The Business Committee of the Thirty-Second General Synod has recommended this proposed resolution be sent to a Committee of the General Synod.

REAFFIRMING THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST’S COMMITMENT TO INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS, AND DEPLORING RELIGIOUS BIGOTRY

A Resolution of Witness
Submitted by the United Church of Christ Board

SUMMARY:

This resolution is a timely reaffirmation of our imperative and calling to engage in interreligious dialogue and relations, to speak clearly in denouncing religiously-motivated bigotry, and to commend to the United Church of Christ’s members and settings the document, “A Just World for All: Engaging with All God’s Creation and Calling the UCC to Live Inter-Religiously” for study, reflection, and action.

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, and HISTORICAL GROUNDING:

In Matthew’s Gospel, when asked to identify the greatest commandment, Jesus quotes the Shema on loving God, as recorded in Deuteronomy (6:5), and the imperative to love one’s neighbor, citing Leviticus (19:18):

“One of them, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ Jesus said to him, ‘“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’’” (Matthew 22:35-40, NRSV)

In Luke’s account of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37), Jesus elaborates on who one should consider one’s neighbor.

These teachings help us to discern our relationship with God, and with our fellow human beings, no matter their race, gender, social status, or faith. Our neighbors can be close by, and around the world; in either case, we are all children of God, and created by God in God’s image. When we regard our neighbors, with the right eyes and heart, we can see God, and are therefore called to interact with other people as we would with God.

The history of humankind is replete with a longing for the Divine, and stories of religions and faith are often intimately connected with civilizations and cultures. History is also filled with conflicts and strife related to differences in religion and faith, just as it is filled with efforts to draw on common religious principles to foster peace, justice, and harmony. Our global partners in many parts of the world have much experience of living in richly pluralistic religious contexts from which we can learn and upon which we can draw, and such experience helps us to understand history, and seek models of success.

The United States continues to witness violent rhetoric and actions spurred by religious bigotry. In past years, these acts have included threats and attacks on Jewish community centers and
schools, the burning of four mosques, the murder of American Sikhs and Hindus, and discrimination against Muslims and Islamic communities. All of these heinous acts are described as hate crimes and expressions of religious bigotry. They cannot be separated from continuing racism and anti-immigration sentiment, exacerbated by political discourse that has hinted at, or has explicitly articulated, both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

Additionally, the disregard for the rights of Native Americans and the traditions of indigenous peoples globally is reflected in the protests around the use of lands historically owned by the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. Access to clean water, the practice of rituals and spiritualities that are affirming and life giving are important to these communities where life continues to be threatened by imperialistic practices rooted in racism and religious bigotry emanating from a history yet to be fully confronted. The vilification of the traditional practices and spiritual expressions of indigenous, African derived, shamanistic and other traditions beyond Christianity reflects a Christian dominant narrative which is oppositional to the call to love.

In a time of heightened tension and of suspicion of people of faiths other than our own, we seek guidance and grounding in scripture to remind us as Christians to be accepting, welcoming, and loving toward our neighbors; and as a church, to continue to engage with the diversity of communities among whom we live, including through study and reflection, and to speak out when we witness hatred and bigotry.

TEXT OF THE MOTION:

WHEREAS, the world is pluralistic, including and perhaps especially, with regard to religious diversity; and

Whereas the United Church of Christ is a Christian community open to God’s new things (Isaiah 43:19); and

Whereas, the opportunities for engagement with people of many faiths are bountiful and represent possibilities for genuine encounter with people who are created in God’s image and who share a spiritual and ritual quest as people of faith, seeking the divine; and

Whereas, the world and the United States specifically witnessed an increased frequency of rhetorical and physical violence toward and between people of different faith communities in the past several months; and

Whereas, the United Church of Christ identifies as a Just Peace Church (General Synod 15; 1985; reaffirmed at GS 30; 2015); and

Whereas, General Synods of the United Church of Christ have been attentive to matters of interreligious relations in the past, notably in the resolution, “Relationship between the UCC and the Jewish Community” (GS 16; 1987), and the resolution, “The relationship between the United Church of Christ and the Muslim community” (GS 17; 1989); and
Whereas, General Synods of United Church of Christ have “condemn[ed] anti-Semitism in all its forms” (GS 14; 1983); “confess[ed] the sin of anti-Semitism and renounce[d] it” (GS 23; 2001); and “express[ed] clear support for neighbors in the Muslim community…who feel the impact of anti-Islamic rhetoric and actions” (GS 28; 2011); and

Whereas, the Officers of the United Church of Christ have consistently offered a public witness denouncing incidents of violence targeting communities identified by their faiths, including a “Statement on the Vilification of Muslims” (Dec. 9, 2015) and “An open letter to our Jewish colleagues and friends” (Jan. 20, 2017); and

Whereas, the Twenty Second General Synod of the UCC commended for study and response the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA document “Interfaith Relations and the Churches” (GS 22; 1999), and the Twenty Fifth General Synod adopted “A Study Resource on Interreligious Relations for the United Church of Christ” (GS 25; 2005); and

Whereas, a special committee of the UCC’s Council for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations has recently completed a statement entitled, “A Just World for All: Engaging with All God’s Creation and Calling the UCC to Live Inter-Religiously,” which asserts that “God shows no partiality,” and is motivated by the UCC’s Core Values of Extravagant Welcome, Continuing Testament, and Changing Lives, and challenges us to expand our understanding of Jesus’ prayer, “That they may all be one,”

BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED, that the Thirty Second General Synod of the United Church of Christ:

Receives, the interfaith statement “A Just World for All: Engaging with All God’s Creation” for use in UCC engagement with world religions and spiritualities;

Renews its conviction that God has called us to affirm new ways in which Christ is reconciling the world;

Reaffirms, with love and certainty, our commitment to interreligious relations with any and all communities of faith;

Calls upon National leadership, Conferences, local churches, and members to continue to study about and engage in interreligious dialogue and relationships, institutionally and personally, drawing on the experience of our ecumenical and global partners;

Deplores and denounces any and all acts of violence and hatred, be they in thought, word, or deed, directed at individuals and communities, particularly when based on religious identity; and to offer a public witness of support and solidarity when such acts are perpetrated; and

Commends settings and members of the United Church of Christ to read, study, and act upon the document, “A Just World for All: Engaging with All God’s Creation and Calling the UCC to Live Inter-Religiously.”
**FUNDING:**

The funding for the implementation of this resolution will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

**IMPLEMENTATION:**

The Officers of the Church, in consultation with appropriate ministries or other entities within the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.
A New Vision

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? Isaiah 43:18-19

The United States continues to experience a changing religious landscape. While the country continues to hold a Christian religious majority, demographics point to a decline in the mainline denominations, an increase in other religious traditions and an increase in individuals who are moving away from traditional ways of religious identification and affiliation. These changes are taking place in a time where bigotry, religious intolerance and racism are also on the rise, buoyed by Christian theological frameworks which are antithetical to nurturing God’s love for all. How will we live into Jesus’ call to love in these days and in these times? How will we reinterpret traditional interpretations of scripture to forge new path to mutual respect and understanding among the world’s religions?

The United Church of Christ Board affirmed a new purpose, vision and mission statement for the denomination. In adopting these statements, the denomination is invited to envision love and justice in the context of the world in which we live and to discern what it means to be a prophetic witness to the church and to the world. The call to love is a call into the mystery of the Spirit, it is a call to a deeper engagement with the Divine and it is a call to be radically transformed in the face of the impossible.

The offering of the new purpose, vision and mission statements is an entry point into all aspects of the life of the church.

- “The United Church of Christ affirms that its purpose is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.
- The United Church of Christ has a vision that united in Christ's love, we seek a just world for all.
- The United Church of Christ sees its mission to be united in Spirit and inspired by God's grace, to welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.

Congregational life, spiritual formation, mission, ministries to all in the church, ecumenical and interfaith engagement are all undertaken in the spirit of the vision of a just world for all. Our interreligious engagement ought to bear witness to, and a commitment to living this purpose: To love our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves; the vision: United in Christ’s love, a just world for all; and the mission: United in Spirit, inspired by God’s grace, we welcome all, love all and seek justice for all. Love is at center of our calling and our witness in the world.

In A Pastoral Letter to a United Church in a Divided Country (November 9, 2016) the officers of the church wrote: “… we were built to heal bodies broken and divided. This is our calling. Our core values of love, hospitality, and justice for all must be fully embraced in the
days to come. It could well be that we were called into being for just such a time as this.” The
time for creating a new reality is now. Amidst the rhetoric of fear, we must affirm the gift of
religious diversity, and allow this gift to reveal to us more of God present and at work in the
world.

Religion and ways of experiencing and expressing knowledge of the Divine must no
longer divide us. Instead, the experience of God’s love ought to unite us beyond fear and
religious bigotry. Religious differences have devised wars, divided families and disrupted
communities.

We are called for this time to live prophetically in our witness, our words and deeds
calling for love of neighbor, the acceptance of all religions and spiritualities, affirming the
mystery of the Divine in a variety of expressions and the presence of religious multiplicity and
religious fluidity in the church, in our communities and in the world. There are a variety of ways
that Spirit is affirmed among us. While we are unable to name them all, we affirm the Mystery
and mind of God is beyond understanding (Isaiah 55:8).

A TIME OF CONFESSION

Acknowledging and righting the past is an important step in creating a new vision and a
new future. While the United Church of Christ owns a rich history of justice, hospitality and
interreligious engagement there are places and times in history where the UCC, its predecessor
bodies and the church did not reflect the respect, love and reciprocity we currently advocate.

Christianity is historically the most powerful religious tradition in the US and remains
dominant in many parts of the world. Christians have committed the crimes that Jonathan Sacks,
a rabbi in the United Kingdom names in his book, saying, “The crimes of religion have one thing
in common. They involve making God in our image instead of letting him remake us in his. The
highest truth does not cast its mantle over our lowest instincts – the search for power, the urge
for conquest, the use of religious language to spread the aura of sanctity over ignoble crimes.
These are forms of imperialism, not faith” (Not in God’s Name, 265).

Christianity has been shrouded in privilege that found other traditions in need of religious
conversion and the subject of the missional imperative of prior centuries that undervalued other
traditions, labelled them as lacking knowledge of God and destroyed religion, culture and
community in its wake. This privileging of Christianity names Christianity as favored by God,
fostering an exceptionalism that threatens the worth and dignity of all creation.

Atrocities have been committed with the Bible present and used to justify the oppression
and persecution of individuals professing different theological beliefs. The name of God and the
revelation of the Christ are utilized in upholding xenophobia and decrying other faith traditions
in opposition to Jesus’ command that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

By naming this position of power held by Christians, we can work to create spaces for
dialogue in which all religious perspectives are heard, and indeed the historically silenced voices
are potentially given a larger platform than the traditionally dominant religious traditions.
We are called to be healers of the breach, a breach that we have made in the past in our views and relationships with those of other faith traditions. Today, we confess not only the cost of such decisions in our past as well as the call today to see God at work in these various different traditions.

As The Study Resource on Interreligious Relations for the United Church of Christ named, “We have not always worked to understand our neighbors, and often have made no effort at simple hospitality….the UCC, a church of the ‘united and uniting family’ brings to the pursuit of interfaith relations long experience in honoring diversity and celebrating the many gifts of particularity within the context of unity. A united and uniting church must, by its very nature, practice diligently the work of sustaining a broadly diverse community in covenantal unity as a grateful response to the faithful covenant God has made with us. We struggle daily with a cacophony of voices which often do not blend into a melodious harmony, and confess that at times we lean too hard on the distinctive witness of one or another branch of our family in order to avoid conflict” (Study Document, #11).

We affirm with the Study Document that “Past mistakes, however, should not inhibit present commitment. In a spirit of hospitality and welcome we believe we are called to new relationships and new ways of relating, knowing that in those encounters we will have much to receive as well as much to give” (Study Document, #23).

CALLED TO LOVE

Jesus said: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:37, 39).

Recognizing that we live in an increasingly pluralistic world, this interreligious statement built on the vision for a just world for all offers a theological, moral and spiritual basis for the United Church of Christ’s ongoing commitment to support and pursue relationships with partners of many faiths. Christians in the United States hold privilege and power, which continue to contribute to the oppression and dehumanization of people of other faiths. In our pursuit of justice the central themes point us to revisiting our views and commitment to interreligious engagement.

This is a priority for our time, because the world is increasingly complex. People are more interconnected than ever before, thanks to the technological revolution. The access to information and understanding of other religions and spiritualties has also resulted in increased fear of people of other faiths and heritage. Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment are spreading across the United States and globally, anti-Semitism and racism are on the rise, the rights of indigenous people continue to be of concern as they continue to experience marginalization and these negative views are readily accessed via technology.

As people’s religious identities change rapidly there is a call to faithful response to the realities that are becoming more evident among us. More and more people are identifying as multi religious with a focus on the spiritual and less on the religious, i.e. Hindu-Christian or
Buddhist-Christian or other hyphenated expressions that are rooted in multiplicity rather than the historic mono-religious experiences of the Divine.

Likewise, some are adherents to one religious tradition and yet they practice the sacred rituals of multiple traditions. Yet others identify as ‘religious hybrids.’ It is no longer unusual for members of our communities of faith to have married persons with a faith tradition different than their own, for their children to choose such a practice or for members of families to be a part of multiple religious households. God calls us to faithfully respond to the changes in our current context. These complexities are framed among the thousands of recognized world religions. These complexities are present in our communities and in the churches we serve and attend.

How do we live into these challenges that also hold promise and opportunity for the growth and life of the church and all of God’s people?

For us to love our neighbor as ourselves means we must commit to learning about our neighbors. Our transformation and love of God is strengthened in our ability to see God present in those among us. This commitment encompasses the internal and the external. Issues of racism, sexism, ableism and other manifestations of injustice directed at identifying and upholding differences as a barrier to right relations are expressions that challenge our own ability to be in right relations with the Divine among us. We offer confession and a call to action to local congregations, to take up the call to live out deep, mutually-transformative relationships with individuals and communities of other faiths.

BACKGROUND

This is not the first time our denomination has addressed our commitment to interfaith relationships, we draw upon the conversations we had at General Synod in 1999 and 2005. In 1999, the General Synod requested that the church study and respond to the document of the National Council of Churches “Interfaith Relations and the Churches.” A Study Resource on Interreligious Relations for the United Church of Christ (2005) professed, “The foundation upon which we engage in interreligious relationships is our belief that God is sovereign of the entire cosmos and that all humanity is created in God’s image. We believe that the community of the whole inhabited earth is a gift which together we are called to nurture.” (p.3)

The United Church of Christ, out of its commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, has spoken in solidarity in the past about relations with people of other religions and the traditions that they represent. The General Synod spoke twice on relations with people of other religions and the traditions they represent: with the Jewish community (1987) and with the Muslim community (1989). Our engagement in interreligious relationships is shaped by the historic and cultural traditions, which are part of our theological heritage. These 16 years later, it is to address our call once again, to name and embrace the mystery of God revealed across time and tradition, in light of our rapidly-changing world and the accompanying fears resulting in hatred and bigotry.

In 2005 the General Synod of the United Church of Christ received and adopted a document called A Study Resource on Interreligious Relations. Now twelve years later it is time to revisit, and discern the ways in which the United Church of Christ will move...
forward in an increasingly multi-religious world. The 2005 study resource set the stage for such a
time as this, challenging the United Church of Christ to do four things:

1. Reflect upon the reasons for engaging in interreligious relations;
2. Examine the contexts in which such relationships occur;
3. Name the distinctive gifts that the United Church of Christ brings to these encounters;
4. Discern God’s call to us as we live and work alongside people of other religious
traditions.

The study resource asserted that we affirm “our distinctive beliefs and our witness to the
gospel of Jesus Christ. We celebrate boldly the richness of the Christian encounter with God revealed in the particular person of Jesus Christ and recognize that we are called to spread this
good news of God’s message of healing and reconciliation. We affirm our continuing and
unambivalent mandate, as a part of the whole Church, to engage in life-enhancing relationships
with all of God’s creation. The foundation upon which we engage in interreligious relationships is our belief that God is sovereign of the entire cosmos and that all humanity is created in God’s image. We believe that the community of the whole inhabited earth is a gift which together we are called to nurture.” (Paragraph #3)

This 2005 Study Resource articulated a paradigm for our current interreligious
engagement, and pushes us further to broadening and deepening our Christian witness by
acknowledging and accepting all faith traditions. Past mistakes do not need to inhibit authentic
commitment. Today we are called into new relationships and new ways of relating, we have
much to receive as well as to give in dialogue, witness, welcome and hospitality. We are called anew in these days to be visionaries for right relationship and bearers of God’s love.

TRANSFORMATION

These changes that are evident across the religious landscape offer opportunities for
transformation for our lives, for the church and for the world. The Baar Statement: Theological
Perspectives on Plurality issued by the World Council of Churches states: “We have seen and
experienced the goodness, truth and holiness of God among followers of other paths and ways
than that of Jesus Christ” (p.4). The Spirit moves beyond our definitions, descriptions and
limitations “as the wind blows where it wills” (John 3:8).

The World Council of Churches Baar Statement affirms that: God, the Holy Spirit has
been at work in the life and traditions of peoples of living faiths. Can we affirm that the Holy
Spirit will lead us into fresh and unexpected discovery of new wisdom and insight as we learn
more from our neighbors of other faiths? Authentic dialogue opens both partners to a deeper
conversion to the God who speaks to each through the other. Through the witness of others, we
can truly discover facets of the divine mystery which we have not yet seen or responded to (Baar,
5).

We can no longer push aside those who are hold different religious views and practices.
They are members of our families, our communities, and these traditions have shaped us as well.
The advancements of pluralism and the reactions against them now define our national life.
Every day, our existence in a pluralistic world has the potential to strip away another layer of our provincialism, the complacent unawareness of other faiths, yielding other forms of emancipation. We hear the testimonies of those among us whose faith has been nurtured in and because of their relationships to others of other religious traditions and faith practices. We draw on the ancient tradition and call of God who invites us to meet God in the other and experience hospitality to the stranger who teaches us more about God and draws us deeper into knowing more of God and more of ourselves.

“Through encounters with people of other religions we hope to find new understanding and to discover fuller and more meaningful ways to live in reconciled communities together.”

A CALL TO ACTION

The vision of a just world for all is an inclusive proposition for all people and includes our interreligious engagement. The affirmation of all religious, faith, and spiritual traditions acknowledges the familiar and the unfamiliar, and leaves room for that which is yet to be named. The United Church of Christ has long been theologically engaged with Muslims and Jews in interreligious dialogue as well as the common source of these faiths as “religions of the book” or “Abrahamic traditions.” In approaching and receiving, seeking to meet and welcoming all traditions, we invite the unity of the spirit.

The list of religions holds too many to name and yet, we are willing to receive the presence of the Divine in spiritual expressions as well as places where the Divine is not revealed in the ways that are familiar to or similar to our Christian practices. Learning about other traditions and assisting in the recovery of traditions that were vilified in the past, particularly indigenous traditions and those brought into the Americas by enslaved Africans is the work of justice and love.

A Litany Affirming our Commitment to Live Inter-religiously

We celebrate boldly the richness of the Christian encounter with God revealed in the particular person of Jesus Christ.

We recognize that we are called to spread this good news of God’s message of healing and reconciliation.

We engage in interreligious relationships because we believe that God is sovereign of the entire cosmos, that all humanity is created in God’s image.

We affirm our desire to expand our relationships with God’s creation.

Therefore,

We find ourselves called to re-interpret cherished traditions.
We listen carefully to religious people throughout the world. We pray for the common good, sharing fears and hopes. We confess, and we ask for forgiveness. We try to forgive the unforgivable. We cultivate wonder and awe, and we admit limits. We acknowledge differences, and explore commonalities. We welcome diversity and avoid judgment. We honor the redemptive work of all religious traditions. We seek fellowship with our neighbor rather trying to change our neighbor. We understand that engagement with others makes us vulnerable. Yet, We believe that the church can experience transformative love. We know that Jesus’ prayer “That they may all be One,” is stretching our faith. We affirm the community of the whole inhabited earth as a gift we are called to serve. Amen.