
- ✓ Ask clarifying questions with a real desire to understand each other's perspectives.
- ✓ Respect, or even better, *embrace* differences of opinion as learning opportunities.
- ✓ Weigh all options, choosing from them (or possibly others that emerge) only after giving each of them thorough and thoughtful consideration.

This list is illustrative, not definitive. Your group can and should modify ground rules as appropriate for the specific context in which your deliberation occurs.

# *A SOCIAL CREED*

## **HOW SHOULD RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS RESPOND TO PUBLIC PROBLEMS?**

**T**his issue guide is focused on an event taking place in the spring of 1908. The General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church is convening its 25<sup>th</sup> session in Baltimore, Maryland on May 6. The General Conference is the denomination's highest-level legislative body. Modeled after the United States Congress, the Conference is responsible for ecclesiastical policymaking. Its decisions become part of the official church doctrines and discipline for the denomination's thousands of connected congregations.

This year, delegates to the Conference will be urged to act on a proposed "Social Creed" for the church, which, if adopted in its entirety, will declare that the Methodist Episcopal Church as a matter of Christian principle stands firmly for a group of social reforms—among them, abolition of child labor, and adoption of a six-day work week and a living wage for workers in all industries—which will greatly unburden the lives of this nation's working classes.

Hundreds of clerical and lay delegates have convened for this Conference. They represent ecclesiastical districts from every section of the United States. They include many representatives from foreign mission fields as well. Understandably, these delegates hold diverse opinions about the proper role of religion in the conduct of public affairs. From its inception as a reform movement within the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Church of England, Methodism has wrestled with actual or assumed tensions between the pursuit of personal piety, i.e., holiness or sanctification, and *social* holiness or involvement with social justice concerns, especially the Atlantic slave trade, which it helped end.

Our country has yet to recover from a financial crisis that began in October 1907. The economy is mired in a deep depression with no end in sight. The near-record number of business bankruptcies, curtailment of industrial production, and widespread unemployment have eroded public confidence in the ability and willingness of business and political leaders to solve the myriad problems of the moment, many of which are but the latest manifestations of chronic difficulties that have afflicted the nation throughout the post-Civil War era.

At the same time, paradoxically, it is an era in which the United States has emerged as a global economic power to be reckoned with. Industrialization and urbanization, fueled by soaring levels of immigration, and greatly improved means of transcontinental communication and transportation are contributing to the nation's rapid transformation from a mostly rural society of scattered, somewhat isolated agricultural communities to a more urban society increasingly dominated by burgeoning, bustling cities that have become the hubs of a nationalized economy controlled by corporate giants employing millions of workers in their vast enterprises.

Consider Baltimore, host city of the 1908 General Conference and birthplace of the Methodist denomination in America in 1784. In the first few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was the nation's second largest city and became only the second to reach a population of 100,000

*circa* 1840. Since 1870, the city's population has doubled to more than half a million people; and yet, despite continued robust growth, it is now the sixth largest city in the United States and is likely to fall even farther down the list when the upcoming 1910 census is taken, and it is surpassed by even faster growing cities. Like other U.S. cities, much of the city's growth is the result of a recent flood of immigrants.

Most immigrants will find work as laborers in mills and mines, if they can find any work

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The city is the nerve center of our civilization.  
It is also the storm center.

~ Josiah Strong ~

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at all in these tough times. Jobs are scarce and competition for them is fierce. Like their native-born counterparts in Baltimore and elsewhere, working class immigrants are exploited with alarming frequency by employers seeking to maximize profits by minimizing production costs. Newly arrived immigrant laborers often are the cheapest to employ and may displace native-born citizens. Consequently, working conditions for too many laborers tend to be inadequate at best and inhumane at worst. Laborers can expect little in return for long hours of grueling work in what have come to be described as sweatshops. Not only do they receive miserly wages, but they suffer from diseases, shortened lifespans and other insults to their well-being caused by deplorable working conditions. When their "long, long shifts" finally end, they must return to squalid living conditions in overcrowded, unsanitary urban tenement districts to rest for the next day's work.

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Master, I've done Thy bidding,  
and the light is low in the west,  
And the long, long shift is over...  
Master, I've earned it---Rest.

~ From "The Song of the Wage-Slave" ~  
Robert Service (1907)

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Child Labor (1908) Lewis W. Hine

# Our Options

**L**et us now deliberate on three options for how the Methodist Episcopal Church or indeed any religious institution should respond to these and other public problems arising from economic inequality and its consequent social injustices.

For present purposes, the diversity of opinion at the General Conference can be grouped into three distinct options, each of which reflects what is valuable to the delegates and their constituents. The actions associated with these options will require trade-offs that delegates must weigh thoughtfully in their deliberations and be willing to accept before reaching any decision about whether or how Methodists as a religious body should respond to public problems. Your deliberations may identify more options, but the three-option framework is a manageable starting point.

The actions proposed in this issue guide are based on ideas or proposals that either were or would have been considered in Protestant Christian circles in 1908, and in the General Conference. However, it should be noted that many of these same, or similar, issues continue to concern people of faith today who may be struggling with how to apply their religious ideals to the solution of societal problems. Deliberative forums using this issue

guide may be more effective if they include consideration of diverse perspectives, including ones that may not have been discussed in 1908.

## **Option One: Focus on Spiritual Concerns**

**S**imply put, the purpose of religion is to save sinners and to bring them into a right relationship with their God. To this end, religious institutions exist to create and sustain faith communities, to foster fellowship among believers, to facilitate corporate worship and religious instruction, to evangelize lost or wayward souls, and to aid otherwise in the acquisition and advancement of an individual's faith and morality. To the extent that religion carries out these essential spiritual tasks, it may also contribute to the material well-being of individuals, since the root cause of most so-called social injustice really is individual immorality or sinfulness that damages both self and others. As Russell Conwell says, "While we should sympathize with God's poor—that is, those who cannot help themselves—let us remember there is not a poor person in the United States who was not made poor by his own shortcomings, or by the shortcomings of someone else." If a person who struggles with intemperance repents of the sin of alcohol abuse, for example, that person will become a better employee, parent, and provider. But make no mistake, religion's fundamental role, its focus, is

personal regeneration and not social reform. The latter relates to the former only as a fortuitous byproduct. Did not Jesus Christ himself say in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:31, 33):

<sup>31</sup> Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

<sup>33</sup> But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

## **Option Two: Encourage Acts of Benevolence**

**I**ndividuals practice their faith not only through observances of personal piety but also through benevolence toward others. Religious institutions should encourage acts of benevolence because God commands us to be charitable toward the poor (Deuteronomy 15:11):

<sup>11</sup> For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.

Even as he admonished his followers to “seek first the kingdom of God,” Jesus also said (Luke 14:12):



<sup>12</sup> ...When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee.

The Old Testament prophets, too, condemned social injustices committed against the poor and the powerless and urged compassion for them.

In our own time, we have excellent examples of Christian charity in prominent businessmen such as Andrew Carnegie and Samuel “Golden Rule” Jones. In his book *The Gospel of Wealth*, Carnegie advises people who have accumulated great fortunes to use their financial resources and business acumen to administer public improvement projects such as public libraries. Jones, who earned his riches in the Ohio oilfields and served as mayor of Toledo until his death, in 1904, conducted his affairs according to the biblical *golden rule*: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12; also Luke 6:31). As Reverend Conwell has emphasized, “Money is power.... In the hands of good men and women it could accomplish, and it has accomplished, good,” adding that most wealthy people in the United States “are honest. That is why they are rich. That is why they are trusted with money.”

## Option Three: Commit to Social Reform

**T**he Old Testament prophets were strident critics of social injustices they witnessed in their various times and places. Especially Amos, who lamented the prevalence of those who “sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes” (Amos 2:6) and called for the people and their leaders to abundant justice, allowing judgment to “run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24). Here, the message appears to go beyond practicing benevolence toward the victims of social injustice, to advocating structural changes in the societal conditions that give rise to injustice.

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The prophets were the revolutionists of their age. They were dreamers of Utopias. They pictured an ideal state of society in which the poor should be judged with equity and the cry of the oppressed should no longer be heard[.]

~ Walter Rauschenbusch ~

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According to Reverend Walter Rauschenbusch, “Jesus was the successor of the Old Testament prophets.” The central theme and key to understanding his earthly ministry was his preaching about the kingdom of God, which he understood in prophetic terms as an imminent societal transformation, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15).

# Summary of Options

## How Should Religious Institutions Respond to Public Problems?

### Option 1

#### Focus on Spiritual Concerns.

Religious institutions should devote their energy to ministering to spiritual concerns. Entanglement in secular affairs will undermine this unique mission.

### Option 2

#### Encourage Acts of Benevolence.

Religious institutions should encourage acts of benevolence toward needy individuals as expressions of compassion and piety.

### Option 3

#### Commit to Social Reform.

Religious institutions should put beliefs into actions that will result in a more equitable and just society, by advocating public policies to redress systemic inequities and injustices.

**Possible Actions**

Bring individuals into a right relationship with God. This will reduce sinful behaviors that harm others.

Strengthen evangelization and outreach to nonbelievers. This will reduce greedy and sinful behaviors.

Teach congregations to live by sound biblical principles. This will result in prosperity for all.

**Possible Actions**

Provide financial support to benevolence ministries or faith-based charitable organizations.

Establish and support ministries in impoverished communities to better understand and relate to their needs.

Encourage the wealthy to follow the example of Andrew Carnegie and invest in community improvement projects such as public libraries.

**Possible Actions**

Advocate at every level of government for the implementation of progressive reforms to eliminate social injustices.

Set a good example by identifying and rooting out social injustices within ecclesiastical hierarchies.

Work with labor unions and other secular organizations to reduce inequalities and injustices.

**Possible Trade-Offs**

This may result in blaming individuals for their misfortunes.

Some resist evangelical efforts, which may lead to public criticism of religious institutions.

This will not address problems that are rooted in systemic flaws.

**Possible Trade-Offs**

These kinds of ministries and organizations address symptoms of social injustices without getting at underlying causes.

As these ministries become institutionalized, they will be less effective at eliminating conditions that provide the rationale for their existence.

Less affluent communities will be dependent on the generosity of the wealthy.

**Possible Trade-Offs**

Focusing on secular actions will take attention and resources away from the spiritual mission.

Setting good examples does not address the pressing needs of those who are suffering.

Ministerial advocacy and political activism will create rifts between clergy and congregations, and between congregational members who hold differing ideas about what should be done.

# Epilogue

**T**his conference is historically significant because here the Methodists became the first denomination to approve a Social Creed as an official statement of ethical principles on social justice issues. The proposed document calls for:

1. Equal rights and complete justice for all (people) in all stations of life.
2. The principle of conciliation and arbitration in industrial dissensions.
3. The protection of the worker from dangerous machinery, occupational diseases, injuries and mortality.
4. The abolition of child labor.
5. Such regulation of the conditions of labor for women as shall safeguard the physical and moral health of the community.
6. The suppression of the “sweating system” (*aka* sweatshops)
7. The gradual and reasonable reduction of hours of labor to the lowest practical point, with work for all; and for that degree of leisure for all which is the condition of the highest human life.
8. A release from employment one day in seven.
9. A living wage in every industry.
10. The highest wage that each industry can afford, and for the most equitable division of

the products of industry that can ultimately be devised.

11. The recognition of the Golden Rule and the mind of Christ as the supreme law of society and the sure remedy for all social ills.

These principles have now become part of church doctrine and discipline.

Later in the year, the newly formed Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, an ecumenical association of Protestant denominations (and predecessor of the National Council of Churches), adopted a slightly modified version of this same creed, joining the Methodists in making a public commitment to a stance consistent with what was more broadly known as The Social Gospel.

## Questions for Reflection

- ❖ The Social Creed was adopted “without dissent” on May 30, 1908. Assuming you lived then and perhaps may have been a delegate at the General Conference, how do you think you would have responded to the proposed Social Creed (or any of its 11 position statements)? As is said of today’s UMC Social Principles, “you may find yourself nodding in agreement, or you may vehemently disagree” (*Social Principles of the United Methodist Church 2017-2020*, p. 6)
- ❖ Would your responses be shared by other members of your community or congregation?



- ❖ Is the Social Creed, in whole or in part, still relevant in the twentieth-first century?
- ❖ The Social Principles, which originated with the 1908 Social Creed, are “an invitation for all members of the church and society to be formed anew by making consistent and deliberate decisions that will align their attitudes, habits, choices, and social structures with the mind of Christ and the will of God for the common good” (*Social Principles*, p. 12). Are you and other members of your faith community ready to accept this invitation? Remember that not everyone is obligated or even expected to agree with all the social principles, but “they are a solid starting point for further dialogue” (*Social Principles*, p. 12).
- ❖ When people deliberate together, they disagree, sometimes “vehemently.” David Mathews puts it this way: The purpose of public deliberation “is to promote shared and sound judgment. That requires dealing with morally grounded disagreements and facing up to difficult trade-offs. The careful weighing that is involved has been described as ‘choice work’ because it is just that, work, and hard work to boot” (*The Ecology of Democracy*, p. 78). Do you think that your faith community can work through the conflict that is an inevitable and vital component of deliberation?

# Timeline of Events Relating to the Social Creed

- 1784** The Methodist Episcopal Church is established at the 10 promote -day “Christmas Conference” that began on December 24 in Baltimore, Maryland. Although Methodism originated much earlier—in the 18<sup>th</sup> century—as a reform movement within the Church of England led by brothers Charles and John Wesley, the Christmas Conference is the church’s beginning as a distinct Protestant denomination. Like its English predecessor, Methodism in America has always emphasized both personal holiness and social justice.
- 1816** African American Methodist leaders meet to form a separate African Episcopal Church (AME), which becomes an important denomination within the Wesleyan tradition. Although Methodism everywhere except in the American South was staunchly opposed to slavery and helped to end the United Kingdom’s involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, it still practiced various forms of racial discrimination, leading to creation of the AME. The AME Church has a long-standing commitment to championing social

justice causes, particularly those that are rooted in racism.

- 1845** The Methodist Episcopal Church splits into separate northern and southern denominations because of unresolvable conflicts over the issue of slavery.
- 1874** The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union is organized. Most Methodists are fervent advocates of temperance throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Even before ratification of the 18<sup>th</sup> “prohibition” amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Methodists and others influenced many local and state governments to impose bans or other restrictions on the manufacture, sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages. Methodists and other evangelical Protestants often causally linked intemperance with public problems.
- 1907** The Macmillan Company publishes *Christianity and the Social Crisis* written by the Baptist minister and Social Gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch. The best-selling book was highly influential in the Social Gospel movement and advocated many of the same ethical principles and policies found in Methodism’s 1908 Social Creed.
- 1907** Social Gospel oriented Methodist clergymen form the Methodist Federation for Social

Service. One of their leaders, Harry F. Ward, drafts a social creed to propose to the Methodist Episcopal Church quadrennial General Conference in May 1908.

**1908** The General Conference adopts Ward’s social creed, which is published in Section 59 “The Church and Social Problems” of *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1908*. Other denominations will soon join the Methodists in adopting their own social creeds. In December, the ecumenical Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America (later the National Council of Churches) adopts Frank Mason North’s modified version of Ward’s social creed. Reverend North is one of the Methodist clergymen who created the Methodist Federation for Social Service. Within a decade, two other Methodist denominations, the Methodist Episcopal Church (South) and Methodist Protestant Church will adopt social creeds.

**1939** The Methodist Episcopal Church, Methodist Episcopal Church (South), and the Methodist Protestant Church reconcile and merge to become a unified Methodist Church.

**1968** The Methodist Church merges with the Evangelical United Brethren Church to form the United Methodist Church.

**1972** The United Methodist Church produces a new statement of social justice concerns, which it now calls Social Principles. These principles evolved from but greatly expanded the scope of the original Social Creed to address many social justice issues, while the parent creed focused narrowly on labor issues. The *Social Principles of the United Methodist Church*, which are non-binding and open to revision at every quadrennial General Conference, nevertheless “express The United Methodist Church’s official positions on societal issues, casting a vision for a just and equitable world” (*Social Principles of the United Methodist Church 2017-2020*, p. 5).

## **Additional Resources**

**Conwell, Russell H. *Acres of Diamonds*. New York: Jove Books, 1960.**

Russell H. Conwell (1843-1925) was an American Baptist minister and educator who founded and served four decades as the first president of Temple University. He delivered the influential speech “Acres of Diamonds” more than 6,000 times and printed versions of the speech have reached millions of readers. It is an encomium for the Protestant work ethic and Christian charity.

**Feldmeir, Mark. *A House Divided: Engaging the Issues through the Politics of Compassion.* Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2020.**

A guide for civil discussion of contemporary societal issues from a Christian perspective, written by a United Methodist Church minister.

**General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) of  
The United Methodist Church**  
<https://www.umcjustice.org>

The GBCS represents the United Methodist Church by advocating the denomination's positions on social justice issues in the public policy arena.

**General Commission on Archives and History**  
[www.gcah.org](http://www.gcah.org)

This commission serves the “ministry of memory” of the United Methodist Church, supporting and disseminating historical research, and maintaining archives pertaining to church history.

**Mathews, David. *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future.* Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2014.**

This book is an excellent resource for learning more about how to engage in effective public deliberation, but also why it is essential to do this work.

## **Methodist Federation for Social Action**

<https://www.mfsaweb.org>

This nonprofit social justice advocacy organization is the successor to the Methodist Federation for Social Service founded in 1907.

## ***Methodist History: 1908 Social Creed for Workers***

<https://youtu.be/2Yo6IsLRNMM>

Deliberations often begin with short “starter” videos to provide overviews of topics under consideration. This video (run time 3:44) produced by United Methodist Communications can be used for this purpose. Access it by following the YouTube link or going to the embedded video on the UMC website at <https://www.umc.org/en/content/methodist-history-1908-social-creed-for-workers>

## **Putnam, Robert D. (with Garrett, Shaylyn R.).**

***The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again.***

**New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020.**

A comparative, data-driven, historical analysis that finds significant similarities between current affairs in the United States and societal conditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## **Rauschenbusch, Walter. *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Classic that Woke Up the Church.***

**New York:**

**HarperOne, 2007.**

A seminal exposition of the Social Gospel. This edition is edited by Rauschenbusch's great-grandson Paul Raushenbush. Commentary, including criticism, by contemporary scholars and theologians follows each chapter, providing insightful perspectives on the original work and how it does (or does not) apply to twentieth-century issues relating to religious institutions' responsiveness to public problems.

***Social Principles 2020***

<https://www.umcjustice.org/who-we-are/the-revised-social-principles>



## Acknowledgements

Viewed superficially, writing appears to be a solitary task, but no author ever really works alone. Many people have contributed to the creation of this issue guide, some of them without awareness or appreciation of the inestimable value of their contributions. They include, but certainly are not limited to: Joni Doherty and colleagues at the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, who generously supported the work and patiently shepherded it to completion; Rev. Russ Breshears, UMC minister and director of the HSU/OBU Wesley Foundation college student and young adults ministry, who partnered with and inspired me throughout the project, providing helpful, always spot-on advice and criticism at critical points, and opening many channels within the United Methodist Church for possible future collaborations; and, the dozens of good souls across denominations who accepted our invitations to participate in concern-gathering sessions and test forums.

The cover art is a digitized image of one panel of a five-panel mural in the Robert F. Kennedy Department of Justice Building in Washington, D.C. The U.S. government commissioned the artist George Biddle (1885-1973) to create the “Society Freed Through Justice” mural in the mid-1930s when the building was constructed.

The photograph on p. 4 is a digitized image of work done by the photojournalist Lewis W. Hine (1874-1940) to educate the public and policymakers about atrocious working conditions in U.S. industries during the first decades of the twentieth century, especially as concerned children and women.

The digitized images were obtained from collections in the Library of Congress. To the best of the author's knowledge following careful research, both images are in the public domain.

### **Other Topics and Ordering Information**

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For more information about Historic Decisions, including additional copies of this guide or guides on other issues, please visit [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).