

The Executive Council has recommended this resolution be sent to a committee of the General Synod.

## **A Call for Study of Our Church's Involvement in the Eugenics Movement**

(A Prudential Resolution)

**APPROVED**

**Submitted By:** The Kansas-Oklahoma Conference

### **Summary Statement**

The Kansas-Oklahoma Conference invites the Twenty-seventh General Synod to call for a study of the involvement in the eugenics movement of our predecessor denominations, our churches, and clergy. The purpose of such a study will be to determine what the history actually is, whether some of the ideology affects our current conversation about current issues, and whether the United Church of Christ should consider apologizing for our involvement.

### **Background**

Issues of genetics, immigration, race, and sexual orientation are central to current public policy discussions.

One concern is the possibility that genetic therapies might be used in a way that is prejudiced against difference. People with physical and mental disabilities could be targeted. Sexual orientation could also be targeted (see the call by Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for the use of genetic therapies to alter the sexual orientation of gay fetuses, [http://www.albertmohler.com/blog\\_read.php?id=891](http://www.albertmohler.com/blog_read.php?id=891)).

There is also a growing anti-immigrant attitude in the United States, which occasionally ventures close to language about racial purity.

Even the measurements used in our current No Child Left Behind education policy may be grouping and categorizing people in unjust ways with lasting effects.

As a society we must dialogue about the ethical issues involved, and the Church should participate in the theological conversation by looking at its own history within the eugenics movement, which lasted from the mid-nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century.

The purposes of eugenics were to support the births of desirable hereditary stock and to lessen or prevent the births of those with undesirable hereditary stock, in an effort to prevent degeneration of particular races and nations. *Positive eugenics* was the term used to denote encouraging white middle- and upper-class women to take on the full-time roles of mother and wife so that they would have as many healthy, normal children as possible. *Negative eugenics* was the term used to denote restricting immigration of those understood as providing poor stock to the nation, and segregating from society and/or involuntarily sterilizing members of the “socially inadequate classes” of society. These classes

included the epileptic, the poor, the feeble-minded, the insane, the deformed, and certain criminals. From 1907 to 1963, over 63,000 people were involuntarily sterilized in the United States.

Christine Rosen's book *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement*, documents the involvement of many churches in the United States, including churches which later became members of the United Church of Christ. As Rosen explains, eugenicists and ministers of the progressive Social Gospel Movement had the complementary aims of preservation of particular races and social salvation. Rosen's volume led us to explore further on our own. Among the many startling facts which we have researched are these:

Congregational clergyman and social gospel pioneer Rev. Josiah Strong wrote *Our Country* in 1885, praising Anglo-Saxons as "the standard bearers of Christianity and civilization."

One of the first eugenics studies in the United States was conducted by the Rev. Oscar Carleton McCulloch of Plymouth Congregational Church in Indianapolis in 1877. His efforts arose in an attempt to cope with local poverty and the conditions which gave rise to it. He made a hobby of tracking "hereditary degeneracy." McCulloch argued that charity and philanthropy furthered these conditions rather than alleviating them, and must be approached with new scientific methods, namely eugenics.

On June 3, 1913 the Rev. Henry E. Jackson of the Christian Union Congregational Church of Montclair, New Jersey, officiated at the "first eugenic wedding." According to the June 4 *New York Times*, Rev. Jackson "announced that he would require the bridegroom in all marriage ceremonies that he performed to furnish a medical certificate."

Newell Dwight Hillis, pastor of Brooklyn's prominent Plymouth Congregational Church, was one of the organizers of the First National Conference on Race Betterment in 1914. Also during this time Hillis spoke routinely around the country of the *Mayflower Studies*, which decried the dying out of the "old New England families": "Considering the role which the *Mayflower* descendants have played in the history of our nation, this result is certainly one to be greatly deplored." He was concerned about the loss of Mayflower descendants' good stock and poor stock of immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Many ministers of a wide variety of denominations participated in annual preaching contests promoting eugenics. The first of these contests was hosted by the American Eugenics Society Committee on Cooperation with Clergymen in 1926 with ministers submitting sermons on the topic "Religion and Eugenics: Does the church have a responsibility for improving the human stock?" One of the contest judges was Ozora S. Davis, President of Chicago Theological Seminary. Two years later, as this contest continued, Rev. Edwin W. Bishop of the Plymouth Congregational Church in Lansing, Michigan, won third prize with his sermon "Eugenics and the Church," which includes this passage:

Jesus plainly taught that individuals differed widely in their innate capacities, that there were one-talent men and two-talent men and five-talent men, and that capacity self-fulfillment would come in realizing the inherent endowment. . . Enter therefore eugenics.

One of the founders of marriage and family therapy in the United State was eugenicist Paul Popenoe. He also founded the Human Betterment Foundation which assisted California in sterilizing over 20,000 people. Popenoe, a Mayflower descendent, taught Sunday school for many years in the Congregational Church, according to his son David Popenoe. Paul Popenoe was convinced of the

usefulness of churches in the eugenics education effort. Many church ministries appear to have been involved in the movement. One example is the Life Adjustment Institute of the Mount Pleasant Congregational Church of Washington, D. C. which taught eugenics as a part of marriage and family education, as did much of the health education in public schools. This was part of a larger movement supported by President Hoover and the White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, which declared that “there shall be no child in America that has not the complete birthright of a sound mind in a sound body,” an idea supported by the American Child Health Association and a national sterilization organization called “Birthright.”

Prominent names such as Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick are implicated in this history. Rev. Fosdick was a member of the American Eugenics Society Advisory Council, believing that eugenics could get at the cause of social degeneration, whereas philanthropy could deal only with the symptoms. The person elected Executive Secretary of the American Eugenics Society in 1934 was Congregational minister George Reid Andrews.

In 1931 Pilgrim Press published *Young People’s Relationships*, the transcripts of the Conference on Preparation for Marriage and Homemaking, sponsored by the American Eugenics Society; the conference advocated women of good stock staying in the home and breeding well.

In 1935, Rosen explains, Dr. Alexis Carrel advocated in *Man, the Unknown*, a national bestseller, “the creation of a utopia autocratically ruled by an ‘enlightened elite’ in which the ‘unfit’ would be euthanistically disposed of in gas chambers.” A Google search of Alexis Carrel turned up many Carrel quotes on the web pages of UCC churches and even his image in the stained glass windows of the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles.

An awareness of our history will assist us in the contemporary conversations on similar issues. Federal government, state governments, charities, as well as many other churches were involved in the eugenics movement, but that does not lessen our responsibility to examine our own history of involvement.

## **Theological Rationale**

According to Ann Gibson Winfield in *Eugenics and Education in America*, our institutional memory continues to affect us in the present, even when we have consciously rejected particular ideologies. Barbara Brown Zikmund, writing in *Hidden Histories*, on the UCC website, agrees. She writes,

History is not always neat and fair. And the UCC history is more complex than the historical orthodoxy that informs its self-image. The United Church of Christ is an extremely pluralistic and diverse denomination that is nourished by many "hidden histories." These important stories out of its past do not appear within the traditional fourfold history. Yet, as Gunnemann says, only when churchpeople know the beliefs, movements, and events that make up their history will they be able to accept ownership and be shaped by that history.

We pride ourselves on our historic firsts, breaking new ground in the realms of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Yet, welcome, inclusion, and affirmation are not the only aspects of our faith tradition’s history. We must examine the darker side, express contrition, if appropriate, and evaluate the extent to which we or other members of society may still hold the tenets of eugenics.

Sometimes, when an individual or community thinks that it understands a situation, it may realize later that it lacked wisdom totally (Matt. 11:16-19).

Even when a community unintentionally commits a sin, it is still guilty and must try to make the situation right (Lev. 4:13).

The point of the eugenics movement was to reject the stranger, because of the threat to purity. However, Christians are called to accept and be hospitable to the stranger (Heb. 13:2, Matt. 25:35).

As Rosen records in her book, with the emergence of Christian realism with such figures as Reinhold Niebuhr, it was understood that the social improvements offered by science might not be in sympathy with the aims of the Christian Church. We call on the UCC to search its history to see how beliefs held then contrast with but might inadvertently influence the current aims of the UCC. These aims include:

- Concerns about our stewardship of creation
- Concerns about contemporary threats to diversity and difference in the realms of race, ability, gender, sexual orientation, etc.
- Our historic stances on inclusion
- Our criticisms of racism, sexism, homophobia, and discrimination against the disabled
- Our struggles for economic and social justice
- Our support of more humane immigration policy
- Our desire to express the compassion and righteousness of God
- Our efforts to seek truth and reconciliation for past wrongs

## **Resolution**

**WHEREAS**, current public policy debates center around issues of difference with regard to race, immigration, gender, sexual orientation, genetic therapies, education, etc.;

**WHEREAS**, the Church should be involved in these debates and conversations;

**WHEREAS**, the church and society previously debated these issues during the eugenics movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries;

**WHEREAS**, the moral and theological wrongs of the eugenics movement are legion;

**WHEREAS**, the predecessor denominations of the United Church of Christ, their churches, and clergy were intimately involved in the eugenics movement; and

**WHEREAS**, the United Church of Christ has claimed in previous resolutions that institutionalized injustices continue to affect contemporary society;

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that the Twenty-seventh General Synod of the United Church of Christ encourages conferences, associations, congregations, agencies, and ministries of the United Church of Christ to join in active **study exploration and education** on issues dealing with our history of involvement in the eugenics movement; and the ethical implications on eugenics today **and to share their significant findings with Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ.**

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ is called on to **develop a direct the development of a study paper** concerned with the **our history of involvement in the eugenics movement with the goal of to determining whether an apology for that involvement ought to be offered by the Church; and determine the need of information in implications today.** **determine the historical involvement and to propose future actions of the United Church of Christ on this matter.**

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ is requested to **develop a study packet for individual churches so that each might study its own history, as well as that of the UCC and the larger society.** **report their findings to the next General Synod, including suggested resources for further study for individual congregations, associations, and conferences of the United Church of Christ.**

## **FUNDING**

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

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

Justice and Witness Ministries is requested to implement this resolution.

## **Source Materials**

Carrel, Alexis. *Man, the Unknown*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1935.

Currell, Susan and Christina Cogdell, Editors. *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930's*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006.

Groves, Ernest R. "The Family" in *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 35, No. 6 (May, 1930) pp. 1017-1026.

Mohler, Albert. "Is Your Baby Gay? What If You Could Know? What If You Could Do Something About It?" [http://www.albertmohler.com/blog\\_read.php?id=891](http://www.albertmohler.com/blog_read.php?id=891)

Popenoe, Paul. *Applied Eugenics*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1927.

Robitscher, Jonas. *Eugenic Sterilization*. Springfield IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1973.

Rosen, Christine. *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Winfield, Ann Gibson. *Eugenics and Education in America: Institutionalized Racism and the Implications of History, Ideology, and Memory*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007.

Zikmund, Barbara Brown. "Hidden Histories." <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/hiddenhistoriesi.pdf>