

Report to the 29th General Synod of the United Church of Christ

Re: Supporting International Human Rights Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
JWM/WCM

By adopting the resolution, Supporting International Human Rights Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, the 28th General Synod of the United Church of Christ, expressed important values as the basis of this witness:

- As a child of God, every person is endowed by God with worth and dignity that human judgment cannot set aside;
- Scripture should not be used to generate hatred and the violation of human rights, and
- International Human Rights Law ought to apply in relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI).

The Health and Wholeness Advocacy (HWA) Office of Wider Church Ministries (JWM/WCM) was assigned to take the lead on the implementation of the resolution. In the fall of 2011, a meeting with national program staff was convened to discuss the resolution and to suggest initial implementation strategies, including:

- A meeting with the Area Executives of Global Ministries
- Gathering of information on potential partners among persons and organizations connected to Global Ministries (ongoing)
- Presence at key United Nations and other international meetings where relationships could be strengthened or built, or advocacy employed
- Identify and engage with U.S. based organizations interested in this work, and
- Identify and share stories and other resources that can help build engagement with and support for these efforts.

Progress was made on these strategies. Meetings with the HWA Executive and Area Executives of Global Ministries took place in May and September of 2012 to discuss moving forward in culturally sensitive ways.

The HWA Office sponsored and the Executive attended the interfaith pre-conference and main conference of the International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (August 2011), where several international faith leaders gathered and which included discussions on human rights and sexual minorities. Rev. Elizabeth Leung and Bishop Yvette Flunder attended Amplify (June 2012) in Hong Kong, which gathered affirming Christian leaders from several countries in Asia and included discussions on race and homophobia.

At AIDS 2012, Washington DC, the United Church of Christ sponsored the “Spirit of 76 Project” which supported the participation of 25 faith leaders from countries with laws that criminalize sexual orientation or gender identity and ensured there were opportunities for their voices opposing such laws to be heard in both the interfaith pre-conference and the main conference.

HWA Executive, Rev. Michael Schuenemeyer, participated in a consultation at the World Council of Churches regarding creating safe spaces in the church for difficult conversations. The

conversations initiated a process for developing a framework for creating safe spaces across the global ecumenical movement. Such a framework will be useful for addressing sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as many other conversations which are difficult to have, such as gender based violence. Work continues to develop the framework and a group of affirming faith leaders are planning share an initial document with those gathered for the World Council of Churches General Assembly, Busan, S. Korea, November 2013.

At the interfaith meetings prior to the International Gay & Lesbian Association World Conference (December 2012, Stockholm, Sweden) initiative was taken to establish a global network of affirming faith leaders. The process of developing the network will be to build the network beginning with the global south.

Rev. Schuenemeyer serves as a member of the Advisory Council of the Global Justice Initiative, a project of the Metropolitan Community Churches and The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries. This project is working to support grassroots faith-based SOGI human rights efforts in Africa. The Global Justice Initiative has developed a good relationship with the U.S. Department of State and is working collaboratively with people on the ground in difficult places, such as Uganda, where anti-gay legislation that includes the death penalty, is still pending in the Ugandan Parliament. UCC General Minister and President, Rev. Geoffrey Black has been actively engaged with this effort, as has Rev. Sandra Gourdet, Executive for the Africa Office of Global Ministries.

Hadwen Park Congregational Church (Worcester, MA) continues to make an important witness by providing services for LGBT asylum seekers. Through the leadership of Rev. Judy Hanlon, the staff and participants in the program have shared the real stories of people affected by human rights violations related to sexual orientation and gender identity. They participated via video conference in a workshop at the 2012 National Youth Event at Purdue University. The demands for their services have increased as the news of their work spreads and as the U.S. State Department lives out its commitment to human rights inclusive of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

The U.N. Human Rights Council also continues to work to develop a stronger policy basis for SOGI human rights. The leadership of Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon and the High Commissioner of the U.N. Human Rights Council has been significant. A process is currently under way to bring a political declaration on SOGI human rights to the Human Rights Council meetings in June 2013. Regional meetings are currently happening that will culminate at meeting in Oslo, Norway in April. The HWA Office is monitoring this process and will keep the UCC informed about opportunities for advocacy as things develop.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. Michael Schuenemeyer, Executive
United Church of Christ Office for Health and Wholeness Advocacy