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

**Becoming a Church of Contemplatives in Action**

**A Resolution of Witness**

Submitted by

- Agape Spiritual Community, Waltham, MA
- Canaan Congregational Church, Canaan, MA
- First Church Williamstown, Williamstown, MA
- Sheffield United Church of Christ, Old Parish Church, Sheffield MA
- Park Congregational United Church of Christ, Toledo, OH
- Immanuel United Church of Christ of Catonsville, MD
- The First Congregational Church of Glen Ellyn, IL
- South Congregational Church, Pittsfield, MA
- Christ Church United, Lowell, MA
- First Church Cambridge, Cambridge, MA
- Keene Valley Congregational Church, Keene, NY
- First Church Pittsfield, UCC, MA
- Vergennes Congregational Church, Vergennes, VT

**SUMMARY**

This Resolution calls for the United Church of Christ to be a church of “contemplatives in action”. The United Church of Christ is known historically as a denomination for its bold leadership on social justice, peace, and environmental concerns. This resolution seeks the church’s integration of action for justice alongside intentional commitment to the life of prayer. Through fostering spiritual practices that deepen us in love for God, neighbors, ourselves, and all creation, this Resolution would empower the UCC to more fully root its collective life of activism for justice in the prayerful life of contemplation. By declaring its support for this resolution, the General Synod will emphasize the necessity of experiential grounding in the love of God alongside our common witness for justice and peace, while resourcing the wider church in the diversity of spiritual disciplines.

**BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL RATIONALE**

The church’s great commandment from Jesus is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Jesus rooted his ministry of teaching, healing, and solidarity with the marginalized through a life of prayer, solitude, silence, and intimate relationship with God. The three synoptic gospels tell how his ministry begins with a transformational time of solitary testing in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13). Periodically Jesus can be found stealing away from the busyness of the crowds to pray (Luke 5:16). Jesus’s public witness of creating inclusive community, exemplifying self-giving
love and service, forming disciples, making peace and engaging in nonviolent resistance to the
powers-that-be is all made possible because of his prayerful “union with the Father” (John
10:30). His life of integrated contemplation and action touches all aspects of Christian life
individually and communally.

Jesus said that we are the light of the world (Matthew 5: 14), sent to bear lasting spiritual fruit
(John 15:16), and that “the things that I do, you also will do, and even greater than these.” (John
14: 12). Just as Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1: 15) made visible in
the world, the church’s vocation is to incarnate Christ, in order that God’s love, justice, and
peace be made manifest. Thus, as Franciscan teacher Richard Rohr writes, “like Christ, you are
an incarnation of matter and spirit operating as one. This… is how all of us continue the mystery
of incarnation in space and time.”

The United Church of Christ, as a denomination, has been a courageous leader in actions for
social justice, peacemaking, environmental stewardship, and solidarity with those most
marginalized. At the same time, the UCC has not historically emphasized to the greatest extent
possible the fostering of spiritual, contemplative practices to love God and ourselves, and to see
God in all things, all people, and creation.

The UCC affirms that “God is still speaking.” To hear God’s still-speaking voice, the church
must follow the contemplative exemplars of our Christian tradition in ceasing from endless
activity and stilling our individual and collective bodies so that we are willing and ready to
listen. As Thomas Merton wrote, “God is present and . . . alive and awake in the fullness and
depth and breadth of all the silences of the world.” Jesus and the Scriptures teach that the Divine
is heard first in the stillness of the soul. Jesus said that the kingdom of God is within us (Luke
17:21). The Psalmist implored us to remember to “be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:
10) Jesus retreated from the crowds, listening to the “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19: 12) to
escape the temptations of ego, power, and acclaim. The single-minded vision of Jesus, grounded
in prayer and divine relationship, modeled putting God first above earthly concerns and riches
(Matthew 6: 25-34).

A contemplative consciousness changes us to become more aware of ourselves, the
interdependent nature of all life, and the presence of the Divine in our lives and world. Such a
grounding in the love of God allows us to “[receive and be] present to the moment and to the
now . . . without your ego deciding whether you like it or not. Reality does not need you to like it
in order to be reality.” This consciousness is what the broader Christian tradition affirms as
“mysticism.” “Mysticism… refers to a universal and unifying view of the world. One of the
quintessential insights of the mystics through the centuries is that the entire cosmos is . . .
embedded in webs of relationship that are interconnected, interdependent, and constantly being
co-created and reinvented.” It is just this type of unifying perspective that is needed in our time
of crisis and division.

Contemplation without action fuels narcissism, and action without contemplation is a recipe for
bitterness and spiritual depletion. As Rev. Traci Blackmon said at her talk at the Thirty Second
UCC General Synod. "The reason we're having so much trouble with the work out there is
because we haven't done the work in here… Jesus is not just asking us to be courageous. Jesus
has a bigger ask. Jesus is asking us to be transformed… and be changed from the inside out."\textsuperscript{5}

Christian mystics throughout the ages report that contemplative encounters with God are restful and rejuvenating to our souls or inspiring us towards creative action. "Those caught up in the intimacy with God explain that the experience expands their knowledge, awakens palpable and actionable love, and is either a profoundly restorative resting in divine presence or a "fire shut up in the bones" that inspires action. The action can be restorative of personal relationships or proactive for the needs of the community."\textsuperscript{6}

Contemplation is a holistic commitment to spiritual awakening. "Contemplation," Joan Chittister says,… "brings us to see the big picture. It brings us to see beyond our own boundaries, beyond our own denominations, beyond even our own doctrines and dogmas and institutional self-interest, straight into the face of a mothering God from whose womb has come all the life that is… We become connected to everything, to everyone…. Zeal for justice consumes us. Then, action and prayer are one."\textsuperscript{7}

**TEXT OF THE MOTION**

WHEREAS the 21st century has seen a resurgence of Christian spiritual and contemplative practices, yet many churchgoers have not heard of or engaged in these practices in church;

WHEREAS people who leave church often find a scarcity of spiritual food there to nourish their souls, and are frequently unfamiliar with practices that cultivate self-care and love of God; and have turned to other spiritual and secular communities and organizations to fulfill this need;

WHEREAS there is a wide diversity of spiritual practices in the Christian tradition, and we aim to honor the diversity of each of these practices as they serve to build up the body of Christ;

WHEREAS with the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, systemic racism, and the financial fallout causing greater need than ever for work for social justice, the church is called to model and share expressions of activism modeled in the contemplative spirit of Jesus;

WHEREAS Jesus said “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit” (John 15: 5), and Christian contemplative practices hold the goal of abiding more deeply in Christ;

WHEREAS if we look at the “Tree of Contemplative Practices”\textsuperscript{8} as but one example of this diversity, we see that the myriad of spiritual disciplines far surpasses what the Church universal and the UCC in particular have offered to church members. As Barbara Holmes says, "Contemplative practices can be silent or evocative, still or embodied in dance or shout. Always, contemplation requires attentiveness to the Spirit of God."\textsuperscript{9};

WHEREAS being “transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Romans 12: 2) begins with honest self-examination, reflective introspection and dialogue, and intentions and commitments to change, through God’s grace;
WHEREAS the UCC is rooted in the “Three Great Loves” of neighbor, children, and creation, and authentic contemplative practices expand our capacity and commitment to love and justice, so that we might be clearer channels for God’s love to shine through and might more fully “come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (Ephesians 4: 13)

WHEREAS the UCC is often identified as a progressive church for activists, whereas what makes the church unique is its spiritual grounding in the love and wholeness of God,

WHEREAS the church’s foundation of divine love grounds and informs communal life in the body of Christ, as well as provides the reason for why the church expresses its witness in active forms of justice, peace, and service in the world;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Thirty-Third General Synod of the United Church of Christ encourages local churches to become churches of “contemplatives in action,” remembering the essential disciplines modeled by Jesus of silent prayer, meditation, and practices to commune with the Divine Mother-Father, and letting contemplative depth inspire our forming and sustaining of life-giving, spiritually-generative community and our church’s action in the world through works of charity, social justice, peacemaking, earth-stewardship, and making disciples on the path of God’s unconditional, agape love;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED the that the Thirty-Third General Synod of the United Church of Christ encourages training of future clergy and lay leaders in the ways of contemplation, spiritual practice, and Christian mysticism, providing experiential grounding for the sustained life of faith; living into our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ and as children of God to see the Divine in everyone and everything in all creation, beginning with ourselves and expanding our love into ever-widening circles;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Thirty-Third General Synod invites local churches to commit to being a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” church- a church that prioritizes contemplation, spending time communing with God in various forms of prayer; and a church of activism that seeks to make God’s love and justice real in the world; thus a church of both contemplation and action—a church of “contemplatives in action” where our love of God through contemplative practices informs how we live and act in the world, and where our interior and exterior spiritual practices complement, ground, and inspire one another.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Thirty-Third General Synod calls upon all settings of the United Church of Christ to invest in curriculum and resources to support Conferences, Associations, local churches, clergy, lay leaders, General Synod and seminaries in practicing and teaching a foundational life of spiritual practices, as modeled in the life of Jesus. In this resourcing, all settings are called to remain committed to the UCC’s diversity as a Multicultural, Multiracial, and Anti-racist church, thus honoring the diversity of spiritual and contemplative practices and teachers from many and varied cultures through whom the spirit works in different ways;
BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the Thirty-Third General Synod encourages all settings of the UCC seek to live out the foundation of contemplative practices in the ministry of God’s work in the world—making inclusive, participatory spiritual practices and teachings that cultivate being, introspection, reflection and growth an integral part of National gatherings, including committee work, children’s, youth and adult ministries, ecumenical partnerships, and General Synod;

FUNDING: Funding for the implementation of the resolution will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

IMPLEMENTATION: The Collegium of Officers, in consultation with appropriate ministries of other entities with the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.

5 Traci Blackmon, UCC General Synod 32 Community Worship June 23 2019, found at 1 hour 47 minutes and 1 hour 51 minutes at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqgPgjiBT6U
7 Joan Chittister, Prophets Then, Prophets Now, disc 1 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2006), MP3 download., from RR Daily Meditation July 5, 2019)
8 http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree