

Discrimination Against Older Clergy in the United Church of Christ A Resolution Approved by General Synod XVI (1987)

Background

Discrimination against older persons in the job market is a widespread problem in our society. Many of our church members, finding themselves unemployed and over fifty, report finding employment opportunities closed to them in spite of qualifications. This is a serious personal and social problem today.

Discrimination against older clergy also exists within the Church. There are complaints about it from clergy of many denominations. One of our pastors, seeking a new position at age 60, was openly told by the chairperson of one search committee that he was turned down because of his age. The committee was looking for a younger pastor. Others report similar experiences. One sensitive and skilled pastor, aware of his own abilities and limitations, recognizing that the time had arrived when a change would be beneficial to the life of his congregations and to his own personal life, has met with rejection time after time. One interview he did have was dominated by a member of the search committee who openly and repeatedly questioned whether a 55 year old clergyperson would have the stamina to lead the church. An association counselor was told by one search committee that they would consider no candidate over the age of 45! A conference minister, seeking to return to a parish pastorate, reported being rejected by search committees because of age. A national staff person recalled that "my father met age discrimination when he was in his late fifties and attempted to move to another parish." Another gifted senior pastor said he had given up trying to move and was waiting until age 62 when, assisted by modest retirement benefits, he would seek opportunities in interim ministry.

Stories of discrimination against older clergy are legion. The problem does exist in the United Church of Christ. Yet these people often bring mature judgment, valuable experience, and proven competence in ministry. Discrimination on account of age denies the church these valuable benefits. It also destroys the morale of some of our most valuable people – people who have given a lifetime of service and have, in that process, acquired wisdom, understanding, and skill they are called by God to share with the Church.

The concern of this Resolution is to address a need of the whole Church as well as of its clergy in the third of their active ministry—who are able and eager to give valuable service yet find themselves frustrated by blind prejudice widespread in both church and society.

Resolution

WHEREAS, discrimination against older people is a serious problem in both church and society in modern America;

WHEREAS, most, if not all, of the conferences and instrumentalities of the United Church of Christ have declared themselves to be equal opportunity employers;

WHEREAS, discrimination against older clergy exists with the United Church of Christ;

WHEREAS, this discrimination causes untold pain, frustration, and low morale among experienced clergy who have valuable experience, wisdom, and skill to share with congregations and with the Church at large;

WHEREAS, Conference ministers and national leadership are aware of the existence of discrimination against older clergy;

WHEREAS, the United Church of Christ appreciates and is concerned for its experienced clergy;

BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED, the Sixteenth General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon conferences and instrumentalities of the Church as well as local congregations each to affirm its support of these veteran disciples of our Lord.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the Sixteenth General Synod calls upon the Office of Communication, the Office for Church Life and Leadership, the Office for Church in Society, the Board for Homeland Ministries, and other instrumentalities of the United Church of Christ to use national Church communication resources, including United Church News, to join in calling attention to the sin of Ageism in Church and Society and to educate our Church people concerning the rich resources the Church has in clergy and other persons gifted with age and experience.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the Sixteenth General Synod calls upon the Office for Church Life and Leadership, the Office for Church in Society, the Office of Communication, the United Church News, and publications of the various conferences to address the problem of Ageism at all levels of the Church's life with programs of consciousness raising and education with respect to the unique contributions the more experienced clergy have to give the Church.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the Sixteenth General Synod requests the Office for Church Life and Leadership, in cooperation with conference and association ministers and placement personnel, to develop a program for training search committees at all levels of the Church to evaluate the needs of the local church or denominational office to be filled, to assess the unique and proven abilities of clergy of whatever age, and to interview candidates in a manner designed to call forth those positive qualities of maturity, competence, experience, and proven ability each has to offer.