

# McGovern was Methodist advocate of Social Gospel

by [John Dart](#) in the [November 14, 2012](#) issue

To most American voters in 1972, Democratic presidential nominee Sen. George McGovern of South Dakota was way too liberal on many issues—and he was beaten badly by incumbent Richard Nixon. But to many fellow Methodists he was also a churchgoing humanitarian who in the 1960s directed the new Food for Peace Program and a forward-looking politician informed by the Social Gospel.

McGovern, 90, died October 21 at a hospice in Sioux Falls. McGovern's death was "a sad moment for our nation," said John McCullough, executive director of Church World Service, citing the senator's years of public service to healing and reconciliation.

"He was a pioneering force behind the school lunch program here in the United States," McCullough wrote in a tribute for Religion News Service. When he spoke to Church World Service officials in 2002, "McGovern said that a proposed \$48 billion increase in military spending was a mistake . . . that 'security' was bound up in how we feed and clothe the poor and hungry, not merely how well we were armed militarily."

The son of a Wesleyan Methodist minister, the future legislator studied at Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell, South Dakota, until World War II interrupted his studies. McGovern earned the Distinguished Flying Cross after piloting 35 combat missions on a B-24 bomber in Europe. He got his undergraduate degree from Dakota Wesleyan in 1946 and attended seminary briefly before earning a master's degree and doctorate in American history and government at Northwestern University.

McGovern was elected to Congress in 1956 but lost his race for the U.S. Senate in 1960. However, John F. Kennedy tapped McGovern as special assistant to the president and as the first director of the Food for Peace Program.

McGovern, recalling his role in addressing poverty and hunger issues at the White House, told United Methodist Communications that he persuaded President Kennedy to start the program with a \$100 million fund in which funds and commodities would come not only from the U.S. but from other countries, too. “And that was the beginning of the UN World Food Program,” McGovern said. “It’s the biggest humanitarian agency in the world and indeed the biggest in world history.”

Elected to the Senate in 1962, McGovern was reelected in 1968, and South Dakotans sent him back to Washington for a third term in 1974—despite his loss two years earlier in the presidential race.

McGovern’s strong criticism in 1972 of the war in Southeast Asia resonated with young people and antiestablishment trends at that time. But the Democrats’ campaign started to unravel when McGovern’s vice presidential running mate, Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, was reported as having a history of depression. McGovern was criticized by some for dropping Eagleton so quickly.

Although some of the “dirty tricks” of the Republican leaders, including the growing Watergate revelations, would eventually force Nixon to resign, the tide of public dissatisfaction with Vietnam and Washington politics was too slow to help McGovern as presidential aspirant.

In retrospect, McGovern’s campaign proposals planted some seeds of change, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. For example, McGovern had said that women should be considered as appointees to the Supreme Court and as nominees for the vice presidency.

McGovern in later years said his biggest regret over the 1972 campaign was that “the American people never really understood what I was attempting to do, what my views were based on.” Instead, he told fellow Methodists, his opponents painted him “as kind of an unstable, radical person.”

According to a longtime friend, Donald Messer, executive director of the Center for the Church and Global AIDS, McGovern emulated John Wesley, founder of Methodism.

For McGovern, “the Social Gospel was not just a theory, but the core of his faith in seeking to make the world a better place,” said Messer, a United Methodist minister.

“Practically every speech and certainly every book he wrote cited biblical references that were at the core of his personal and political philosophy,” Messer said.

Former United Methodist bishop James Armstrong, who served along with McGovern as a delegate to the World Council of Churches gathering in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1968, said McGovern’s faith was influenced by earlier experiences. “War gave him a sense of futility, and it motivated him to action. His faith was applied Christianity.”