

THE CERTIFIED ADVOCATE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM OUR WESLEYAN HERITAGE OF SOCIAL HOLINESS

Introduction

We are living in a moment that is both urgent and unsettled.

Across our communities and institutions, we see deep division, moral confusion, and growing inequality. The public square – once imagined as a place of shared deliberation – has become, for many, a space of contention, mistrust, and competing truths.

And in the midst of all this, the Church is faced with a question that is as old as it is immediate:

What does it mean to live out my faith in the public square?

For some, faith has been relegated to the private sphere – something personal, internal, and disconnected from civic life. But for those of us shaped by the Wesleyan tradition, that understanding is incomplete.

Our theological inheritance tells a different story.

It tells us that faith is not only personal – it's social.

Not only inward – but outward.

Not only about belief – but about transformation.

This is the heart of what John Wesley meant when he declared that “there is no holiness but social holiness.”

Today, I want to explore what that means for us now – particularly as United Methodists called to engage the public square. We will consider:

- The Wesleyan Foundation of Social Holiness,
- Faith-Based Advocacy as a Spiritual Practice,
- The Role of Prophetic Witness,
- The Responsibility of Embodying Our Social Principles; and
- The Necessity of Developing Literacy in Religious Language

Because the question before us is not whether faith belongs in public life. The question is whether we will show up – faithfully, thoughtfully, and courageously.

The Wesleyan Foundation: Social Holiness

To understand our call today, we must begin with our roots. When John Wesley spoke of “social holiness,” he was pushing against a form of Christianity that was overly individualistic – one that focused solely on personal salvation without regard for the condition of the world. For Wesley, holiness was never meant to be isolated. It was meant to be lived. It was lived in community. It was lived in service. It was lived in resistance to injustice.

Wesley organized societies not simply for prayer, but for accountability and action. He visited prisons, advocated for reforms, challenged economic exploitation, and spoke out against slavery. In other words, his faith had public consequences. Social holiness, then, is not an optional dimension of discipleship – it’s essential to it. It reminds us that:

1. Our spiritual lives are connected to the lives of others,
2. Our personal piety must be matched by public practice; and
3. Our love for God is inseparable from our love for neighbor.

And this love is not abstract. It demands something of us. It demands that we pay attention to the conditions in which people live. It demands that we confront systems that harm. It demands that we participate in the work of healing and justice. So, when we talk about faith-based advocacy in the public square, we are not talking about stepping outside our faith. We are talking about stepping more fully into it.

Faith-Based Advocacy as a Spiritual Practice

Advocacy is often misunderstood as political activity reserved for a select few. But in truth, it is a form of collective responsibility. To be civically engaged is to recognize that the structures and systems that shape our common life matter and that we have a role in shaping them. For United Methodists, this is deeply theological.

Our baptismal vows call us to “resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.” That is not a passive commitment. It is an active one. Advocacy can take many forms – advocating for policies that reflect justice and compassion, organizing within communities, serving in public roles, or speaking out on issues that affect the common good. But at its core, advocacy is about aligning our public actions with our spiritual convictions.

It is not about partisanship. It is about moral responsibility. This distinction matters because when the Church becomes overly aligned with partisan agendas, it risks losing its prophetic voice. But when the Church withdraws entirely, it abandons its responsibility to bear witness. The challenge, then, is to remain rooted in our theological commitments while engaging a diverse and pluralistic society. We are not called to dominate the public square. We are called to contribute to it.

To bring a moral vision shaped by the Gospel. To advocate for dignity, justice, and peace. To ensure that the most vulnerable are not forgotten. In this way, advocacy becomes an expression of love – not only for neighbor, but for the world God so loves.

Prophetic Witness in the Public Square

If advocacy is our participation, then prophetic witness is our voice. The prophetic tradition is central to our faith. The prophets of Scripture did not simply offer spiritual guidance – they confronted injustice, challenged power, and called communities back to righteousness. They spoke when silence would have been easier. They acted when inaction would have been safer. To be prophetic today is to carry that same spirit into our context. It is to name injustice clearly and truthfully, challenge systems that perpetuate harm, call leaders and institutions to accountability, and offer a vision of what justice and peace can look like. But prophetic witness is not only about critique. It is also about hope.

It is about proclaiming that another world is possible – because God is still at work. And yet, we must be honest: prophetic witness is not comfortable. It may lead to misunderstanding. It may provoke resistance. It may come at a cost. But the absence of prophetic witness comes at a greater cost. Because when the Church is silent in the face of injustice, it risks becoming irrelevant – or worse, complicit. The question, then, is not whether prophetic witness is risky. The question is whether faithfulness requires it.

And our tradition answers clearly: it does.

Interpreting and Translating the Social Principles

The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church are one of the ways we articulate our collective moral vision. They speak to issues such as economic justice, human rights, environmental stewardship, and the dignity of all people. But these principles are not self-executing. We must learn to embody them. And this work is both theological and practical. This looks like asking ourselves:

1. What do these principles mean in our current context?
2. How do we communicate these values in ways that resonate beyond the Church?

This is especially important in a pluralistic society, where not everyone shares the same theological framework. For example:

- The belief that all people are created in the image of God can be expressed as a commitment to human dignity and equality
- A call to stewardship can inform conversations about environmental responsibility and sustainability
- A commitment to justice can shape advocacy around economic and social policy

In this sense, translation does not mean abandoning our faith language. It means expanding our ability to communicate it. It means becoming bilingual – fluent in both theological and public discourse. Because if our values cannot be understood, they cannot be shared. And if they cannot be shared, they cannot shape the world around us.

Religious Language Literacy in the Public Square

This brings us to a critical challenge: language. Words carry weight. They can clarify or they can confuse. They can build bridges or reinforce divides. Religious language, in particular, can be powerful. But it can also be misunderstood or dismissed if it is not used thoughtfully.

Developing literacy in religious language means learning how to communicate in ways that are both faithful and effective. It involves:

- Understanding the meaning behind our theological terms
- Being attentive to how those terms are received by different audiences
- Choosing language that invites engagement rather than shuts it down

For example, phrases like “sin,” “salvation,” or “holiness” may not resonate in secular contexts – but the underlying concepts of brokenness, restoration, and wholeness are deeply human and widely understood. The task is not to dilute our message. It is to deepen our communication. To speak in ways that are rooted in our tradition, yet accessible to those beyond it. Because the goal of engaging the public square is not simply to be heard – it’s to be understood. And understanding is the foundation for meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and change.

Conclusion: A Faith That Engages the World

So where does this leave us?

It leaves us with a charge.

A charge to embrace the fullness of our Wesleyan heritage. A charge to practice social holiness in tangible ways. A charge to engage the public square with courage and clarity.

This is not easy work. It requires discernment. It requires humility. It requires persistence. But it is necessary work. Because the world we inhabit is shaped by the voices that speak and the actions that are taken. And if people of faith withdraw, something essential is lost. But if we show up – grounded in love, guided by justice, and committed to the common good, something transformative becomes possible. We can help shape a public square that is more just. More compassionate. More reflective of the kingdom of God. The Wesleyan tradition reminds us that faith is not meant to be hidden. It is meant to be lived. In our communities. In our institutions. In our public life.

So, the invitation before us is clear: To engage. To witness. To speak. And to do so not out of obligation, but out of conviction that the God we serve is not only present in our sanctuaries, but active in the world.