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

A COMMITMENT TO GENDER SAFETY & EQUITY IN MINISTRY SETTINGS

A Resolution of Witness

Submitted by the Central Pacific Conference of the United Church of Christ

SUMMARY

This resolution calls us to renewed accountability for the theology of equality that we have long professed as the United Church of Christ. In a climate of increased violence and hatred, where women in public leadership are targeted with intimidation by the highest office of government, women and non-binary clergy are uniquely vulnerable as they stand in the pulpit. Clergy have begun to share their #metoo #churchtoo stories of discrimination, sexual harassment and abuse in the congregations where they serve. This resolution confesses our complicity with systems of sexist oppression, and asks the Church to explore ways to promote gender safety. It asks the Church to empower women and non-binary persons, both lay and ordained, to raise issues regarding sexism and discrimination, free of censure or threat of retaliation. This resolution expresses a commitment to the physical and sexual autonomy of women and non-binary persons. It urges congregations to address inequities (in pay, benefits, senior leadership, etc.) for clergy and lay women and non-binary persons who serve within the Church. Finally, it resolves that the Church do this work with intentionality and awareness of the added threats and realities of violence experienced by women and non-binary persons holding multiple marginalized identities.

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Our scriptural tradition has a complicated relationship with women. While women are counted in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1-17), their agency is mitigated by sexual exploitation (Tamar, Dinah, Bathsheba and many nameless others), objectification for barter or conquest (Ruth, Leah and Rachel), or as a buffer to protect men from violence (daughters of Lot). Patriarchal and misogynistic interpretations of scripture have only served to perpetuate and amplify the patriarchal culture and bias of those who wrote scripture.

Although women hold important roles in the stories of our faith, by the account of Carol Meyers, of the 1,426 names which appear in the Hebrew Testament, 1,315 are specified or presumed to be male. Of those women who are named, few of their stories appear in the lectionary or traditional Sunday School curriculum. Yet those women received an inheritance from YHWH (Hagar), saved the life of Moses (Shiphrah and Puah, Miriam), protected the people of God during war (Yael, Rahab), served as prophets (Deborah, Huldah), changed the torah so that women could inherit property (Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milkah and Noah), and advocated for their murdered children (Rizpah).
In the Christian Testament, Jesus shared a table with women and gave them a place, defending them against the judgment and accusations of others. Women were the first witnesses of the resurrection (Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James, Salome, Joanna, and others). Women were funders and foundational members of the earliest Christian congregations. Our scriptures tell us that women served as leaders and teachers (Priscilla), disciples (Tabitha), apostles (Junia), deacons (Phoebe) and patrons (Lydia) in the early church. Although their stories have been largely ignored and are only now being reclaimed, these texts provide an important affirmation of the importance of women’s leadership.

Biblically and theologically, the United Church of Christ affirms that women can and should serve and lead within the Church. The denomination has worked to adopt inclusive language, affirming that humankind, in all of our gender expressions, is created in the image of God. The United Church of Christ is proud to celebrate that a Congregationalist church ordained the first woman minister in the United States, Antoinette Brown, in 1853. (It is worth noting, however, that Brown left that church after only two years to become Unitarian.) Previous General Synods have affirmed the value and dignity of women, and called on us to recognize and address gender inequality and discrimination where they exist within the Church itself. As women began entering ordained ministry in great numbers, from the 1970s onward, the work of Marie Fortune and what is now the FaithTrust Institute helped committees on ministry develop processes to address ministerial sexual misconduct, as well as examine the ways women clergy were being harassed. Only recently has the United Church of Christ reached a point where more than 50% of active clergy are women.

In a climate of increased violence and hatred, where women in public leadership are targeted with intimidation by the highest office of government, women and non-binary clergy are uniquely vulnerable as they stand in the pulpit. Clergy across the United Church of Christ have begun to share their #metoo #churchtoo stories of discrimination, sexual harassment and abuse in the congregations where they serve. Stories of women’s leadership in scripture may seem to be the exception rather than the rule, and sexist assumptions and attitudes remain.

We are called to stand in solidarity with women and non-binary persons who, for the sake of their calling, risk their bodies and their lives to be faithful to the gospel. We are called to hold all clergy, regardless of age, gender, or active status, to the code of ethics that requires us to treat one another as equal partners in the ministry of Jesus Christ. This resolution calls us to accountability for the theology of equality that we profess as the United Church of Christ.

TEXT OF THE MOTION

WHEREAS: The General Synod of the United Church of Christ has taken a firm, unyielding stance for the human rights and safety of women, refuses to condone any form of violence against vulnerable people, and strongly encourages clergy and laity to support survivors of sexual violence; and

WHEREAS: The majority of women, both cisgender and transgender, whether they identify as women or as non-binary, are objectified and subjected to the violence and degradation of sexual assault and unwanted sexual advance; and
WHEREAS: Sexual harassment and gender discrimination, including attacking, undermining and dismissing women and non-binary persons’ leadership, is a form of violence; and occurs within a national context of escalating violence against women in positions of public leadership; and

WHEREAS: Women and non-binary persons risk further discrimination, violence, loss of employment, ostracism or death in daring to say no or confront the harasser, and penalty of being silenced or not believed when they dare to report; and

WHEREAS: Gender expression continues to be a minefield for women and non-binary persons, who are pressured to exude the amount of femininity that makes others comfortable – “too feminine” is seen as helpless or intentionally seductive, but “too masculine” is considered confrontational and disrespectful - and women are still judged on their appearance, rather than on their skills, ideas, achievements, or other non sexual/non-gendered attributes; and

WHEREAS: Women are still subject to economic violence, primarily in that they are paid less than men for the same or similar work, and this lower pay in turn reduces their pension, retirement benefits and Social Security payments; they are overcharged for “women’s products” and penalized for carrying out the responsibilities of home and family; and

WHEREAS: These experiences of bias, discrimination and violence occur in ministry settings, and are experienced by clergy and lay women and non-binary persons holding positions of leadership within the Church; and

WHEREAS: Such discrimination is founded in misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and racism, which are antithetical to the way of Jesus; and

WHEREAS: Our society is in the midst of a cultural transformation, with the #metoo movement empowering survivors to break the silence and share their stories of rape, abuse, and sexual harassment, and women and non-binary persons have begun sharing their #churchtoo stories of how this occurs within the Church; and

WHEREAS: Clergy, chaplains and faith leaders are called upon to provide pastoral care to those navigating gender discrimination, sexual harassment and violence, some of which occurs within our ministry settings; and

WHEREAS: The United Church of Christ Ministerial Code of Ethics requires ministers to “not use my position, power, or authority to exploit any person”, ix

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Thirty Third General Synod of the United Church of Christ, confesses its complicity with systems of sexist oppression that inhibit and limit leadership, and asks all settings of the United Church of Christ, including (but not limited to) Committees on Ministry, Local Church Ministries and Justice & Witness Ministries Teams, to explore ways to promote gender safety, to empower women and non-binary persons, both lay and ordained, to raise issues regarding sexism and discrimination, reinforcing the covenants and
standards of behavior which bind us together as conference, clergy, and lay leaders and members; and

BE IT ALSO RESOLVED that the Thirty Third General Synod of the United Church of Christ affirms the physical and sexual autonomy of women and non-binary persons: the right not to have any other person invade her/their personal space without permission; the right not to be touched, or abused, either emotionally or physically, in any way by another person; the right to express gender in the ways she/they choose; the right to communicate autonomously, without reproach or censure based in sexism and misogyny; the right to expect that any such action will in no way be held against her/them for any reason in the workplace, including ministry settings, or in any social situation; and

BE IT ALSO RESOLVED that the Thirty Third General Synod of the United Church of Christ encourages all settings of the UCC to commit to gender equity in staff compensation, and urges all settings to address inequities (in pay, benefits, senior leadership, etc.) for clergy and lay women and non-binary persons who serve within the Church; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the Thirty Third General Synod asserts that this work must simultaneously address the threats and realities of violence that racism, transphobia, heterosexism, classism, and ableism impose on the daily life and leadership of women and non-binary persons in the Church.

FUNDING

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

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iv https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/training
v https://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/churchtoo
viii https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence
ix United Church of Christ Ordained Minister’s Code, https://www.ucc.org/ministers_ordained-ministers-code