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

Resolution of Witness in Support of Adult Survivors of Child Abuse and Neglect

A Resolution of Witness

Submitted by Central Atlantic Conference

Summary:

This resolution encourages the various settings of the United Church of Christ (UCC), especially its congregations, to address publicly the healing needs of adult survivors of child abuse and neglect by reinforcing the truth that survivors are not to blame for their victimization and that the United Church of Christ welcomes them in experiencing God’s love and compassion within a community that is called to radical inclusivity. To this end, it asks the UCC’s national setting to create and disseminate an educational curriculum that can be used by churches as they seek to minister compassionately and effectively to such survivors. It also encourages the various settings of the UCC to advocate at the state and federal levels for various legislative and policy reforms that will safeguard the rights and facilitate the healing of survivors. Adoption of this resolution will be groundbreaking because for the first time, a national organization in the United States – either secular or religious – will publicly proclaim its solidarity with, acceptance of, and support for adult survivors of child abuse and neglect. And the hope is that by “living in” to this resolution, the United Church of Christ will come to be identified as a safe place for survivors to experience healing and true fellowship.

Biblical, Theological, and Historical Grounding:

The noted German theologian Martin Luther once said, “If you preach the gospel in all aspects with the exception of the issues that deal specifically with your time, you are not preaching the gospel at all.” Doubtless, there are problems intrinsic to the human condition that are troubling to us all. Nevertheless, if there is a particular area of concern that emerges into our consciousness and pricks our conscience here and now, then we must deal with it, no matter how dark its place of origin. And one such relevant area of concern has been brought to our attention by a specific group of sufferers who have come looking for help, looking to God for healing, and trusting that our houses of worship will be homes of refuge and healing for them – indeed, that they will be one of the few places of safety that they will ever know in their lives. These sufferers have been traumatized by being assaulted and violated; they have been taken to the dark places of someone’s soul. These are the survivors of child abuse, the victims of physical, verbal, and sexual violence – and most often by those entrusted to protect, nurture, and guide them into adulthood.

And regrettably, the church historically has failed to welcome and support these survivors. Indeed, many of them have entered the offices of clergy looking for comfort and encouragement; and almost as many have left feeling more trapped and guilty than they did before they sought ecclesiastical support and succor. Imagine the dismay of the survivors in the presence of the
church’s attitude of dismissal! Most often, it has only been by the grace of God, and not also through the ministrations of the church, that they have survived their childhood horrors.

To be sure, the church has here only followed the precedent set by King David and Absalom in relation to the violation of Tamar by her half-brother, Amnon (also the King’s son), as recorded in 2 Samuel 13: 1-22. Tamar’s father, David, covered up the scandal, as did her brother, Absalom, who took the desolate young woman into his home. Indeed, Tamar was declared “disgraced” through no fault of her own and was asked to keep silent.

But demanding silence from victims is not the counsel of the Divine, who instead implores us to “open (our) mouths, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy.” (Proverbs 31: 9) Indeed, God admonishes us to “do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor; (to) not mistreat or do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; (and to) not shed innocent blood in his place.” (Jeremiah 22: 3)

Still, the church overwhelmingly continues to disregard the still-speaking voice of God and to ignore the pleadings of survivors. Perhaps it fears the potential damage to the reputations of persons and families if it should listen and respond in Christ-like ways to the cries of survivors. And, of course, some of the abusers themselves have been (and are) leaders in the church. But the time has now come for the church to feel and act differently toward adult survivors of child abuse and neglect – and to do so in a decisive and emancipative way.

To be sure, the issue to consider is not so much that or how the church has heretofore ignored or denied the hidden hurts of survivors; rather, what is of utmost moment is what the God whom Jesus decisively reveals declares about the long-term insidious and invidious effects of childhood abuse and neglect and what we should be doing to respond constructively to them here and now. Granted, the United Church of Christ’s historical (and historic!) witness has partially responded through resolutions advocating for the welfare of children, including those concerning “Child Abuse & Exploitation of Youth” (1983 GS 14), “In Support of the Rights of God’s Children” (1993 GS 19), and “Creating a World Safe for Children Free from Violence” (1995 GS 20). But that witness has lacked a clarion call proclaiming the UCC’s commitment to provide safety and healing to, as well as advocacy for, the survivors of such abuse and neglect. This resolution would provide that much-needed and long-awaited call.

There are countless individuals sitting in our pews right now that have survived a horrendous journey to one of the darkest corners of the human soul, a place that harbors justification for any form of child abuse. This resolution seeks to bring the still-present wounds of those survivors into the light of God’s comfort and healing by declaring that the church and each of its members as a follower of Christ have a responsibility to provide help and comfort to those who have been violated, even and especially by family members; to those in need of reassurance and justice; and to those who have been damaged and distressed by childhood abuse and neglect. And our open arms will let each and every survivor know that as a member of the United Church of Christ, “You are in a safe place.” In so doing, we will heed the call of the God of Jesus, who invites us to “bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)
The Text of the Motion:

WHEREAS, Jesus declared in Matthew 25:40, “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto me”;

WHEREAS, Jesus asked in Matthew 7:9, “What man is there of you, whom if his son asks for bread, will he give him a stone?”;

WHEREAS, Jesus says in Matthew 18:6-7, “But who so shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea”;

WHEREAS, one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually assaulted before they reach the age of eighteen;

WHEREAS, the incidence rate of child abuse and neglect is 10 times as high (40 children per 1,000 children per year) as the incidence rate for all forms of cancer (3.9 individuals per 1,000 individuals per year);

WHEREAS, children in their first year have the highest rate of victimization (24.4 children per 1,000 children) among individuals in respect to any one-year span in the national population;

WHEREAS, 80% of perpetrators are parents;

WHEREAS, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), or the various forms of abuse and neglect (e.g., psychological, physical, sexual) that children experience often as a result of household dysfunction (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness), are the most preventable causes of serious mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse in women, and high-risk behavior (e.g., IV drugs, promiscuity) for HIV, as well as significant contributors to the leading causes of death in the general population (heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and suicide);

WHEREAS, ACES have a negative impact on child development, as manifested in adverse neurobiological effects (e.g., brain abnormalities, stress hormone dysregulation), deleterious psychosocial consequences (e.g., poor attachment, poor socialization, poor self-efficacy), and significant health-risk behaviors (e.g., smoking, obesity, substance abuse, promiscuity);

WHEREAS, ACES also have significant long-term consequences, including the occurrence and recurrence of various diseases, dysfunctional coping and disabilities (e.g., major depression, suicide, PTSD, drug and alcohol abuse, heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, sexually transmitted diseases, intergenerational transmission of abuse), and assorted social problems (e.g., homelessness, prostitution, criminal behavior, dysfunctional parenting, inordinate utilization of health and social services), often resulting in shortened lifespans;

WHEREAS, the estimated total lifetime financial costs associated with all confirmed cases of child maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse and neglect) is approximately $124 billion for every year of maltreatment;
WHEREAS, arbitrary statutes of limitations deny most adult survivors of child abuse and neglect some means of just recompense for the crimes committed against them as children, as it is very common for survivors to struggle for decades (and long after the expiry of such statutes) before properly making the connection between childhood abuse and the struggles they often experience;

WHEREAS, eliminating such statutes of limitations will provide many such survivors the opportunity to gain just recompense from their perpetrators and/or the organizations that failed to protect them (e.g., schools, daycare centers, religious associations, sports clubs, activity clubs); 9

WHEREAS, many survivors of child abuse and neglect often experience spiritual struggles in the course of healing, trying to come closer to God as they question how God could allow such abuse and neglect to happen in the first place. 10 Indeed, trauma can shake people’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast them into a state of existential crisis whereby they begin to lose trust in an all-powerful and good God, assume that their world is anything but safe and well-ordered, and believe that they themselves are wicked and deserving of bad outcomes; 11

Whereas, for some survivors, the loss of positive religious beliefs (e.g., in the goodness of others, in spiritual and faith traditions, in a beneficent God) or the learning of negative religious beliefs (e.g., that bad things happen because of divine sanction or retribution for individual sin or sins) that often accompanies traumatization can be debilitating. Indeed, such loss or learning can fuel the shame, guilt, despair, and hopelessness that undergird suicidality and harmful risk taking, as well as adversely impact the ability and desire to show love to others. 12

WHEREAS, insofar as the retention or acquirement of authentic religious beliefs and a salubrious spirituality protects some survivors against suicide or contributes more generally to their process of healing, the traumatized may also come to a point in their recovery when they benefit by giving service back to others, both within and outside their religious community. Finding ways that survivors can serve others or contribute to a higher cause can help them find meaning and purpose in what they have experienced and in their lives. Often the survivors’ religious community can facilitate this kind of service, helping them to take down the walls they have put up to protect themselves. 13

WHEREAS, abused children normally do not tell anyone about their abuse; and even when they become adults, they either never tell anyone or wait for years/decades before disclosing their abuse because of the fear of negative responses from others; 14

WHEREAS, in United States history, not one President or member of Congress has ever put the plight of adult survivors of child abuse on the national agenda;

WHEREAS, the media has been complicit in the fact that there has never been a national discussion about the plight of adult survivors of child abuse and neglect; and
WHEREAS, there is no national database to report accurately on the number of adult survivors of child abuse and neglect in the United States, thus negatively impacting the capacity to provide adequate services for survivors;¹⁵

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Thirty-First General Synod of the United Church of Christ not only reaffirms and supports past General Synod resolutions advocating for the welfare of children but also now calls upon the various settings of the UCC to address publicly the healing needs of adult survivors of child abuse and neglect by reinforcing the truth that survivors are not to blame for their victimization and that the United Church of Christ welcomes them in experiencing God’s love and compassion within its community of radical inclusivity;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the Thirty-First General Synod of the United Church of Christ encourages each Association and congregation of the United Church of Christ to educate its members that adult survivors are, for the most part, invisible because of the compulsion they have felt since childhood not to self-disclose, as well as to train its members to respond positively to those who are ready to self-disclose (probably for the first time) through words and deeds that are accepting, validating, non-judgmental, and non-pressuring;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Thirty-First General Synod of the United Church of Christ asks the UCC’s national setting to assist in such educating and training by creating and disseminating a study guide that can be used by churches as they seek to minister compassionately and effectively to adult survivors of child abuse and neglect; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Thirty-First General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon the various settings of the UCC to work with state and federal representatives to strengthen the Americans with Disabilities Act so that mental disabilities are accommodated just as much as physical disabilities in the workplace; to encourage state and federal lawmakers to develop a standardized method of reporting child mental, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and/or child neglect by clinicians, criminal justice organizations, social service providers, healthcare organizations, insurance companies, researchers, and public policy makers; to encourage state and federal lawmakers to eliminate statutes of limitations for child abuse and neglect, as such statutes infringe upon the procedural due process rights of adult survivors of child abuse and neglect by denying them access to the courts and thereby to legal justice; and to work with the media and state and federal legislators to focus strongly on the need to support adult survivors of child abuse and neglect.

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

10. It’s Not You, It’s What Happened to You: Complex Trauma and Treatment, by Christine Courtois, PhD, ABPP, LLC (2014).
11. Life After Trauma: A Workbook for Healing, by Dena Rosenbloom & Mary Beth Williams (Second Edition; 2010).