

Teaching the Social Principles

by Jim Winkler

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The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church is one of the best-kept secrets of our denomination. You are to be congratulated for taking the time to do an intentional study of this significant, Holy Spirit-inspired document.

The General Board of Church and Society, for whom I am their General Secretary, is charged to “seek the implementation of the Social Principles and other policy statements of the General Conference on Christian social concerns.” The resource you are reading is one way we seek to implement the Social Principles. Only by careful, prayerful study of this document can United Methodist Christians enter into a dialogue of faith and practice (see the Preface to the Social Principles).

Through trial and error, I have found a method of teaching the Social Principles that is easy, fun, and informative. I call it “Agree/Disagree.” I have used it for groups ranging in size from 10 to 75. The session lasts about 90 minutes (though it certainly can be less). Here’s how it works:

First, share copies of the Social Principles. Then give a brief description of how the Social Principles are determined. This involves providing participants with a short United Methodist polity (or ‘government’) course: each of the approximately 41,000 local churches in Africa, Europe, the Philippines, and the United States sends delegates to annual conference. Each of these 117 annual conferences elects delegates to the General Conference that meets every four years. All told, there are nearly 1000 delegates — half lay, half clergy. General Conference is the highest decision-making body of The United Methodist Church, and the only entity that can speak officially for the Church.

Any United Methodist — individual, local church, annual conference, agency, caucus, or group — may propose changes to the Social Principles to General Conference. Petitions are written and submitted well in advance of the General Conference itself. There, delegates vote on each petition, and if supported, it becomes part of the *Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*.

The Social Principles, though not church law, are part of the Book of Discipline. They are intended to be “instructive and persuasive in the best of the prophetic spirit,” according to the Preface of the Social Principles. “They are a prayerful and thoughtful effort on part of the General Conference to speak to the human issues in the contemporary world from a sound biblical and theological foundation.”

After doing this brief lesson on polity, ask participants to stand up (if they are able), and to clear the center of the room. Then explain that you are about to explore several

stances taken by the General Conference and recorded in the Social Principles, and you are also going to give the participants the opportunity to express their opinions.

When meeting with adults groups, I focus on three issues: capital punishment, abortion, and homosexuality. With youth groups I have chosen capital punishment, racial justice, and the rights of children and youth.

Explain to the group that you will read a brief statement from the Social Principles. Participants should move to one side of the room if they agree with the statement, to the other side if they disagree, and stay in the middle if they are uncertain (or don't wish to make their feelings known). Next, two or three people from the agree side are invited to explain why they agree with the particular passage from the Social Principles. Then, ask two or three people from the disagree side to state why they disagree. Finally, ask those in the middle, having now heard both sides, to comment. As participants listen to the discussion, they should feel free to move about the room if their opinion changes. Those who speak should be asked to give their name as they speak. Make sure to involve everyone, as there inevitably will be a handful of people who are not shy about monopolizing the discussion.

I prefer to begin with capital punishment. Rather than read the entire section, I read the passage that reads, "We (General Conference, and thus, The United Methodist Church) oppose capital punishment and urge its elimination from all criminal codes." During the discussion phase, the leader may wish to interject follow-up questions to individuals or to the entire group. I use questions such as: "Since polls show a majority of U.S. citizens and United Methodists support the death penalty, why do you think our denomination, as well as other faith groups, have chosen to oppose it?" "If you were a delegate to General Conference and were faced with making a decision on the church's stance on the death penalty, would you make your choice based on your personal opinion or on the basis of what the church of Jesus Christ should say?"

Secondly, I move to the topic of abortion. I read the passage from the Social Principles that says, "In continuity with past Christian teaching, we recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures."

Then I turn to the matter of homosexuality. Sometimes I read the whole sentence, "Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all." On other occasions, I read only the phrase, "...we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching...". Interestingly, when I read only that portion of the sentence, a significantly greater number of people oppose the General Conference stance on the grounds it is too condemnatory. When the entire sentence is read, it is not unusual for nearly every person present to support the statement.

Finally, time permitting, I add one additional statement. I ask the group if they agree with this Social Principles statement: "Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are

due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for homosexual persons. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims where they have shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships that involved shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection under the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against gays and lesbians. We also commit ourselves to social witness against the coercion and marginalization of former homosexuals.”

I have personally witnessed, on a number of occasions, a nearly unanimous number of participants supporting both the statement that does not condone the practice of homosexuality as well as supporting equal rights under the law from homosexual persons.

Needless to say, there are many additional Social Principles statements one might raise. For example, I have noticed a distinct difference on our opposition to gambling between those over the age of 40 — who generally support the church’s stance — and those under 40 who tend to see the matter as one of personal choice.

Stances on war and peace, affirmative action, environmental justice, divorce, racism, alcohol and tobacco, and the rights of women, just to name a few, provoke lively discussion. Generally, I have found that participants must be pushed to articulate a biblical and theological basis for their beliefs.

Frequently, the leader will face the question, “Why have I never heard of these before?” In today’s society, some blame their pastors for keeping the Social Principles a secret. Indeed, some do out of a sense of avoiding perceived conflict. However, an informed congregation is a strong congregation; dialogue and debate can be healthy for the spiritual life of a congregation, so long as an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect is upheld in the finest of Christian traditions. I encourage every local church to purchase enough copies of the Social Principles (available from the General Board of Church and Society at 202-488-5618).

The year 2008 will be the 100th anniversary of our Methodist Social Creed. I am hopeful the 2004 General Conference will dedicate the next quadrennium leading up to 2008 as a period in which The United Methodist Church celebrates the Social Principles and Social Creed and undertakes a period of study and action based on them.