

For the Common Good

(Resolution of Witness: Requires 2/3 vote for passage)

Submitted by: Justice and Witness Ministries

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. . . Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me. . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. . ." Then he will say to those at his left hand. . . "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. . ." "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." Matthew 25: 34-45

Summary

The Twenty-fifth General Synod calls upon all settings of the United Church of Christ to uphold the common good as a foundational ideal in the United States, rejects the notion that government is more unwieldy or inefficient than other democratic institutions, and reaffirms the obligation of citizens to share through taxes the financial responsibility for public services that benefit all citizens, especially those who are vulnerable, to work for more equitable public institutions, and to support regulations that protect society and the environment.

Background and Biblical and Theological Rationale

A just and good society balances individualism with the needs of the community. In the past quarter century our society has lost this ethical balance. Our nation has moved too far in the direction of promoting individual self interest at the expense of community responsibility. The result has been an abandonment of the common good.¹ While some may suggest that the sum total of individual choices will automatically constitute the common good, there is no evidence that choices based on self interest will protect the vulnerable or provide the safeguards and services needed by the whole population. While as a matter of justice and morality we strive always to expand the individual rights guaranteed by our government for those who have lacked rights, we also affirm our commitment to vibrant communities and recognize the important role of government for providing public services on behalf of the community.

Our Christian faith speaks directly to public morality and the ways a nation should bring justice and compassion into its civic life. In the story of the last judgment, Jesus tells us that nations will be judged by how they care for their most vulnerable citizens, those Jesus describes as, "the least of these who are members of my family. This story in *Matthew* (Matthew 25: 34 – 45) is

48 not about personal salvation; rather it is presented as a story of the judgment of nations.
49 Theologian Marcus Borg explains how God’s unconditional love connects to our responsibility
50 as citizens in society outside the church. As citizens we are called to do justice as a public
51 expression of our love for God and all whom God has created: The God of love is also the God
52 of justice. The two are related, for in the Bible justice is the social form of love.ⁱⁱ
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54 In the story of the last judgment, Jesus describes basic human needs in the agrarian biblical
55 society: food, water, clothing, healing, compassion, and hospitality. A contemporary list of basic
56 human needs would also include a decent job, sufficient income, health insurance, affordable
57 housing, quality public education, affordable child care, and a healthy environment.
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59 The General Synods of the United Church of Christ have spoken over the years to the need for
60 public policy that allows for people who want to work to be able to support themselves and their
61 families and to care for those who, for one reason or another, cannot.ⁱⁱⁱ While the United Church
62 of Christ has spoken to a mass of specific concerns about the welfare of the millions of citizens
63 who make up our nation, our times today call for a new statement. From the time of the
64 founding of our nation and certainly through most of the twentieth century it has been assumed
65 that the role of government is to protect the needs of the public. Now as such assumptions are
66 being actively questioned by proponents of radical individualism, we defend the public space
67 itself and reaffirm the importance of institutions designed to serve the common good.
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69 We are told that each of us is responsible for oneself alone and that our individual successes and
70 failures are due solely to our own efforts. Thus our fame and fortune or our failures whether
71 wealth to enjoy or poverty to endure derive from our own individual abilities and efforts alone.
72 This illusion has been dispelled by modern social science.^{iv} For Christians this idolatrous and
73 narcissistic view fails to acknowledge the primacy of God. The earth is the Lord’s and all that is
74 in it. (Psalms 24:1). God’s abundance is to be shared by all God’s children. In modern society
75 sharing occurs through our systems of progressive taxation, public services, and regulations
76 made in the interest of all.
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78 The United States is a nation whose founding documents proclaim the ideals of liberty and
79 justice for all. In the church we recognize that America’s public institutions and public life have
80 not always manifested these ideals on which our nation was founded. Knowing that our nation’s
81 founders omitted significant groups of citizens from their vision, among them people of color
82 and women, the United Church of Christ and its forebears have historically worked for civil and
83 human rights of these groups to be part of the American Dream. While our church has
84 historically challenged injustice in America’s social institutions, however, we have never
85 compromised our commitment to the public good and the role of government for protecting the
86 public welfare. Realizing our nation’s founding ideals will require ongoing attention to
87 maintaining public institutions designed to ensure that all persons can thrive.
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89 The church must speak today about the public space where political processes are the way that
90 we organize our common life, allocate our resources, and tackle our shared problems. Politics is
91 about the values we honor, the dollars we allocate, and the process we follow so that we can live
92 together with some measure of justice, order and peace.

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Resolution

WHEREAS the United States has an abundance of God’s resources, more than enough for all;

WHEREAS God’s resources are not being equitably shared;

WHEREAS in 2005, the income disparity between the rich and the poor in the United States has widened to the greatest degree since the 1920s;

WHEREAS millions are unemployed and millions more jobs pay too little to lift people out of poverty;

WHEREAS three of every four poor children across the United States now live in working families;

WHEREAS approximately 80 million people have lacked health insurance at some time during the past two years;

WHEREAS economic and racial residential segregation has significantly increased during the past quarter century in America’s major metropolitan areas;

WHEREAS public schools have become as segregated in many places as before the Civil Rights Movement, and our society leaves behind the children of the poor while providing a generous education for children of privilege;

WHEREAS despite that nearly three quarters of mothers now work outside the home, and at the same time welfare reform forces poor women to be in the workforce, our nation has not considered guaranteeing universally available, affordable, quality child care;

WHEREAS environmental contamination is frequently allowed to compromise the health of poor people and people of color, to contaminate the lands of indigenous peoples, and to destroy the integrity of God’s creation;

WHEREAS there are significant on-going efforts to privatize education, health care, and natural resources, and to reduce revenues collected through taxes as a strategy for reducing dependency on government services;

WHEREAS Congress has continued to reduce taxes on the wealthiest Americans who are most able to pay, and the ensuing revenue cuts are reducing the capacity of government to provide services on behalf of the common good;

WHEREAS federal tax cuts since 2001 will contribute to our generation’s passing an enormous burden of debt to our children;

138 **THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** that the Twenty-fifth General Synod of the United Church
139 of Christ calls upon the United Church of Christ in all its settings:

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- 141 • to uphold the common good as a foundational ideal in the United States;
- 142 • to reclaim the imperative to share God’s resources equitably and sustainably with all
- 143 God’s children; and
- 144 • to affirm the role of public institutions paid for by taxes for ensuring essential services
- 145 and protecting the good of the wider community;
- 146 • to honor and uplift the integrity of God’s creation
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148 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the United Church of Christ in all its settings will work to
149 make our culture reflect the following values:

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- 151 • that societies and nations are judged by the way they care for their most vulnerable
- 152 citizens;
- 153 • that government policy and services are central to serving the common good;
- 154 • that the sum total of individual choices in any private marketplace does not necessarily
- 155 constitute the public good;
- 156 • that paying taxes for government services is a civic responsibility of individuals and
- 157 businesses;
- 158 • that the tax code should be progressive, with the heaviest burden on those with the
- 159 greatest financial means;
- 160 • that the integrity of creation and the health and sustainability of ecological systems is the
- 161 necessary foundation for the well-being of all people and all living things for all time.
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163 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the United Church of Christ in all its settings will engage
164 in study, reflection, and prayer to learn about these issues and the consequences of current trends
165 to future generations to discern God’s call;

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167 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the United Church of Christ in all its settings will do
168 justice and promote the common good by working actively to:

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- 170 • ensure full employment, dignity on the job, living wages, and sufficient income for
- 171 everyone;
- 172 • provide adequate health care including reproductive rights as an entitlement for all.;
- 173 • guarantee affordable housing for all;
- 174 • guarantee accessible, affordable public transportation for all;
- 175 • eliminate residential and institutional segregation by income, race, and ethnicity in our
- 176 neighborhoods, among our suburbs, and in our public schools;
- 177 • provide opportunity for every child in well-funded, high quality public schools;
- 178 • provide a system of affordable, high quality child care for all of our children;
- 179 • regulate the release of toxic waste, clean up contaminated sites, and engage communities
- 180 in planning, implementing and evaluating projects that affect the quality of their
- 181 environment.

- 182 • support policies and practices that promote environmental protection, environmental
183 justice and sustainable, renewable development.

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185 Funding for this action will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the affected
186 agencies and the funds available.

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188 The Twenty-fifth General Synod calls upon Justice and Witness Ministries to develop the
189 strategy and program to implement this resolution.

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191 *The Executive Council recommends that the resolution entitled “For the Common Good” be*
192 *referred to a General Synod Committee.*

i. “The common good consists of the conditions and institutions necessary for human cooperation and the achievement of shared objectives as decisive normative elements in the social situation, elements which individualism is both unable to account for in theory and likely to neglect in practice.” [James F. Childress and John Macquarrie, editors, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), p. 102.]

ii. Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p. 76.

iii. General Synod 4 in 1963 called “upon the United Church of Christ to work through government at all levels to promote the general welfare, particularly in areas of education, health, work and leisure, housing and economic security. . .”

General Synod 7 recognized in 1969 that, “government has an important place in the providence of God in meeting his purposes and human needs. Christian stewardship regards the payment of taxes, levied through the democratic process, as a public duty, and their responsible use as a public trust.”

General Synod 9 in 1973 called “for publicly funded programs to improve and expand the Food Stamp, school breakfast and school lunch programs, and the creation of a new means to insure that no person is hungry in this society of abundance.”

General Synod 15 in 1985 called for “social policies leading to the elimination of poverty,” and called “for economic policies and systems which provide for the human needs of all people,” as part of a Just-Peace Church.

General Synod 16 in 1987 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.”

General Synod 17 in 1989 called on the church to advocate for poor women and children and to support, “creation of affordable housing, not welfare warehousing, and available, accessible health care regardless of economic status,” supported “welfare programs for women that are not punitive or demeaning. . .” and supported “adequate, affordable child care for families with working parents.”

General Synod 18 in 1991 declared 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. . .” and 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.”

General Synod 18 in 1991 supported, “the adoption of national policies guaranteeing food security to all people.”

General Synod 18 in 1991 affirmed, “the moral and justice imperatives of equal access for all people in the united States to high quality and affordable health care” and called “for the establishment of a universal health care system in the United States that provides: access for all persons equally, without discrimination; comprehensive services and benefits to all who need them; reasonable standards of cost containment; equitable and efficient delivery and financing; and educational support for health care workers.”

General Synod 21 in 1997 called for the defense of government from those who would maximize private interests at the expense of the common good...”

General Synod 22 in 1999 called “all expressions of the church. . . to advocate for policies assisting low income families that: provide assistance that doesn’t drastically decline as employment income increases; increase the minimum wage, provide living wages; provide regular employment with adequate pay and benefits with full employee rights and protections, provide education, training. . . provide access to child care, food stamps, health care, subsidized housing and transportation support; increase the amount of governmental child support; and increase federal and state earned income tax credit.”

General Synod 23 in 2001 called “upon the United Church of Christ in all its settings to proclaim public school support and advocacy for the

same as one of the foremost civil rights issues in the twenty-first century.”

iv. This competitive model fails to account for inequalities that give some individuals a huge advantage and others a severe disadvantage. Such an attitude ignores pervasive racism, sexism, classism, and structural inequality.