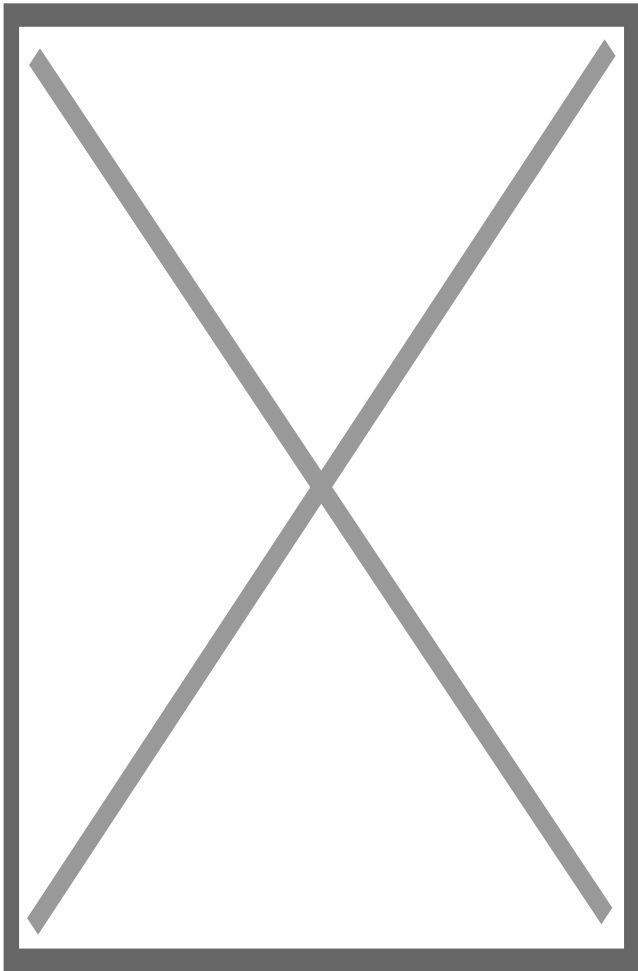


The social gospel of the streets

Sean Dempsey traces the moral imagination that guided faith-based activists in Los Angeles through five decades of justice work.

by [Heath W. Carter](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue
Published on December 2, 2025

In Review



City of Dignity

Christianity, Liberalism, and the Making of Global Los Angeles

By Sean T. Dempsey
University of Chicago Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

These days it would be easy to suppose that the story of Christianity in the United States is Christian nationalism all the way down. The religious right is reveling in its ascendance to the mountaintop, and historians have spent much of the last two decades—at least since the reelection of George W. Bush—trying to understand how it managed to amass so much political and cultural power. Their efforts, only redoubled since the 2016 presidential election, have yielded a wide and deep vein of literature tracing the roots of our contemporary plight back into the distant past. The books that have found a popular audience have most often been the ones promising to explain how Christianity became so entwined with toxic masculinity, White supremacy, and runaway greed. Who could be blamed for wondering if it has always been this way—and, by implication, always will be?

Progressive Christians who find themselves caught in a powerful tractor beam of despair would do well to pick up a copy of *City of Dignity*. Sean Dempsey tells the story of liberal Christians—Protestant and Catholic, Black and White and Latino—who fought for justice in late 20th-century Los Angeles. They did not win every battle, but their moral and theological witness often broke through, capturing the attention and arousing the conscience of people all over the country and world.

Dempsey's narrative extends from the end of the Second World War to the mid-1990s. Along the way he introduces a variety of characters who are not household names but who, in their day, did the small faithful thing right in front of them, often to great effect. The Jesuit priest and academic George Dunne is one case in point. He came to Los Angeles from Saint Louis, Missouri, where he had gotten into hot water with the president of Saint Louis University for his outspoken opposition to Catholic segregationism. It would have been easy for Dunne to shrink from controversy upon assuming a new post at Loyola University, but instead, in 1945, he published an article in *Commonweal* entitled "The Sin of Segregation." At a moment when countless White Catholics were intent on maintaining the racial homogeneity of their neighborhoods, Dunne became the first Catholic clergyman to denounce segregation as a sin against charity.

Dunne's courage was remarkable but hardly unique. Dempsey goes on to recover the stories of the interracial, ecumenical coalition of believers who, in the wake of the Watts riots, formed the Greater University Parish near the University of Southern California in order to advocate for more just housing and development initiatives; of the activists and allies who animated movements for Black Power, Latino liberation, and LGBTQ rights; of the diverse Christians who powered the sanctuary movement in the 1980s amid a refugee crisis stemming from political turmoil in Central America; of the even more recent witness of clergy such as Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries and leading figure in the world of Christian social entrepreneurship and community development; and of so many more.

Dempsey gathers these stories under the larger umbrella of social Christianity, thereby throwing his interpretive weight behind a larger and much-needed push to revise the old story of the American social gospel. For a long time historians equated social Christianity with the ideas of elite White Protestant liberals like Walter Rauschenbusch. According to this now-tired yarn, their optimistic early 20th-century visions of the coming kingdom of God ran smack dab into the devastation of the First World War. By the 1930s, sensible neoorthodox theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr had restored ancient Christian teaching about original sin to its pride of place and relegated social gospel theology to the dustbin of history.

In reality, as Dempsey's narrative suggests, the beating heart of social Christianity has never been located first and foremost in elite seminaries but rather at the grassroots and in the streets, where clergy and laypeople alike have made intuitive connections between their faith and ongoing struggles for justice. The social gospel tradition long outlasted the First World War—in fact, it lives on today. Social gospels have evolved over time in dynamic relationship to material realities and theological innovations, which have often sprung up, as Dempsey underscores, "from below."

Yet one can also discern lines of continuity across time via the life of church and ecumenical institutions, via unfolding traditions of social teaching, and via relationships of influence between historical actors. Dempsey does not offer a precise definition of what exactly does and does not count as social Christianity, but he leaves no doubt that this progressive tradition, broadly construed, has mattered much more in the last two generations than most historians and contemporary Christians alike have given it credit for.

In so doing, Dempsey also challenges prevailing characterizations of Southern California, which show up most often in American religious history as a formidable redoubt of conservative evangelicalism. There was always much more going on in this region, and not just in its urban core. “The presence of many suburban liberals in this book points to the possibility that assumptions about suburban whites and their contentious relationship to liberal clergy might be overstated,” Dempsey writes. At the same time, he is careful to attend to the limits of the traditions at the heart of his story. In his treatment of Boyle and more recent Christian social entrepreneurs, for example, Dempsey is quick to point out that their reliance on market-based solutions—a far cry from the Christian socialism of old—seems unlikely to address some of the most glaring deficiencies of neoliberal society.

Dempsey’s book does not offer readers a road map for how to navigate this present wilderness. But it does provide a vivid reminder that today’s progressive Christians are inheritors of a venerable tradition of social witness that has changed lives and communities for the better and done so even in times that seemed bleak.

Catholic activist Dorothy Day did not live in Los Angeles, but she was a contemporary and fellow traveler of some of the folks that Dempsey discusses and was certainly familiar with the worry that their collective resistance to injustice was futile. In the September 1957 issue of *The Catholic Worker*, Day offered this reflection:

One of the greatest evils of the day is the sense of futility. What good does it do? What is the sense of this small effort? We can only lay one brick at a time, one foot of pipeline; we can be responsible for only the one action of the present moment. But we can beg for an increase of love in our hearts that will vitalize and transform these actions, and know that God will take them and multiply them, as Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes.

Dempsey’s book shows forth the sense of their small efforts in an earlier day. With any luck it will inspire more of the same in our own.