

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

**Becoming a Church of Contemplatives in Action**

**A Resolution of Witness**

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1 **SUMMARY**

2

3 This Resolution calls for the United Church of Christ to be a church of “contemplatives in  
4 action”. The United Church of Christ is known historically as a denomination for its bold  
5 leadership on social justice, peace, and environmental concerns. This resolution seeks the  
6 church’s integration of action for justice alongside intentional commitment to the life of prayer.  
7 Through fostering spiritual practices that deepen us in love for God, neighbors, ourselves, and all  
8 creation, this Resolution would empower the UCC to more fully root its collective life of  
9 activism for justice in the prayerful life of contemplation. By declaring its support for this  
10 resolution, the General Synod will emphasize the necessity of experiential grounding in the love  
11 of God alongside our common witness for justice and peace, while resourcing the wider church  
12 in the diversity of spiritual disciplines.

13

14 **BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL RATIONALE**

15

16 The church’s great commandment from Jesus is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and  
17 strength and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Jesus rooted his ministry of teaching,  
18 healing, and solidarity with the marginalized through a life of prayer, solitude, silence, and  
19 intimate relationship with God. The three synoptic gospels tell how his ministry begins with a  
20 transformational time of solitary testing in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-  
21 13). Periodically Jesus can be found stealing away from the busyness of the crowds to pray  
22 (Luke 5:16). Jesus’s public witness of creating inclusive community, exemplifying self-giving

23 love and service, forming disciples, making peace and engaging in nonviolent resistance to the  
24 powers-that-be is all made possible because of his prayerful “union with the Father” (John  
25 10:30). His life of integrated contemplation and action touches all aspects of Christian life  
26 individually and communally.

27  
28 Jesus said that we are the light of the world (Matthew 5: 14), sent to bear lasting spiritual fruit  
29 (John 15:16), and that “the things that I do, you also will do, and even greater than these.” (John  
30 14: 12). Just as Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1: 15) made visible in  
31 the world, the church’s vocation is to incarnate Christ, in order that God’s love, justice, and  
32 peace be made manifest. Thus, as Franciscan teacher Richard Rohr writes, “like Christ, you are  
33 an incarnation of matter and spirit operating as one. This... is how all of us continue the mystery  
34 of incarnation in space and time.”<sup>1</sup>

35  
36 The United Church of Christ, as a denomination, has been a courageous leader in actions for  
37 social justice, peacemaking, environmental stewardship, and solidarity with those most  
38 marginalized. At the same time, the UCC has not historically emphasized to the greatest extent  
39 possible the fostering of spiritual, contemplative practices to love God and ourselves, and to see  
40 God in all things, all people, and creation.

41  
42 The UCC affirms that “God is still speaking.” To hear God’s still-speaking voice, the church  
43 must follow the contemplative exemplars of our Christian tradition in ceasing from endless  
44 activity and stilling our individual and collective bodies so that we are willing and ready to  
45 listen. As Thomas Merton wrote, “God is present and . . . alive and awake in the fullness and  
46 depth and breadth of all the silences of the world.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus and the Scriptures teach that the Divine  
47 is heard first in the stillness of the soul. Jesus said that the kin-dom of God is within us (Luke  
48 17:21). The Psalmist implored us to remember to “be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:  
49 10) Jesus retreated from the crowds, listening to the “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19: 12) to  
50 escape the temptations of ego, power, and acclaim. The single-minded vision of Jesus, grounded  
51 in prayer and divine relationship, modeled putting God first above earthly concerns and riches  
52 (Matthew 6: 25-34).

53  
54 A contemplative consciousness changes us to become more aware of ourselves, the  
55 interdependent nature of all life, and the presence of the Divine in our lives and world. Such a  
56 grounding in the love of God allows us to “[receive and be] present to the moment and to the  
57 now . . . without your ego deciding whether you like it or not. Reality does not need you to like it  
58 in order to be reality.”<sup>3</sup> This consciousness is what the broader Christian tradition affirms as  
59 “mysticism.” “Mysticism... refers to a universal and unifying view of the world. One of the  
60 quintessential insights of the mystics through the centuries is that the entire cosmos is . . .  
61 embedded in webs of relationship that are interconnected, interdependent, and constantly being  
62 co-created and reinvented.”<sup>4</sup> It is just this type of unifying perspective that is needed in our time  
63 of crisis and division.

64  
65 Contemplation without action fuels narcissism, and action without contemplation is a recipe for  
66 bitterness and spiritual depletion. As Rev. Traci Blackmon said at her talk at the Thirty Second  
67 UCC General Synod. “The reason we’re having so much trouble with the work out there is  
68 because we haven’t done the work in here... Jesus is not just asking us to be courageous. Jesus

69 has a bigger ask. Jesus is asking us to be transformed... and be changed from the inside out."<sup>5</sup>  
70 Christian mystics throughout the ages report that contemplative encounters with God are restful  
71 and rejuvenating to our souls or inspiring us towards creative action. "Those caught up in the  
72 intimacy with God explain that the experience expands their knowledge, awakens palpable and  
73 actionable love, and is either a profoundly restorative resting in divine presence or a "fire shut up  
74 in the bones" that inspires action. The action can be restorative of personal relationships or  
75 proactive for the needs of the community."<sup>6</sup>

76  
77 Contemplation is a holistic commitment to spiritual awakening. "Contemplation," Joan Chittister  
78 says,... "brings us to see the big picture. It brings us to see beyond our own boundaries, beyond  
79 our own denominations, beyond even our own doctrines and dogmas and institutional self-  
80 interest, straight into the face of a mothering God from whose womb has come all the life that  
81 is... We become connected to everything, to everyone.... Zeal for justice consumes us. Then,  
82 action and prayer are one."<sup>7</sup>

### 83 84 **TEXT OF THE MOTION**

85  
86 **WHEREAS** the 21st century has seen a resurgence of Christian spiritual and contemplative  
87 practices, yet many churchgoers have not heard of or engaged in these practices in church;

88  
89 **WHEREAS** people who leave church often find a scarcity of spiritual food there to nourish their  
90 souls, and are frequently unfamiliar with practices that cultivate self-care and love of God; and  
91 have turned to other spiritual and secular communities and organizations to fulfill this need;

92  
93 **WHEREAS** there is a wide diversity of spiritual practices in the Christian tradition, and we aim  
94 to honor the diversity of each of these practices as they serve to build up the body of Christ;

95  
96 **WHEREAS** with the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, systemic racism, and the financial  
97 fallout causing greater need than ever for work for social justice, the church is called to model  
98 and share expressions of activism modeled in the contemplative spirit of Jesus;

99  
100 **WHEREAS** Jesus said "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in  
101 them bear much fruit" (John 15: 5), and Christian contemplative practices hold the goal of  
102 abiding more deeply in Christ;

103  
104 **WHEREAS** if we look at the "Tree of Contemplative Practices"<sup>8</sup> as but one example of this  
105 diversity, we see that the myriad of spiritual disciplines far surpasses what the Church universal  
106 and the UCC in particular have offered to church members. As Barbara Holmes says,  
107 "Contemplative practices can be silent or evocative, still or embodied in dance or shout. Always,  
108 contemplation requires attentiveness to the Spirit of God."<sup>9</sup>;

109  
110 **WHEREAS** being "transformed by the renewing of our minds" (Romans 12: 2) begins with  
111 honest self-examination, reflective introspection and dialogue, and intentions and commitments  
112 to change, through God's grace;

113

114 **WHEREAS** the UCC is rooted in the “Three Great Loves” of neighbor, children, and creation,  
115 and authentic contemplative practices expand our capacity and commitment to love and justice,  
116 so that we might be clearer channels for God’s love to shine through and might more fully “come  
117 to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of  
118 the full stature of Christ.” (Ephesians 4: 13)

119  
120 **WHEREAS** the UCC is often identified as a progressive church for activists, whereas what  
121 makes the church unique is its spiritual grounding in the love and wholeness of God,  
122

123 **WHEREAS** the church’s foundation of divine love grounds and informs communal life in the  
124 body of Christ, as well as provides the reason for why the church expresses its witness in active  
125 forms of justice, peace, and service in the world;  
126

127 **THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** that the Thirty-Third General Synod of the United Church  
128 of Christ encourages local churches to become churches of “contemplatives in action,”  
129 remembering the essential disciplines modeled by Jesus of silent prayer, meditation, and  
130 practices to commune with the Divine Mother-Father, and letting contemplative depth inspire  
131 our forming and sustaining of life-giving, spiritually-generative community and our church’s  
132 action in the world through works of charity, social justice, peacemaking, earth-stewardship, and  
133 making disciples on the path of God’s unconditional, agape love;  
134

135 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** the that the Thirty-Third General Synod of the United Church  
136 of Christ encourages training of future clergy and lay leaders in the ways of contemplation,  
137 spiritual practice, and Christian mysticism, providing experiential grounding for the sustained  
138 life of faith; living into our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ and as children of God to see the  
139 Divine in everyone and everything in all creation, beginning with ourselves and expanding our  
140 love into ever-widening circles;  
141

142 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Thirty-Third General Synod invites local churches to  
143 commit to being a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” church- a church that prioritizes  
144 contemplation, spending time communing with God in various forms of prayer; and a church of  
145 activism that seeks to make God’s love and justice real in the world; thus a church of both  
146 contemplation and action—a church of “contemplatives in action” where our love of God  
147 through contemplative practices informs how we live and act in the world, and where our interior  
148 and exterior spiritual practices complement, ground, and inspire one another.  
149

150 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Thirty-Third General Synod calls upon all settings of  
151 the United Church of Christ to invest in curriculum and resources to support Conferences,  
152 Associations, local churches, clergy, lay leaders, General Synod and seminaries in practicing and  
153 teaching a foundational life of spiritual practices, as modeled in the life of Jesus. In this  
154 resourcing, all settings are called to remain committed to the UCC’s diversity as a Multicultural,  
155 Multiracial, and Anti-racist church, thus honoring the diversity of spiritual and contemplative  
156 practices and teachers from many and varied cultures through whom the spirit works in different  
157 ways;  
158

159 **BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED** that the Thirty-Third General Synod encourages all settings of  
160 the UCC seek to live out the foundation of contemplative practices in the ministry of God’s work  
161 in the world—making inclusive, participatory spiritual practices and teachings that cultivate  
162 being, introspection, reflection and growth an integral part of National gatherings, including  
163 committee work, children’s, youth and adult ministries, ecumenical partnerships, and General  
164 Synod;

165  
166 **FUNDING:** Funding for the implementation of the resolution will be made in accordance with  
167 the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

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169 **IMPLEMENTATION:** The Collegium of Officers, in consultation with appropriate ministries  
170 of other entities with the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How A Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, And Believe*, (Convergent: 2019), 99.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, “The Sacred Land,” in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell, (Image: 1996), 458.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rohr, *A Spring Within Us: A Book of Daily Meditations* (CAC Publishing: 2016), 275.

<sup>4</sup> Beverly Lanzetta, *The Monk Within: Embracing a Sacred Way of Life* (Blue Sapphire: 2018), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Traci Blackmon, UCC General Synod 32 Community Worship June 23 2019, found at 1 hour 47 minutes and 1 hour 51 minutes at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqgPgjIBT6U>

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Holmes: *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2017), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Joan Chittister, *Prophets Then, Prophets Now*, disc 1 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2006), MP3 download., from RR Daily Meditation July 5, 2019)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree>

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Holmes: *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2017), 5.