

THE SOCIAL CREED AND METHODISM THROUGH EIGHTY YEARS

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In May 1988 the United Methodist Church celebrates the eightieth anniversary of the Social Creed. But most persons know little about the role and function of this distinctive document, or its varied forms. Nor do they appreciate the unique relationship of this literary genre to Methodism. My purpose here is to describe the origin and evolution of the Social Creed, with special attention to its ties to Methodism through eight decades.

American religious historians generally have accepted Harry F. Ward's evaluation that the adoption of the Social Creed in 1908 constituted "a significant fact in the history of religion" because it marked "the deliberate and conscious entrance of the Church upon the field of social action."¹ But few of them have bothered to explain the development of the social pronouncement beyond the acknowledgement that "it stands as one of the great symbols of the Social Gospel."²

Typically, the interpretation of most historians emphasizes four essential ingredients: the Social Creed first was adopted by the Methodist Episcopal Church in May 1908; then it was approved in modified form by the Federal Council of Churches in December 1908; four years later it was supplemented, revised, and reaffirmed by the Federal Council; and it remained unchanged for twenty years until the ecumenical organization again revised and enlarged it as the Social Ideals of the Churches in 1932. And then it virtually disappears from history. In most narratives the context of the Social Gospel and of ecumenical Protestantism is the primary emphasis. While its Methodist origin is sometimes noted, the cooperative response of Protestant churches to society's problems has been regarded as more important. Strangely, these interpretations account for less than half of the time the Social Creed has existed and the full story cannot be told without devoting major attention to the relation of Methodism to this social declaration.

In the account that follows I focus on the Social Creed as an official document. Several useful books interpret the Creed, but their primary purpose is to understand and explain the affirmations stated in it. In contrast,

¹Harry F. Ward, *The Social Creed of the Churches* (New York: Eaton & Mains; Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, 1912) 7.

²Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974) 354.

I view the Creed as a literary entity containing a number of ideas that was adopted as a unit, and I trace what happened to the total document, not to just one or more issues stated to it. Hence my emphasis is on the social statement as a unique and pliable type of literature.

Another distinct feature of this narrative is its primary orientation to institutions, since officially incorporated organizations authorized the pronouncements. In the account, interaction of three institutions becomes centrally important. The Social Creed was initially created by the efforts of the Methodist Federation for Social Service; it was first officially adopted by the Methodist Episcopal Church; and it was then endorsed by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. These three bodies existed throughout the eighty years of the Creed's development and they continue to exist, although the names of each have changed along the way. The interaction of these institutions ranges from times of remarkable cooperation to periods of obvious differences and even to stages of open alienation. These shifts in relationships among the organizations directly affected the Creed's development.

The importance of Methodism in this study is explained by the fact that this denomination has the only continuing relationship to the Social Creed throughout its eighty years' existence. Methodists were authors of its major recensions and were leaders who affected the origin and preservation of the document. Moreover, Methodism was the only tradition that consistently used the term Social Creed and that continues to authorize such pronouncements to the present time.

With these distinctive emphases in mind, we turn now to trace the Social Creed through six stages of development.

Origins of the Social Creed (1907-1912)

Although hindsight shows clearly that the origins of the Social Creed were multiple and derived from forces working inside and outside of the churches, in England and Europe as well as America, those who shaped the document believed they were responding to the immediate needs of their time in the United States.³

In an era of unscrupulous business leaders and unprotected laborers, of political corruption and insurance scandals exposed by muckracking journalists and progressive reformers,⁴ the Methodist Federation for Social Service was created at Washington, DC, on December 3-4, 1907. Through the leaders and strategy of this organization the Social Creed had its birth.

³Harry F. Ward, "Twenty years of the Social Creed," *Christian Century* (Chicago), 19 Apr. 1928, 502-3.

⁴Washington Gladden, "The Church and the Social Crisis," *Minutes of the National Council of the Congregational Churches of the United States*, 1907, 1-21.

From its inception the Methodist Federation for Social Service determined that it would "be kept wholly unofficial in its relation to the General Conference and . . . other official societies of Methodism" in order to maintain the freedom to speak prophetically. But that autonomy did not inhibit the organization from seeking to influence its parent church. By a strategy of publicity, planning, and perseverance its leaders worked to arouse the Methodist Episcopal General Conference in May, 1908, to take a stand on the economic problems that troubled the nation. A strategy of petitions that were assigned to a committee with sympathetic leaders enabled Herbert Welch and Harry F. Ward, two Federation officers who were not delegates, to collaborate with the sub-committee that prepared a report on "The Church and Social Problems." Through their informal unofficial participation the two quietly wrote most of the report that was approved by the conference on May 30, 1908. Later Welch acknowledged that Ward was the primary author of the report submitted.⁵

Within the three page report was a list of affirmations that comprised the original Social Creed, which stated:

The Methodist Episcopal Church stated:

For equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life.

For the principles of conciliation and arbitration in industrial dissensions.

For the protection of the worker from dangerous machinery, occupational diseases, injuries, and mortality.

For the abolition of child labor.

For such regulation of the conditions of labor for women as shall safeguard the physical and moral health of the community.

For the suppression of the 'sweating system.

For the gradual and reasonable reduction of the 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.

For a release for [from] employment one day in seven.

For a living wage in every industry.

For the highest wage that each industry can afford, and for the most equitable division of the products of industry that can ultimately be devised.

For 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.⁶

This list of affirmations was recognized immediately as "a Methodist platform on social problems" that enabled the denomination to move "to a front place on questions of labor and capital," but the statement was

⁵"Minutes of the Methodist Federation for Social Service, 1907-1930," (Unpublished manuscript, Rose Memorial Library, Drew University, Madison, NJ), 12-13, 21, 26; Herbert Welch, *As I Recall My Past Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 54-55. For more detailed information on this and succeeding events through 1912 see Donald K. Gorrell, "The Methodist Federation for Social Service and the Social Creed," *Methodist History* 13 (Jan. 1975), 3-32.

⁶*Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1908*, 547.

not originally called the Social Creed. At the time of the General Conference that title was not in use, but by the late summer of 1908, when the Methodist Federation reprinted the report, the section of eleven principles was titled the "Social Creed of Methodism."⁷

Adoption of the full report also recognized the greatness of Methodism's "opportunity in the present crisis and the consequent urgency of its duty." The report went on to summon the denomination "to continue and increase its works of social service" and assigned responsibilities to the Methodist Federation for Social Service during the next quadrennium, thereby granting that organization unofficial recognition.⁸

During the autumn of 1908 Frank Mason North, another of the Federation's leaders, created a second version of the Social Creed. An active ecumenist as well as social activist, North chaired a committee that prepared an eighteen page report on "The Church and Modern Industry" that was presented to the first meeting of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America in December. In that document he included most of the recently adopted Methodist Social Creed but added four additional affirmations that called for more rights for workers and the abatement of poverty. Based on a more elaborate theological rationale and the conviction that it would take the combined efforts of American Protestantism to deal with the social and industrial problems of the nation, North viewed the affirmations as an authoritative declaration by the combined denominations of the new Federal Council of Churches.⁹ Without any evident authorization, he shared the Methodist Social Creed with other denominations and transformed the pronouncement into the Social Creed of the Churches. That his goal was achieved was evident when Lyman Abbott's *The Outlook* declared that the "resolutions concerning the relation of the Church to modern industry, in fact, to the whole social order . . . may be said to constitute a charter, a bill of rights, which the Protestant Churches of America recognize on behalf not only those who toil but also of society."¹⁰

Probably due to the close proximity of these two versions of the Social Creed within a few months, there has been confusion among historians

⁷*Western Christian Advocate* (Cincinnati), 10 Jun. 1908, p. 6; *Central Christian Advocate* (Kansas City, MO), 10 Jun. 1908, p. 10; *The Church and Social Problems, Including the Statement of the General Conference of 1908 and the Social Problem in the Episcopal Address*, Federation Pamphlet No. 5 (N.p., n.d.), 8.

⁸*Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1908, 547-48; *Western Christian Advocate* (Cincinnati), 10 Jun. 1908, 6.

⁹*Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America: Report of the First Meeting of the Federal Council, Philadelphia, 1908*, ed. Elias B. Sanford (New York: The Revell Press, 1909), 226-43, with the revised Social Creed on 238-39; Gorrell, 16-20.

¹⁰*The Outlook* (New York), 19 Dec. 1908, 849-50.

concerning authorship. Harry F. Ward and Frank Mason North have each been designated as the original writer.¹¹ Both were among the five persons who called the meeting that established the Methodist Federation for Social Service, both worked diligently for the organization and social ministry generally, and both had a rightful claim to authorship. Nevertheless, it seems clear now that Ward composed the original Social Creed of Methodism while North authored the later ecumenical Social Creed of the Churches. But during their lifetimes North received the accolades because he authored a signed report and delivered it publicly while Ward's labors were unofficial and behind the scenes with a sub-committee. A touch of Ward's disappointment is evident in a letter to his wife but he never made the matter public in his books and articles concerning the Social Creed. North never claimed more than his Federal Council contribution and graciously accepted the praise.¹²

For the nascent Council of Churches the Social Creed served as a symbol of both the ecumenical and social commitment of member denominations. But the Council also facilitated social ministry in other ways. It created a Commission on the Church and Social Service, which North chaired, and it formed a Secretarial Council consisting of the executive secretaries for social service chosen by member churches. When Ward became executive secretary of the Methodist Federation for Social Service in 1912, he became a leading figure in the Secretarial Council, which served as a clearing house and coordinating office for social strategy and publication. The first common Council publishing subject was titled *The Social Creed of the Churches* and was edited by Ward.¹³

Upon the recommendation of the Secretarial Council a third revision and expansion of the Social Creed was endorsed by the Federal Council in 1912. As various denominations adopted the 1908 Creed they made additions or alterations and a common text of the statement was threatened. To regain uniformity the social service secretaries worked out "the best form of what has come to be called the Social Creed of the Churches"

¹¹In a four volume study of Methodism and Society one volume credits the authorship to Ward while another attributes it to North. Richard M. Cameron, *Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective* (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961), 323; Walter G. Muelder, *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961), 50.

¹²Harry F. Ward to Daisy, 17 Feb. 1909, Harry F. Ward Papers, Union Theological Seminary, New York, quoted in Eugene P. Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet: The Times and Life of Harry F. Ward* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 45-46; Creighton Lacy, *Frank Mason North: His Social and Ecumenical Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 129-45; Gorrell, 21-22.

¹³Charles S. Macfarland, "The Kingdoms of This World; The Kingdom of Our Lord," *Christian Unity at Work: The Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America in Quadrennial Session at Chicago, Illinois, 1912*, ed. Charles S. Macfarland (New York: Federal Council of Churches, 1913), 158-160, 165-67; Harry F. Ward, *A Year Book of the Church and Social Service in the United States* (New York: Flemin H. Revell, 1914), 24-28.

for the churches to adopt. Evidencing the growing interest in social problems, the delegates not only adopted the revised Creed but added two additional declarations from the floor. Although industrial problems still dominated, the list showed a broadening social perspective that now incorporated statements about the family, child development, health, liquor traffic, and property.¹⁴

During the four years from 1908 to 1912 the Social Creed emerged first from the efforts of the Methodist Federation for Social Service to be endorsed by one Methodist denomination, and then, second, had been translated to an ecumenical declaration by the vision of a single person, only to become in a third version the product of cooperative ecumenical thinking and planning. This was achieved by close interaction and oneness of purpose among the Methodist Federation, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Federal Council of Churches. By 1912 the Social Creed had become a stabilized feature of the institutional Protestantism whose social commitment it symbolized.

Elaborations of the Ideals (1912-1928)

The sixteen point Social Creed adopted in 1912 served as the basic pronouncement of the Federal Council for twenty years, but the social platform was not actually as stable as that fact implies. Although the text remained unaltered, changing attitudes and circumstances in churches and the nation affected the document.

While there was no modification of the sixteen affirmations approved in December 1912, it was clear that member churches of the Federal Council felt free to make additions to the main platform. In 1916 the Methodist Federation for Social Service recommended the addition of a series of paragraphs on five topics relating to community service and industrial conditions which the General Council approved and added to its Social Creed.¹⁵ Three years later, when the first World War ended, the Federal Council itself urged the addition of "four resolutions supplementary to the Social Creed of the Churches" that related to industrial problems and argued for "full political and economic equality with equal pay for equal work" for women.¹⁶

Despite this willingness to accept additional statements, four Presbyterian and Reformed denominations questioned the basic premises of social ministry between 1913 and 1915. In the largest of these bodies,

¹⁴Macfarland, "The Kingdoms of This World . . .," 174-177; Gorell, 24-28.

¹⁵*Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1916, 527-31; *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1916, 602.

¹⁶*The Churches Allied for Common Tasks: Report of the Third Quadrennium of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, 1916-1920*, ed. Samuel McCrea Cavert (New York: Federal Council of Churches, 1921), 113-14.

the northern Presbyterians, the attack led the secretary of the Bureau of Social Service to resign, compelled the Board of Home Missions to reorganize, and forced the Federal Council of Churches to curtail its social service program and more clearly define its principles for social ministry. Part of this assault condemned the Social Creed because the Federal Council had "no authority to draw up a common creed." Since Presbyterians believed that creeds referred to the earlier "ecumenical creeds of Christendom," they preferred the use of the term "social ideals."¹⁷ On this issue other denominations concurred, as evidenced by a pamphlet entitled "Social Service Ideals" issued by the Social Service Commission of the Northern Baptist Convention in 1915. In 1920 the term Social Creed still was used in the reports of the Federal Council but by 1928 the dominant term was Social Ideals.¹⁸ It was felt by then that the word "creed" in reference to social concerns suggested that a humanitarian platform was replacing religious convictions, while the word "ideals" conveyed the notion of goals yet to be achieved by institutions in which all members had not reached consensus.

As the trend toward ideals persisted in the twenties, so did the tendency to add large supplementary statements to the Social Creed. Most important of the denominational changes were the paragraphs added to the 1912 basic text by the National Council of the Congregational Churches in 1925. Convinced that new issues of national concern deserved a place in a social platform, Congregationalists adopted a series of statements that translated the Social Creed into five concrete areas: education, industry and economic relationships, agriculture, racial relations, and international relations.¹⁹ By 1928 these additions were also approved by two other denominations.

That one of these bodies was the Methodist Episcopal Church evidenced a change caused by the Methodist Federation for Social Service. Its views had become more radical since World War I but were muted for political reasons. However, Harry Ward refused to take the initiative to again change the Social Creed because he now desired action more than words. Thus delegates at the 1928 General Conference were told that the changed text that they endorsed "is largely taken from the action of the Congregational Council of North America."²⁰

¹⁷*Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, 1913, 56, 170-71, 186-89, 281, 448; 1914, 52-56, 133-37, 375.

¹⁸*The Churches Allied for Common Tasks*, p. 312; *Twenty Years of Church Federation: Report of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, 1924-1928*, ed. Samuel McCrea Cavert (New York: Federal Council of Churches, 1929), 230-31.

¹⁹*Minutes of the National Council of the Congregational Churches of the United States*, 1925, 156-58.

²⁰"Minutes of the Methodist Federation for Social Service," 22 Nov. 1920. 202-3; 11 Nov. 1927, 235; *Daily Christian Advocate*, 30 May 1928, 706; *Christian Advocate* (New York), 28 Jun. 1928, 815.

At its quadrennial meeting in December 1928 the Federal Council of Churches observed the twentieth anniversary of the Social Creed, which had become a charter for the churches that “served as a guide, as a basis for educational effort, and as an interpretation to society of the church’s point of view” even though it had not been fully attained. Nonetheless, it was recognized that new statements had to be added in light of new needs and the delegates authorized a total rewriting of the Social Creed by the Council’s next meeting in 1932.²¹ The practice of adding supplements to a basic platform was no longer workable. Unlike the Apostles’ or Nicene Creeds, whose strength lay in their unchanged wording, a Social Creed had to be changed periodically to keep it relevant to changing conditions. That recognition marked the close of the second stage of development.

Revision and Revolt (1928-1939)

When Francis J. McConnell, who was already a Methodist bishop and president of the Methodist Federation for Social Service, was elected as president of the Federal Council in 1928, he seemed to personally unify the long-time cooperation among these organizations. But events in the next eleven years shattered that institutional collaboration and marked these years as a third distinct period in the evolution of the Social Creed.

During his four-year leadership, the Council endured the social, economic and political ravages of the Depression but managed to produce a new Social Ideals declaration. The ten person revision committee included three Methodists: chairman Edward Devine, Frank Mason North, and Worth Tippy, who directed the Council’s Social Service Commission. All three were members of the Methodist Federation from its inception. Professor Devine was the primary author of the new document. The seventeen point platform looked much like its 1912 predecessor and incorporated much of it. But it contained striking innovations that fit the circumstances of the Depression Era. Its first two articles boldly confronted traditional laissez-faire economic theory by asserting the subordination of the profit motive to the cooperative spirit and advocated “social planning and control of the credit and monetary system . . . for the common good.” Other affirmations dealt with urgent problems in agriculture, race relations, international affairs, prison reform, and rights of free speech, assembly, and press. In the opinion of Methodist F. Ernest Johnson of the Federal Council staff in 1932 Social Ideals “showed a definite movement toward the ‘left’” when compared to the 1912 predecessor. But the justification for the declaration had cautious expectations: “This statement is not intended to provide a creed. It is rather intended as a contribution to the process of

²¹*Twenty Years of Church Federation*, pp. 62, 229-31.

meeting problems by creating programs.”²² Dr. North presented the report, as he had twenty years earlier, and the delegates sang his hymn “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life,” before approving it without dissent.²³

Despite the obvious leadership of Methodists in this revision, and contrary to the prevailing interpretation of Methodist historians, the Methodist Episcopal Church did not adopt the revised Federal Council Social Ideals or any other new Social Creed at its General Conference in 1932. Walter G. Muelder in *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century* has argued that the General Conference took action that had “historic character” and deserved special attention. But comparison of the Social Creed in the 1932 Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, on which he based his analysis, was identical in wording to that in the 1928 *Discipline*. As noted above that was borrowed from the amplified Social Creed adopted by the Congregational Church in 1925 rather than based on Methodist initiative or depression conditions. In fact, northern Methodism took no action concerning the Social Creed in 1932, and the 1932 revised Social Ideals became part of the denominational tradition through the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, which embraced it with minor changes in 1934.²⁴

One reason for that result in the Methodist Episcopal Church was Harry Ward’s refusal to work for changed words rather than actions. His growing radical convictions that had been suppressed in the twenties were freely expressed in the thirties. By 1931 he was convinced that the official social program of the churches depended on “the capacity of capitalistic industrialism to transform itself” by evolutionary development and he now doubted that necessary changes could be achieved without revolutionary methods. He agreed with the evaluation of the *Christian Century* that the 1932 Methodist General Conference had “flickered out in futility” and concluded that it was necessary for the Methodist Federation to become more revolutionary in order to remedy the situation. By November 1933 he urged his organization to work for the abolition of “a dying capitalism.”²⁵

²²Charles S. Macfarland, *Christian Unity in Practice and Prophecy* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1933), 298, 312-14; F. Ernest Johnson, *The Church and Society* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1935), pp. 62, 229-31.

²³*New York Times*, 8 Dec. 1932, 2; 9 Dec. 1932, 44; *Christian Advocate: Western Edition* (Cincinnati), 22 Dec. 1932, 29.

²⁴Muelder’s interpretation is found in “The Social Creed in the Great Depression” chapter of *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century*, 126-74, which is restated in A. Dudley Ward, *The Social Creed of the Methodist Church* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1961), 25 and Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 253-54, 391-94, 400, 401, 402, 419, 422. Cf. *Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1932, par. 561 to *ibid.*, 1928, par. 597, and cf. both to *Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 1934, par. 593.

²⁵Harry F. Ward, *Which Way Religion?* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1931), 6, 180-81; *Christian Century* (Chicago), 8 Jun. 1932, 726; *Social Service Bulletin* (New York), 15 Jun. 1932, Nov. 1933.

This steady movement to the left appealed to a few, but it alienated many other Methodists. By 1935 the revolt of the left produced a pendular revolt of the right. A conference of conservative Methodist laymen was organized in Chicago to prepare for the 1936 General Conference at Columbus, Ohio and similar groups were formed in Los Angeles and New Jersey. As their attacks increased, the Methodist Federation for Social Service held meetings across the country to strengthen their cause. By careful planning and maneuvering, denominational leaders guided the moderate majority and avoided an open floor confrontation by enabling the extremists of the contending groups to be heard at length in committee sessions. But in light of that freedom, the chairperson asked the General Conference delegates not to edit or amend their report, which was approved as submitted. Consequently, the anticipated "Battle of Columbus" resulted in the "Peace Pact of Methodism."²⁶

However, the peace was purchased at a price—the loss of the Social Creed in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Although there was no report of legislation disavowing Methodist endorsement of the Social Creed in the records of the 1936 General Conference, the *Discipline* that year no longer included that pronouncement. In the place formerly occupied by the Social Creed in the 1932 *Discipline* were statements on The Spiritual Life of the Church and on Social and Economic Questions in the 1936 *Discipline*. Evidently the divided condition of the denomination described in the latter document was intended to explain the absence of the social platform in the *Discipline* for the first time since 1908.²⁷ However it occurred, that result was an obvious victory for the laymen's groups, which had wanted the General Conference to disavow its earlier social statements. While the laity were unable to get Methodism to repudiate the Federation they succeeded in getting rid of the Social Creed. As a consequence, when the Methodist Episcopal Church entered into the Methodist Reunion of 1939 with the Methodist Episcopal Church, South and the Methodist Protestant Church it did not carry with it the Social Creed it had created and supported for twenty-eight years. Moreover, by 1939 the close institutional unity on the Social Creed previously enjoyed by the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Federation for Social Service, and the Federal Council of Churches was dissolving.

A New Methodist Social Creed (1939-1952)

As three branches of Methodism united at Kansas City in April 1939, the formation of the new institution known as The Methodist Church

²⁶*Christian Century* (Chicago), 1 Apr. 1936, 486-87; *Daily Christian Advocate*, 18 May 1936, 456-7.

²⁷Cf. General Conference Reports and Resolutions in *Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, 1932, 646-66, especially par. 561, with those in *ibid.*, 1936, 651-74, especially pars. 1462 and 1463.

stimulated a new sense of denominational pride. One product of that pride was a new Social Creed that was distinctly denominational in form and commitment, although it was rooted in earlier versions. Adoption of a new Methodist Social Creed identifies a fourth stage of development, which extended from 1939 to 1952.

While this history of the Social Creed has been traced primarily in the Federal Council of Churches and the Methodist Episcopal Church, which were instrumental in its creation, the other two Methodist bodies also had endorsed the platform to some degree. The Methodist Protestant Church adopted a Social Creed in 1916, although its version was the original Methodist Social Creed of May 1908, not the later Social Creed of the Churches. By the 1920's, however, the declaration no longer was included in its *Discipline*. Southern Methodism embraced the 1912 Federal Council version in 1914 and consistently printed it in its *Disciplines* until they endorsed a slightly modified recension of the Council's 1932 revised Social Creed.²⁸ Since the 1936 *Disciplines* of both northern Methodism and the Methodist Protestants did not include a Social Creed statement, the single thread of its continuity into the Methodist Church was provided by the 1938 *Discipline* of the southern branch.

Thus, it was not surprising that the initiative to adopt a Social Creed in the united church came from William P. King, editor of the *Christian Advocate* at Nashville, Tennessee. He called for a committee to harmonize the Social Creed statements in earlier *Disciplines* of each predecessor church since the plan of union failed to include such a platform. On May 9, 1939 that committee reported on "A Social Creed" that simply harmonized prior pronouncements by piecing them together into a single declaration. A 1932 provision advocating social planning and economic control was deleted by a close vote but every other alteration was delayed to future General Conferences. At the first General Conference in 1940 several changes of an editorial nature were approved but they only perfected the earlier hasty work. The basis for the harmonization was the 1912 Social Creed rather than the more recent 1932 revision.²⁹

The distinctive feature of the new Methodist social platform was its obvious denominational character. In 1940 it was titled "Our Social Creed" and four years later it was designated "The Methodist Social Creed," a title it carried until 1968. Its affirmations were rooted in the social concerns of John Wesley and expressed Methodism's sense of responsibility in the social order. And the document henceforth contained a provision

²⁸ *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church*, 1916, 138-39; *Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*, 1914, 373-74; 1934, par. 593.

²⁹ *Journal of the Uniting Conference of The Methodist Church*, 1939, 222, 278, 358-9, 535-8; *Daily Christian Advocate*, 2 May 1939, 113-14; 8 May 1939, 308-9; 11 May 1939, 430-33; *Discipline of The Methodist Church*, 1940, par. 1712.

that every *Discipline* hereafter should include the Social Creed as revised unless otherwise instructed by future General Conferences.³⁰ From 1940 to 1952 the Methodist Social Creed consistently contained twenty articles but the wording did not remain constant as every General Conference revised one or more articles. The principle that the Social Creed remained a regular part of the *Discipline* while its ingredient statements were subject to change became a fundamental policy of the Methodist Church.

In the mid-forties the relationship of the Methodist Federation to the denomination again became an issue. The retirement of Harry Ward and Bishop McConnell in 1944 triggered both internal dissension and external criticism for the Federation. New leader Jack McMichael, who was even more radical in ideas and methods than Ward, alienated many members and attracted critical attack. Requests that the Methodist Church create its own official social action agency and sever its relations with the organization increased as Federation leaders and programs became targets of the *Reader's Digest* and congressional investigations during the McCarthy era.³¹ Finally in 1952 the General Conference voted to break its ties to the Federation and to create a Board of Social and Economic Relations within the denomination. Among the official board's assigned functions was responsibility to revise and clarify the Social Creed and make it effective.³² When The Methodist Church authorized its own board for social action it entered a new stage and social responsibility with regard to the Social Creed.

As Methodist commitment to the Social Creed became stabilized, ecumenical Protestantism gradually abandoned use of that type of social platform. A thirtieth anniversary review of progress by the Federal Council in 1938 made no reference to the Social Creed or Social Ideals by name, in contrast to the acclaim they received in 1928. And there was no mention of them in its 1948 evaluation.³³ In an appraisal of the Social Ideals in 1942 F. Ernest Johnson compared them to a similar study in 1930 and saw much progress in implementation, but he concluded that it was due

³⁰*Journal of the General Conference of The Methodist Church*, 1940, 670-71, 675-76; *Daily Christian Advocate*, 2 May 1940, 257-58; 7 May 1940, 448-49.

³¹Muelder, *Methodism and Society in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 205-28; Ralph Lord Roy, *Apostles of Discord* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1949), 308-36; Stanley High, "Methodism's Pink Fringe," *Reader's Digest*, Feb. 1950, 134-38.

³²*Journal of the General Conference of The Methodist Church*, 1948, 407, 410, 747; 1952, 613-21, 685-90, 1415-21. The Federation continues to the present as the Methodist Federation for Social Action, led now by George McClain.

³³*Twenty Years of Church Federation*, pp. 188-89, 229-31; *Biennial Report of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America*, 1938, pp. 13-15; *Annual Report of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America*, 1948, 9-10.

to New Deal legislation rather than the churches.³⁴ He did not suggest that the Federal Council had lost its Christian concern for the social order, but rather had altered its methods in light of a major theological shift that had affected Protestantism. Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, published in 1932, was a sharp critique of Social Gospel optimism and methods and advocated social action based on realism and power. His book transformed social ministry by leading most denominations to abandon paper social pronouncements in favor of specific programs of action. When the Federal Council was absorbed into the larger National Council of Churches in 1950 the concerns once expressed in the Social Creed were cared for in four of the six departments of the new organization's Department of Christian Life and Work, and there was no provision for such a pronouncement.³⁵ The Social Creed was no longer a part of ecumenical Protestantism; henceforth it existed only in The Methodist Church.

Official Creed – Official Board (1952-1968)

Entrusting the Social Creed to a new Board of Social and Economic Relations ushered in a new stage of development for the document within The Methodist Church, a stage that lasted from 1952 to 1968. In 1953 A. Dudley Ward, who was no relation to Harry Ward, became the Executive Secretary of the new board. Previously he had served on the staff of the National Council of Church's Department of Church and Economic Life for three years and carried some of the theology and strategy of that agency with him. His vigorous leadership was devoted to implementing the responsibilities assigned by the General Conference, which by 1956 was evident in a new format for the Methodist Social Creed.

Since the Board of Social and Economic Relations was empowered "to implement and make effective the provisions of this Social Creed," it requested authority to rearrange the order of items more logically, to rewrite an out of date section, and to add new subjects. Rearranging the paragraphs involved the insertion of topical headings that became the organizing principle for listing affirmations. To do this smoothly required rewriting, which made possible the insertion and deletion of ideas. In addition, the board created four major sections in the Social Creed: I. Our Heritage; II. Our Theological Basis; III. Our Declaration of Social Concern (under which all the topical headings were listed); IV. Our Mandate —

³⁴ "Social Pronouncements By Religious Bodies," F. Ernest Johnson (ed.) *The Social Work of the Churches: A Handbook of Information* (New York: Dept. of Research and Education of the Federal Council of Churches, 1930), chap. 6; "After Thirty Years: A National Inventory in Terms of the Social Ideals of the Churches," *Information Service* (New York), 20 Jun. 1942, 1-12.

³⁵ *Christian Faith in Action: The Founding of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America* (New York: National Council of Churches, 1951), 210, 265-72.

Read, Study, Apply. Emphasizing the Wesleyan heritage and theological component strengthened the denominational basis of the Creed, the social declarations broadened its areas of concerns, and the mandate enhanced its usefulness at all levels of the church.³⁶

Four years later the Board of Social and Economic Relations was combined with the boards for Temperance and World Peace to form a new Board of Christian Social Concerns, in which each became a separate division. The unification created a strong official Board to implement the denomination's official Creed, reduced duplication of work, and provided a strategic and symbolic headquarters in Washington, DC, across from the Capitol.³⁷ Eventually Dudley Ward became Executive Secretary of the enlarged Board, which had responsibility for the Methodist Social Creed when The Methodist Church united with the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968.

Neither the United Brethren nor the Evangelicals had developed the commitment to social responsibility or the machinery to implement it that characterized the Methodist tradition. When the two merged in 1946 to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church their social pronouncements were more paper affirmations than actions because the denomination never had the social leadership of more than a part-time executive. Since Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren social platforms were not in conflict, it was agreed that in the first *Discipline* of the United Methodist Church the existing social declarations of both former bodies be printed as the new denomination's Social Principles.³⁸ Thus, church union provided an opportunity to rethink the Social Creed and another period of development opened up because the Social Principles Study Commission appointed by the 1968 General Conference took a totally new approach to the task.

A New Birth: Principles and Worship (1968-1988)

Guided by Bishop James S. Thomas, the Commission on Social Principles worked to restate the denomination's Social Creed in one of the most dynamic periods in the nation's history. The Uniting Conference of The United Methodist Church in April 1968 met only blocks from the site where President John F. Kennedy was fatally shot and just two weeks after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. There were also the violence of burning cities, hateful race relations, protests against the Vietnam War, and demands for social justice from countless groups during the four years the Commission met.

³⁶*Discipline of The Methodist Church*, 1956, par. 2020, 702-7; *Daily Christian Advocate*, 7 May 1956, 588-91.

³⁷*Discipline of The Methodist Church*, 1960, 429-38.

³⁸*Discipline of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, 1947, 395-402; *Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 1968, 52-66.

Amid such conditions it was determined that it would not be enough simply to select one of the existing statements or to merge the two, even if they were updated. Rather the Commission determined thoroughly to study the history, content, and implications of the existing platforms, and then in light of that and the social problems that were "literally exploding all around us" to develop the best current social principles to submit to the 1972 General Conference. Their priorities were formed on the basis of regional hearings, ideas solicited from individuals and congregations, and study papers by specialists. Moreover, they set out to prepare Social Principles that could be used in congregational worship as well as in planned social action. The Commission believed that "the General Conference expected us to begin a new era in the writing of Social Principles."³⁹

In form the resulting document differed from all previous Social Creeds. It had a new title: Social Principles of The United Methodist Church. It began with a theological preamble and ended with "Our Social Creed," which was a creedal affirmation more akin to the classical creeds of early Christianity and appropriate for congregational worship. Between these two components were the Social Principles themselves divided into six major sections: I. The Natural World, II. The Nurturing Community, III. The Social Community, IV. The Economic Community, V. The Political Community, and VI. The World Community. More inclusive and extensive than all previous pronouncements, the subjects were expressed as a series of principles that were not specific resolutions because the Commission was convinced "that social principles should be specific enough to be meaningful but general enough to allow for the framing of specific resolutions within their broad limits."⁴⁰

Despite these careful preparations the Commission's report was subjected to major revisions by a legislative committee of the 1972 General Conference. From beginning to end it was extensively altered in ideas as well as wording. When the revised form was presented to the assembled delegates for consideration numerous changes were proposed but only a dozen were enacted. The two that attracted the most attention concerned abortion and homosexuality. After this lengthy process, the Social Principles were adopted by the General Conference and Bishop Thomas led the delegates as they affirmed the new Social Creed for the first time.⁴¹ The Social Creed had attained the status of an authorized creed appropriate for use in public worship, which was several stages removed from the

³⁹*Daily Christian Advocate*, 22 Apr. 1970, 127-28; James S. Thomas, "The Process of Developing Social Principles," *engage* (Washington, D.C.), Mar. 1972, 9.

⁴⁰*engage*, Mar. 1972, 9-10, 14-32; *Daily Christian Advocate*, 19 Apr. 1972, 222-25.

⁴¹Cf. *engage*, Mar. 1972, 14-32 with Report 14 of Committee on Christian Social Concerns, *Daily Christian Advocate*, 25 Apr. 1972, 483-87. A summary of major changes was presented by the editor in *Daily Christian Advocate*, 27 Apr. 1972, 593-94. The final document is in *Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, 1972, 83-97.

original promulgation of a platform concerning only economic problems in 1908.

The significance of this worship dimension of the Social Creed must be read in proper perspective, for the document differs in content, tone, and intention from all previous versions. As an affirmation of integrated statements of theology and social, communal, economic, political and natural commitments it is a unique development. However, it must be recognized that the entire Social Principles pronouncement, not just the final portion designated Our Social Creed, is the legitimate successor to previous Social Creeds. The worship was added to the forms that had developed earlier; it did not supercede them.

Succeeding General Conferences of The United Methodist Church have modified the originally adopted statement every four years in order to implement growing concerns about gender, ethnicity, age groups, inclusive language, and other contemporary issues. But the basic design of the Social Principles as a modern expression of the Social Creed tradition has proved workable. Until the General Conference changes the format again, the Social Creed continues in its sixth stage of development.

In its present form in Methodism the Social Creed has resolved several issues that arose during its development. It is an official pronouncement that symbolizes the commitment of The United Methodist Church to a role of social responsibility in the world. While it states ideals and provides the basis for platforms it is a statement of principles grounded in Christian theology and political realism. At the same time it enables United Methodists not only to declare their position on issues but also to unite in a credal affirmation of its content in the context of public worship.

The document has ended where it began, in a denominational rather than an ecumenical heritage. Other churches embraced it but then concluded it was only an expression of words. But as the Methodist Church retained the declaration, severed its relationship to the Methodist Federation for Social Service, and formed its own official Board of Church and Social Service, the social platform came to have continuing support and influence in the denomination. Over the years, and through church mergers, the document has changed in basis, content, format, and purpose, but its essential functions of stating and symbolizing the church's concern for the social order have remained constant. As a unique literary genre it has been useful and pliable in its relationship to Methodism through eighty years.