

A RESOLUTION SUPPORTING PUBLIC SCHOOL EDUCATORS, ACADEMIC FREEDOM, AND EQUITY EFFORTS IN SCHOOLS

A Resolution of Witness

Submitted by The United Church of Christ in New Brighton, Minnesota, along with the following additional congregations: [TBD]

SUMMARY

This resolution is intended to voice support of public-school educators, academic freedom, and equity efforts in schools at a time when public education is threatened through attempts to control curriculum, ban books and media, and restrict strategies to ensure the advancement of equity.^{i, ii, iii, iv} The intent of this resolution is to raise awareness and provide members of the United Church of Christ with information that can be used for the development of talking points about these issues.

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL GROUNDING

The roots of liberal education's emphasis on academic freedom and integrity are in the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries when reason and critical thinking were championed over dogma and intolerance. It was during this time when education began to be viewed as a means of liberating the mind and empowering citizens with knowledge. Indeed, the separation of church and state has its origins in the Enlightenment. Yet the necessity of keeping the affairs of the state separate from the influence of the church does not go against Biblical teachings. Scripture itself understands faithful following of Adonai to be grounded in reason as well as tradition. The central confession of Judaism that Jesus deemed the greatest commandment tells us to love God with all our mind as well as all our heart, strength, and being (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Mark 12:28-34; Matthew 22:36-40; Luke 10:27). In ancient Israelite understanding, the heart was the locus of thought and will. Further, in the Wisdom tradition, an entire stream of teaching is derived, not from revelation or tradition, but from learned observation. Wisdom theology has frequently been the basis for including scientific, sociological, and philosophical studies in ethical reflection. Certainly, the Bible does not support challenges to reason, such as the tendency to pit religious truth against scientific investigation – as in the condemnation of Galileo or the creation vs. evolution debates. Proverbs, which promotes the idea that there is a divinely created order that humans are to discern, also reflects a tremendous respect for sages/teachers. The Spirit moves in surprising ways, demonstrating that God's truth is to be found outside established religious channels as well as within them.

If we are commanded to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourself (Leviticus 19:18), then we must ensure that our education system supports and lifts up every child. To love with all one's mind and strength surely involves rigorous, critical study – the opposite of banning books and media or proscribing curriculum. Moreover, loving neighbor as self is incompatible with censorship and curricular control in two ways. First, and most importantly, the topics that are forbidden most often deal with the experiences of neighbors who have racial, ethnic, religious, sexual, or gender identities that differ from those

seeking the bans. Excluding the experience of any of our neighbors is the opposite of loving them. And lest we think of “neighbor” in too narrow a sense, Jesus has given us the story of the Samaritan to show us who is our neighbor. Samaritans were despised by Jews in much the same way Black or LGBTQ+ people are despised by many of those who seek to control curriculum, prohibit the teaching of critical race theory, or urge “don’t say ‘gay’” laws. Secondly, but relatedly, we are able to love our wildly diverse, culturally differing neighbors only when we know something about them, and that requires reading and studying from a broad range of sources. Moreover, as the Joint Public Education Task Force of the American Missionary Association and the Commission for Racial Justice noted in 2001, Jesus asks us to welcome children, honor them, and not place stumbling blocks before them (Mark 9:37, 42).^v An education system that makes students feel unwelcome, discriminates against them for who they are, or limits their access to knowledge about their own history and culture is systematically placing stumbling blocks in the way of God’s children.

Within the United Church of Christ, commitment to and support for public schools has a long history. Indeed, our Puritan forebears passed laws requiring communities to establish schools and to teach reading and writing; such laws formed the basis of the American public school system.^{vi}^{vii} In recent years, the church has repeatedly affirmed the importance of policies that support all children, as well as affirming the importance of public schools and equity efforts therein. In 1987, the Sixteenth General Synod called upon the United Church of Christ “to intensify its long-standing commitment to economic and social justice through support of specific policies which help, empower, and sustain all children, particularly those children most in need.”^{viii} In 1991, the Eighteenth General Synod supported equalized funding for schools and a quality education for every child, declaring that “Christians are required to transform the institutions of our society so that they provide what rightly belongs to all people and no longer deny access for some”; the synod called upon the United Church of Christ “to work with secular and ecumenical agencies to protect and strengthen public education as a bulwark of democracy and as a way into full participation in our society for all children.”^{ix} Finally, General Synod Twenty-Three in 2001 called upon the United Church of Christ to support and advocate for public schools, declaring such advocacy “one of the foremost civil rights issues in the twenty-first century.”^x

TEXT OF THE MOTION

- 1 **WHEREAS** the United Church of Christ was founded by four denominations with education as
- 2 a central aspect of our identities and has always been a firm advocate for education, with the
- 3 Church having had a hand in the founding of many colleges and universities, including Harvard,
- 4 Oberlin, Carleton, Doane, and others, as well as many Historically Black Colleges and
- 5 Universities, which grew from the hundreds of schools founded by the American Missionary
- 6 Association after the Civil War;^{xi} and
- 7
- 8 **WHEREAS** the United Church of Christ has been committed to being an Open and Affirming,
- 9 Anti-Racist, Environmental Justice, Just Peace denomination;^{xii} and
- 10
- 11 **WHEREAS** we in the United Church of Christ believe there is “ever more truth and light to be
- 12 brought forward” from our scriptures, as well as from our world and our people;^{xiii, xiv} and
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14 **WHEREAS** the United Church of Christ has claimed to be a thinking church as well as a feeling
15 and believing church;^{xv} and

16
17 **WHEREAS** the United Church of Christ has demonstrated its commitment to learning about the
18 sins and legacies of slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, immigration quotas, internment camps,
19 boarding schools, anti-miscegenation laws, sodomy laws, discriminatory housing policies,
20 discriminatory healthcare policies, and other practices that have contributed to ongoing
21 disparities of resources and opportunities for oppressed peoples, without fearing the discomfort
22 that can accompany such learning;^{xvi, xvii, xviii} and

23
24 **WHEREAS** the United Church of Christ has demonstrated its commitment to addressing the
25 sins of violence and oppression experienced by women, LGBTQ+ people, people with
26 disabilities, people of religious minorities, immigrants, refugees, Native American/Indigenous
27 people, Black people, Latinx people, Asian people, and all others who have suffered oppression
28 in this country;^{xix, xx, xxi, xxii, xxiii} and

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30 **WHEREAS** students benefit greatly from the study of literature and art that addresses the full
31 range of being human;^{xxiv} and

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33 **WHEREAS** proposals to ban discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools
34 send a profoundly negative message of non-acceptance to students whose romantic attraction
35 does not conform to heteronormative assumptions, and to students who may be experiencing
36 gender dysphoria or who have already realized that their real gender does not match that which
37 was assigned at birth and by socialization;^{xxv}

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39 **THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that that the Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United
40 Church of Christ declares that it is vital for every person, of every race, skin color, culture,
41 religion, language status, gender, sexual orientation, ability, income, or family background to be
42 given an opportunity to learn about who they are and where they came from; and that students
43 are better equipped to reach their full potential as critical thinkers in school environments that
44 continually strive for equity in all aspects of schooling, from academics and curriculum to extra-
45 curricular activities and school culture;^{xxvi}

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47 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of
48 Christ affirms support of our public education systems and public-school educators, as well as
49 academic freedom, and the right of educators to make decisions that are in the best interest of
50 ALL students, consistent with research and best practice;

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52 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that that the Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United
53 Church of Christ declares that on-going thoughtful evaluation of teaching methodology and
54 content is a necessary part of strengthening our public schools, but harassment of teachers,
55 administrators, and school board members is harmful to them, to the schools and educational
56 systems they represent, and, most especially, to the students they serve.

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58 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of
59 Christ stands against efforts to inflame the public with hateful rhetoric against educators; censor

60 what is taught in public school classrooms; censor books and media in school libraries; deny the
61 histories of oppression experienced by marginalized groups; deny racism, sexism, heterosexism,
62 xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and other forms of prejudice, bias, and hate; and impose burdensome
63 disclosure mandates related to classroom lessons, assignments, and activities;

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65 **BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED** that the Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of
66 Christ encourages all settings of the Church as well as lay members to use this resolution for the
67 development of talking points for presentation in public arenas where such matters are being
68 dealt with, including state legislatures, local school boards, parent-teacher associations,
69 ministerial associations, community groups, and the like.

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71 **FUNDING:** The funding for the implementation of the Resolution will be made in accordance
72 with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

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74 **IMPLEMENTATION:** The Officers of the Church, in consultation with appropriate ministries
75 or other entities within the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.

ⁱ PEN America (2022). *Educational Gag Orders: Legislative Restrictions on the Freedom to Read, Learn, and Teach*: https://dataspace.princeton.edu/bitstream/88435/dsp01f4752k89d/1/PEN_EducationalGagOrders_01-18-22-compressed.pdf

ⁱⁱ Borter, G., Ax, J. & Tanfani, J. (2022). Reuters Investigates: *School Boards Get Death Threats Amid Rage Over Race, Gender, Mask Policies*: <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-education-threats/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Meckler, L. (2022). The Washington Post: *Across the Country, Educational Equity Was in Vogue. Then it Wasn't*: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/06/08/school-board-equity-critical-race-theory/>

^{iv} Education Minnesota, Minnesota Administrators for Special Education, Minnesota Association of School Administrators, Minnesota Association of School Business Officials, Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals, Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association, Minnesota School Boards Association. (2021, September 13). *Public school leaders pledge to support and expand education equity programs intended to make schools more safe, welcoming and effective for all students* [Press Release]: <https://mnmsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/EquityJointStatement-9-13-2021.pdf>

^v United Church of Christ (2001). *Separate and Unequal: Final Report of the Joint Public Education Task Force of the American Missionary Association and the Commission for Racial Justice*: http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/5785/Separate-and-Unequal.pdf?1418430074

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Carleton, D. (2009). *Old Deluder Satan Act of 1647*. The First Amendment Encyclopedia: <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1032/old-deluder-satan-act-of-1647>

^{viii} United Church of Christ: *Resolution For the Common Good, GS 25*: http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/1572/Resolution-for-the-Common-Good.pdf?1418425054

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} United Church of Christ: *History*: <https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/about/history/>

^{xii} United Church of Christ: *We are People of Extravagant Welcome*: https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/about/general-synod/general-synod-resolutions-regarding-environmental-justice/vitality/vitality_boost-your-vitality/vitality_what-matters/vitality_what-matters_we-are-people-of-extravagant/

^{xiii} United Church of Christ: *We Listen for a Still-speaking God*: https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/about/general-synod/general-synod-resolutions-regarding-environmental-justice/vitality/vitality_boost-your-vitality/vitality_what-matters/vitality_what-matters_we-listen-for-a/

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- ^{xiv} United Church of Christ in New Brighton: *Our Values and Beliefs*: <https://uccnb.org/who-we-are/our-values-and-beliefs>
- ^{xv} United Church of Christ: *Not Mutually Exclusive*: https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/about/general-synod/general-synod-resolutions-regarding-environmental-justice/not-mutually-exclusive_index/
- ^{xvi} United Church of Christ: *White Privilege: Let's Talk – A Resource for Transformational Dialogue*: <http://privilege.uccpages.org/>
- ^{xvii} United Church of Christ: *Sacred Conversations to End Racism*: <https://www.ucc.org/sacred-conversations-to-end-racism/>
- ^{xviii} United Church of Christ: *Our Whole Lives*: <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/health-and-wholeness-advocacy-ministries/our-whole-lives/>
- ^{xix} United Church of Christ: *A Summary of General Synod Actions 1957-1999*: <https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/summary-of-gs-actions-1957-1999.pdf>
- ^{xx} United Church of Christ: *United Church of Christ Called to be an Anti-Racist Church, Adopted 2003 General Synod Multiracial/Multicultural Addendum to 1993 Pronouncement and Proposal for Action*: https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/racial-justice/justice_racism_anti-racist-church/
- ^{xxi} United Church of Christ: *Social Policy Statements on LGBT Concerns*: https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/health-and-wholeness-advocacy-ministries/lgbtq-ministries/lgbt_statements/
- ^{xxii} United Church of Christ: *Doctrine of Discovery*: https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/faithful-action-ministries/racial-justice/justice_racism_doctrine-of-discovery/
- ^{xxiii} United Church of Christ: *General Synod Resolution Calls the church to More Disability Justice*: https://www.ucc.org/general_synod_resolution_calls_the_church_to_more_disability_justice/
- ^{xxiv} Gay, G. (2003). Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. *The Importance of Multicultural Education*: <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/the-importance-of-multicultural-education>
- ^{xxv} Parris, D., Fulks, E. & Kelley, C. (2021). Child Trends: *Anti-LGBTQ Policy Proposals Can Harm Youth Mental Health*: <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/anti-lgbtq-policy-proposals-can-harm-youth-mental-health>
- ^{xxvi} Bloomberg, L.D. (2022). Teachers College Press Blog. *Culturally Inclusive Pedagogy: Empowering Responsive and Reflective Educators*: <https://www.tcpress.com/blog/culturally-inclusive-pedagogy-empowering-responsive-reflective-educators>