Promoting and Protecting Human Rights

We promote the protection of human rights in business operations through robust corporate engagement efforts and investment policies. Our actions are intended to reflect The United Methodist Church’s call for “the recognition, protection and implementation of the principles of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights so that communities and individuals may claim and enjoy their universal, indivisible, and inalienable rights.” (The Book of Discipline, The Social Principles, ¶162) Our initiatives include the following:

Worker Safety—Bangladesh Factories
In April 2013, more than 1,000 garment workers in Bangladesh lost their lives when the Rana Plaza factory building in which they were working collapsed.

Many apparel companies and retailers outsource to low-cost manufacturing facilities, many of which are overcrowded and unsafe, in Bangladesh and other developing countries. In 2013, Wespath co-signed a letter encouraging 27 companies to participate in the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, which details how contractors can make industrial buildings safer. Signatories to the Accord commit to independent facility inspections and fire safety training.

Wespath led engagements with European retailers Adidas and Inditex; both ultimately signed the Accord.

By August 2015, more than 1,600 factories had been inspected in Bangladesh under the Accord.

Child Labor—Uzbekistan Cotton Fields
Wespath, in cooperation with other investors, engaged with major retailers Wal-Mart, Nike and Williams-Sonoma to ensure their suppliers stop using cotton sourced from Uzbekistan, once the site of the largest mobilization of child labor in the world.

It is estimated that in 2007, some 2 million* school-aged children were forced to work the fields and meet difficult cotton quotas. By 2014, the number of children aged 9–17 working in the cotton fields had dropped to 41**, reflecting both the positive influence of investor engagement with companies sourcing the cotton and increased oversight and sanctions from the international community.

Although child labor has been significantly reduced, forced labor by adults unfortunately still exists in Uzbekistan. In 2015, Wespath identified Uzbekistan as one of the “high-risk” countries demonstrating a prolonged and systematic pattern of human rights violations as described in our human rights investment guideline. We have subsequently excluded from investment the securities of the largest processor of Uzbek cotton, Daewoo, from our funds.

Human Rights Investment Guideline
In 2015, Wespath implemented a leading-edge human rights investment guideline. The guideline helps us prioritize when engagement could influence a company to change its practices and have a positive impact on the individuals and communities affected by its business. The guideline also offers clear guidance on when certain companies should be excluded from our investment funds on the basis of human rights-related risks. As such, our guideline focuses on promoting and protecting human rights and managing financial risk.

* Estimate from the Uzbek-German Forum for Human Rights
** Data from the U.S. Department of Labor