

85-GS-85 VOTED: The Fifteenth General Synod adopts the Pronouncement on Public Education.

PRONOUNCEMENT ON PUBLIC EDUCATION SUMMARY

In the past two years, thoughtful public attention has turned to public schools. With confidence in their achievements waning and a rapid growth of "Christian" Day schools, the public schools seem to be losing public support. Yet this development must not be allowed to obscure the great strengths and accomplishments of American education. The United Church of Christ and its predecessor bodies have been at the forefront of the struggle for equity and excellence in American educational institutions; we still have a unique role to play in the movement for educational reform and renewal. Committed to high standards of literacy and learning, to a ministry of pastoral care and reconciliation, and to justice in all social institutions, we must reaffirm our responsibility for quality public education, and embark upon new cooperative ventures with the public schools.

BACKGROUND

Every generation has addressed critical educational issues. The most severe threat to public education today is an erosion of confidence in the public schools. The "Christian" Day School movement, originally begun to avoid desegregation, but now also serving those unhappy with the public schools, is a sign of this erosion. Because of the aging of our population, a decline in the white birth rate, and a steady exodus from the public schools, fewer people have a personal investment in public education, and support lags. Many people have lost their essential awareness of their stake in and responsibility for a strong system of public schools, schools upon which we must rely to communicate our cultural, historical, and national values.

We must remember that the United States has attempted what no other country has tried: universal, free education. In spite of the difficulty of that task, American education has generally succeeded: it has assimilated successive waves of immigrants, prepared increasing numbers of students for higher education, enabled a large percentage of students to finish high school, successfully desegregated most school systems, and has provided special education for the handicapped.

Today a new challenge is before us. Already, in twenty-three of the nation's twenty-five largest cities, children of ethnic minorities are a majority of the school-age population. This trend can only continue. But while children from many areas have comfortable schools with all the educational trimmings, poor and ethnic minority children often face over-crowded and deteriorated facilities, and a lack of enrichment programs or modern technology. Unless we think and act now, we are on the brink of establishing a two-tiered system of education, a system which separates the wealthy from the poor, the haves from the have-nots.

There are some encouraging signs on the educational scene. Many new partnerships are being formed between business or industry and education, and between colleges

and elementary or secondary schools. Other reforms or plans for reform include teacher training, curriculum, salaries, and issues of educational leadership.

Education reform is essential, but we must aim at causes, not at symptoms. We must be aware that schools exist not only to provide workers for business and industry, but also to instill a sense of history, a love of knowledge and the arts, and a critical awareness of the responsibilities of citizenship. In addition, we must be wary of a concern for excellence which masks a lack of concern for equity.

We can and must be effective advocates for educational justice. The major responsibility for public education is close to home for us all: in our state capitals, and, even more powerfully, in the nearly 16,000 local school boards and districts which determine leadership, staffing, budgets, curriculum, policies, and services in the public schools. Here each of us has both a responsibility and an opportunity to bear witness to every person's right to develop fully within a society characterized by justice, decency, and compassion.

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND ETHICAL RATIONALE

In spite of the fact that public education as we know it is a modern institution, the education of the public has been highly valued by the Jewish and Christian traditions. In Biblical times, families bore the primary responsibility for nurture, supported by a community religious ethos and an environment of religious feast days, festivals, rites and rituals. The Book of Proverbs served as an early textbook, urging the wisdom essential for a good life. In Jesus' time a cluster of institutions provided education, including the household, community, temple, synagogue, and school. Jesus, called "Rabbi," was a master teacher, and through word, parable and example he commissioned his disciples to "go ... teach." Following this Great Commission, early Christians placed great importance on education. While the medieval Church restricted schooling to a priestly class, the Reformation revolutionized education and opened the study of the Scriptures to rich and poor alike. Not only did Luther and Calvin promote the priesthood of all believers, but they proposed plans for elementary, secondary, and university education. Luther believed that both the government and the Church were responsible for education.

We are heirs to this Reformed tradition, which planted the ideals of equal educational opportunity and academic excellence in this country, twin goals which are mutually supportive, not competitive. The churches and agencies which preceded the United Church of Christ founded some of the first colleges and universities in this country and were instrumental in the creation of many early elementary and secondary schools. The American Missionary Association founded over 500 schools for newly-freed blacks and others after the Civil War. These schools combined high academic standards with equal access for all persons. More recently the United Church of Christ has recognized inadequacies in public schools and called for specific improvements. It has urged its members to become informed and involved in school policy, has supported desegregated schools, and has opposed sectarian intrusions like public funds for private schools or organized prayer and

Bible reading in the public schools. General Synods have called for more funds for public education, urging churches to recruit persons to influence school boards and strengthen accountability for quality and equality in education.

Many biblical and theological principles support the Church's engagement with public education. All persons are children of God; all are created in the divine image; all need an opportunity to grow in wisdom, in stature, and in God's favor. Speaking in the prophetic tradition of justice and righteousness, we must demand educational opportunities for all.

STATEMENT OF CHRISTIAN CONVICTION

The Church is called to serve God in all realms of life; we cannot isolate personal from social ministries or spiritual from political witness. The distinctive American tradition of separation of Church and State necessitates the separation of the institutional Church from the institutional State, but not the removal of the religious voice from public policy or the divorce of faith from learning. Indeed, our prophetic heritage compels us to advocate for justice and peace, for protection for the weak, and for aid for the powerless.

Traditionally, the role of the Church in public education should not be limited to narrow religious issues such as recess time instruction, prayer and Bible reading, creationism, or religious holidays. Instead, it should address injustices, such as discrimination on the basis of race, sex, class, language, or national origin, and the inequalities of educational opportunity which we find all around us.

The Church is called by God to work for justice and equity in society and to bring a ministry of reconciliation where there is suffering, hurt, and alienation. It is the responsibility of Christian people to address moral and ethical issues, and to work for a strong and healthy school system so essential to the public welfare and the common good. A strong public school system producing thoughtful and responsible young people and adults, will ultimately protect the freedom of churches to do their essential but different work.

The United Church of Christ has an important contribution to make to educational reform and renewal because of its past commitment, its morally sensitive assessment of the present situation, and its faithful vision for the future. Therefore,

we call schools to excellence in developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes, recognizing that literacy and learning are essential for intellectual and spiritual growth;

we call schools to justice and equity, supporting equal access to an education that challenges all persons to achieve their greatest potential, and we advocate more equitable distribution of state and federal funds to accomplish this purpose;

we urge the maintenance of school systems that are accountable to local and regional electorates, financed by public tax revenues, and responsible to State standards for curriculum and teacher certification;

we advocate more equitable distribution of state and federal funds for poor, minority and gifted students with special needs who are "at risk" of failure in both urban and rural areas;

we reaffirm the 1954 Supreme Court decision that separate schools are inherently unequal, and we call upon churches and communities to face de facto segregation and to wrestle with the racism and racial isolation that result in inferior education;

we endorse a strong federal role in education in the areas of equity, civil rights, and research;

we encourage the development of intentional partnerships between churches and schools, including but not limited to tutoring, counseling, recruitment of volunteers, programs of parental involvement, provision of resources and equipment, and membership in citizen advisory and advocacy groups;

we resist the pressures on public schools from sectarian religious groups and ideologies, while we strongly endorse teaching about religion in relation to history, literature, the fine arts, and world cultures; and

we defend the right of parents to choose alternative, private, religious, or independent schools, but continue to declare that those schools should be funded by private sources of income.

PROPOSAL FOR ACTION ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

85-GS-86 VOTED: The Fifteenth General Synod adopts the Proposal for Action on Public Education:

PROPOSAL FOR ACTION ON PUBLIC EDUCATION

WHEREAS, long-standing commitment to public education, and

WHEREAS, public education has become a major concern on the national and state levels, and

WHEREAS, the current priorities of the United Church of Christ, especially Family life and Youth and Young Adult Ministries, are closely related to this concern;

THEREFORE, the Fifteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon its churches, conferences, and national instrumentalities:

to work for the next two years on the issues of public education, studying all reports and recommendations, formulating approaches, and preparing a report for the Sixteenth General Synod;

to develop strategies for making public education at all levels, (elementary, secondary, higher, adult, and continuing), a major concern of the United Church of Christ; and

to cooperate, wherever possible, with other denominations in the pursuit of these ends.

Specifically, we call upon

1. Local churches, to identify and recognize educators in their congregations; support teaching as a Christian vocation; recruit qualified persons to serve on school boards and committees and as volunteers and aides; set up seminars and forums for the discussion of issues; develop stronger family and parent cooperation; and initiate more responsible community participation.
2. Conferences, to designate a staff person with a public education portfolio; form a public education task force, promote cooperative programs with public schools and with our church-related colleges, build networks and coalitions on a state-wide level, and monitor state legislation, policy, and curriculum development.
3. The United Church Board for Homeland Ministries to form an inter-agency public education task force among national bodies and instrumentalities to develop policies and positions, monitor national legislation as well as judicial and executive decisions, initiate contacts with national education groups, build national networks and coalitions; publish resources on the issues, and provide funding through conferences for projects that serve students "at risk."

Note: The implementation of this Proposal for Action is subject to the availability of funds.