

BISHOP HERBERT WELCH



Photo: General Commission on Archives and History

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Bishop Welch takes photos in Korea, 1919, one of the countries he served as a missionary bishop.

Mission Bishop and Founder of Relief Agency

Herbert Welch (1862–1969), the longest serving of all Methodist bishops, played multiple roles of significance in the church’s missional and social history. He originated, and led from 1940 to 1948, led what is today the United Methodist Committee on Relief. He was a founder of the Methodist Federation for Social Service (1907) and author of the first Methodist Social Creed. As a mission bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Japan and Korea (1916–1928), he helped to shape the affirmation of faith known as “The Korean Creed.”

Welch built into UMCOR the philosophy that Christians respond to need in the name of Christ “without distinction for race, creed, or color.” He proposed the “Methodist Committee on Overseas Relief” to the 1940 General Conference out of experience with Asian refugees multiplied by Japanese expansionism. Initial work was among World War II refugees, but as early as 1942 MCOR directors recognized that relief must be more than providing necessities to displaced populations.

The agency also embraced reconstruction, rehabilitation, repatriation of refugees and prisoners of war, restoration of churches and civil operations, and reconciliation.

Born in New York City, educated at Wesleyan University, Drew Theological Seminary and Oxford University, Welch was ordained elder by the New York Annual Conference in 1894. He and his wife, Adelaide Frances McGee, would have two daughters. After pastoral service in his conference, Welch was elected president of Ohio Wesleyan University in 1905. It was while at the school that he helped to launch what is today the United Methodist Federation for Social Action, initially in part to oppose child labor.

Welch served the Pittsburgh Episcopal Area from 1928 to 1932, when he was reassigned to the Shanghai Area in China. He retired in 1936 but was recalled in 1938 to preside over the Boston Episcopal Area. He died at the age of 106.