

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

1 **REAFFIRMING THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST’S COMMITMENT TO**
2 **INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS, AND DEPLORING RELIGIOUS BIGOTRY**

3 **A Resolution of Witness**

4 **Submitted by the United Church of Christ Board**

5
6 **SUMMARY:**

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8 This resolution is a timely reaffirmation of our imperative and calling to engage in interreligious
9 dialogue and relations, to speak clearly in denouncing religiously-motivated bigotry, and to
10 commend to the United Church of Christ’s members and settings the document, “A Just World
11 for All: Engaging with All God’s Creation and Calling the UCC to Live Inter-Religiously” for
12 study, reflection, and action.

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14 **BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, and HISTORICAL GROUNDING:**

15
16 In Matthew’s Gospel, when asked to identify the greatest commandment, Jesus quotes the *Shema*
17 on loving God, as recorded in Deuteronomy (6:5), and the imperative to love one’s neighbor,
18 citing Leviticus (19:18):

19 “One of them, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which
20 commandment in the law is the greatest?’ Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord
21 your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the
22 greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor
23 as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew
24 22:35-40, NRSV)

25 In Luke’s account of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37), Jesus elaborates on who one
26 should consider one’s neighbor.

27
28 These teachings help us to discern our relationship with God, and with our fellow human beings,
29 no matter their race, gender, social status, or faith. Our neighbors can be close by, and around the
30 world; in either case, we are all children of God, and created by God in God’s image. When we
31 regard our neighbors, with the right eyes and heart, we can see God, and are therefore called to
32 interact with other people as we would with God.

33
34 The history of humankind is replete with a longing for the Divine, and stories of religions and
35 faith are often intimately connected with civilizations and cultures. History is also filled with
36 conflicts and strife related to differences in religion and faith, just as it is filled with efforts to
37 draw on common religious principles to foster peace, justice, and harmony. Our global partners
38 in many parts of the world have much experience of living in richly pluralistic religious contexts
39 from which we can learn and upon which we can draw, and such experience helps us to
40 understand history, and seek models of success.

41
42 The United States continues to witness violent rhetoric and actions spurred by religious bigotry.
43 In past years, these acts have included threats and attacks on Jewish community centers and

44 schools, the burning of four mosques, the murder of American Sikhs and Hindus, and
45 discrimination against Muslims and Islamic communities. All of these heinous acts are
46 described as hate crimes and expressions of religious bigotry. They cannot be separated from
47 continuing racism and anti-immigration sentiment, exacerbated by political discourse that has
48 hinted at, or has explicitly articulated, both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

49
50 Additionally, the disregard for the rights of Native Americans and the traditions of indigenous
51 peoples globally is reflected in the protests around the use of lands historically owned by the
52 indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. Access to clean water, the practice of rituals and
53 spiritualities that are affirming and life giving are important to these communities where life
54 continues to be threatened by imperialistic practices rooted in racism and religious bigotry
55 emanating from a history yet to be fully confronted. The vilification of the traditional practices
56 and spiritual expressions of indigenous, African derived, shamanistic and other traditions beyond
57 Christianity reflects a Christian dominant narrative which is oppositional to the call to love.

58
59 In a time of heightened tension and of suspicion of people of faiths other than our own, we seek
60 guidance and grounding in scripture to remind us as Christians to be accepting, welcoming, and
61 loving toward our neighbors; and as a church, to continue to engage with the diversity of
62 communities among whom we live, including through study and reflection, and to speak out
63 when we witness hatred and bigotry.

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65 **TEXT OF THE MOTION:**

66
67 **WHEREAS**, the world is pluralistic, including and perhaps especially, with regard to religious
68 diversity; and

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70 *Whereas* the United Church of Christ is a Christian community open to God’s new things (Isaiah
71 43:19); and

72
73 *Whereas*, the opportunities for engagement with people of many faiths are bountiful and
74 represent possibilities for genuine encounter with people who are created in God’s image and
75 who share a spiritual and ritual quest as people of faith, seeking the divine; and

76
77 *Whereas*, the world and the United States specifically witnessed an increased frequency of
78 rhetorical and physical violence toward and between people of different faith communities in the
79 past several months; and

80
81 *Whereas*, the United Church of Christ identifies as a Just Peace Church (General Synod 15;
82 1985; reaffirmed at GS 30; 2015); and

83
84 *Whereas*, General Synods of the United Church of Christ have been attentive to matters of
85 interreligious relations in the past, notably in the resolution, “Relationship between the UCC and
86 the Jewish Community” (GS 16; 1987), and the resolution, “The relationship between the United
87 Church of Christ and the Muslim community” (GS 17; 1989); and
88

89 **Whereas**, General Synods of United Church of Christ have “condemn[ed] anti-Semitism in all its
90 forms” (GS 14; 1983); “confess[ed] the sin of anti-Semitism and renounce[d] it” (GS 23; 2001);
91 and “express[ed] clear support for neighbors in the Muslim community...who feel the impact of
92 anti-Islamic rhetoric and actions” (GS 28; 2011); and

93
94 **Whereas**, the Officers of the United Church of Christ have consistently offered a public witness
95 denouncing incidents of violence targeting communities identified by their faiths, including a
96 “Statement on the Vilification of Muslims” (Dec. 9, 2015) and “An open letter to our Jewish
97 colleagues and friends” (Jan. 20, 2017); and

98
99 **Whereas**, the Twenty Second General Synod of the UCC commended for study and response the
100 National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA document “Interfaith Relations and the
101 Churches” (GS 22; 1999), and the Twenty Fifth General Synod adopted “A Study Resource on
102 Interreligious Relations for the United Church of Christ” (GS 25; 2005); and

103
104 **Whereas**, a special committee of the UCC’s Council for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations
105 has recently completed a statement entitled, “A Just World for All: Engaging with All God’s
106 Creation and Calling the UCC to Live Inter-Religiously,” which asserts that “God shows no
107 partiality,” and is motivated by the UCC’s Core Values of Extravagant Welcome, Continuing
108 Testament, and Changing Lives, and challenges us to expand our understanding of Jesus’ prayer,
109 “That they may all be one,”

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111 **BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED**, that the Thirty Second General Synod of the United
112 Church of Christ:

113
114 **Receives**, the interfaith statement “A Just World for All: Engaging with All God’s Creation” for
115 use in UCC engagement with world religions and spiritualities;

116
117 **Renews** its conviction that God has called us to affirm new ways in which Christ is reconciling
118 the world;

119
120 **Reaffirms**, with love and certainty, our commitment to interreligious relations with any and all
121 communities of faith;

122
123 **Calls** upon National leadership, Conferences, local churches, and members to continue to study
124 about and engage in interreligious dialogue and relationships, institutionally and personally,
125 drawing on the experience of our ecumenical and global partners;

126
127 **Deplores and denounces** any and all acts of violence and hatred, be they in thought, word, or
128 deed, directed at individuals and communities, particularly when based on religious identity; and
129 to offer a public witness of support and solidarity when such acts are perpetrated; and

130
131 **Commends** settings and members of the United Church of Christ to read, study, and act upon the
132 document, “A Just World for All: Engaging with All God’s Creation and Calling the UCC to
133 Live Inter-Religiously.”

134

135 **FUNDING:**

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

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140 **IMPLEMENTATION:**

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142 The Officers of the Church, in consultation with appropriate ministries or other entities within
143 the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.

144

145 Background Attachment:

146 **A Just World for All: Engaging with All God’s Creation**
147 **United Church of Christ Interreligious Statement**

148
149 **A NEW VISION**

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151 *Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing;*
152 *now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? Isaiah 43:18-19*

153
154 The United States continues to experience a changing religious landscape. While the
155 country continues to hold a Christian religious majority, demographics point to a decline in the
156 mainline denominations, an increase in other religious traditions and an increase in individuals
157 who are moving away from traditional ways of religious identification and affiliation. These
158 changes are taking place in a time where bigotry, religious intolerance and racism are also on the
159 rise, buoyed by Christian theological frameworks which are antithetical to nurturing God’s love
160 for all. How will we live into Jesus’ call to love in these days and in these times? How will we
161 reinterpret traditional interpretations of scripture to forge new path to mutual respect and
162 understanding among the world’s religions?

163
164 The United Church of Christ Board affirmed a new purpose, vision and mission statement
165 for the denomination. In adopting these statements, the denomination is invited to envision love
166 and justice in the context of the world in which we live and to discern what it means to be a
167 prophetic witness to the church and to the world. The call to love is a call into the mystery of the
168 Spirit, it is a call to a deeper engagement with the Divine and it is a call to be radically
169 transformed in the face of the impossible.

170
171 The offering of the new purpose, vision and mission statements is an entry point into all
172 aspects of the life of the church.

- 173
- 174 • “The United Church of Christ affirms that its purpose is to **love God with all our heart,**
 - 175 **mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.**
 - 176 • The United Church of Christ has a vision that *united in Christ’s love, we seek a just world for*
 - 177 *all.*
 - 178 • The United Church of Christ sees its mission to be *united in Spirit and inspired by God’s*
 - grace, to welcome all, love all, and seek justice for all.*

179 Congregational life, spiritual formation, mission, ministries to all in the church,
180 ecumenical and interfaith engagement are all undertaken in the spirit of the vision of a just world
181 for all. Our interreligious engagement ought to bear witness to, and a commitment to living this
182 purpose: To love our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as
183 ourselves; the vision: United in Christ’s love, a just world for all; and the mission: United in
184 Spirit, inspired by God’s grace, we welcome all, love all and seek justice for all. Love is at
185 center of our calling and our witness in the world.

186
187 In *A Pastoral Letter to a United Church in a Divided Country* (November 9, 2016) the
188 officers of the church wrote: “... we were built to heal bodies broken and divided. This is our
189 calling. Our core values of love, hospitality, and justice for all must be fully embraced in the

190 days to come. It could well be that we were called into being for just such a time as this.” The
191 time for creating a new reality is now. Amidst the rhetoric of fear, we must affirm the gift of
192 religious diversity, and allow this gift to reveal to us more of God present and at work in the
193 world.

194
195 Religion and ways of experiencing and expressing knowledge of the Divine must no
196 longer divide us. Instead, the experience of God’s love ought to unite us beyond fear and
197 religious bigotry. Religious differences have devised wars, divided families and disrupted
198 communities.

199
200 We are called for this time to live prophetically in our witness, our words and deeds
201 calling for love of neighbor, the acceptance of all religions and spiritualities, affirming the
202 mystery of the Divine in a variety of expressions and the presence of religious multiplicity and
203 religious fluidity in the church, in our communities and in the world. There are a variety of ways
204 that Spirit is affirmed among us. While we are unable to name them all, we affirm the Mystery
205 and mind of God is beyond understanding (Isaiah 55:8).

206 207 **A TIME OF CONFESSION**

208
209 Acknowledging and righting the past is an important step in creating a new vision and a
210 new future. While the United Church of Christ owns a rich history of justice, hospitality and
211 interreligious engagement there are places and times in history where the UCC, its predecessor
212 bodies and the church did not reflect the respect, love and reciprocity we currently advocate.

213
214 Christianity is historically the most powerful religious tradition in the US and remains
215 dominant in many parts of the world. Christians have committed the crimes that Jonathan Sacks,
216 a rabbi in the United Kingdom names in his book, saying, “The crimes of religion have one thing
217 in common. They involve making God in our image instead of letting him remake us in his. The
218 highest truth does not cast its mantle over our lowest instincts – the search for power, the urge
219 for conquest, the use of religious language to spread the aura of sanctity over ignoble crimes.
220 These are forms of imperialism, not faith” (*Not in God’s Name*, 265).

221
222 Christianity has been shrouded in privilege that found other traditions in need of religious
223 conversion and the subject of the missional imperative of prior centuries that undervalued other
224 traditions, labelled them as lacking knowledge of God and destroyed religion, culture and
225 community in its wake. This privileging of Christianity names Christianity as favored by God,
226 fostering an exceptionalism that threatens the worth and dignity of all creation.

227
228 Atrocities have been committed with the Bible present and used to justify the oppression
229 and persecution of individuals professing different theological beliefs. The name of God and the
230 revelation of the Christ are utilized in upholding xenophobia and decrying other faith traditions
231 in opposition to Jesus’ command that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

232
233 By naming this position of power held by Christians, we can work to create spaces for
234 dialogue in which all religious perspectives are heard, and indeed the historically silenced voices
235 are potentially given a larger platform than the traditionally dominant religious traditions.

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We are called to be healers of the breach, a breach that we have made in the past in our views and relationships with those of other faith traditions. Today, we confess not only the cost of such decisions in our past as well as the call today to see God at work in these various different traditions.

As The Study Resource on Interreligious Relations for the United Church of Christ named, “We have not always worked to understand our neighbors, and often have made no effort at simple hospitality....the UCC, a church of the ‘united and uniting family’ brings to the pursuit of interfaith relations long experience in honoring diversity and celebrating the many gifts of particularity within the context of unity. A united and uniting church must, by its very nature, practice diligently the work of sustaining a broadly diverse community in covenantal unity as a grateful response to the faithful covenant God has made with us. We struggle daily with a cacophony of voices which often do not blend into a melodious harmony, and confess that at times we lean too hard on the distinctive witness of one or another branch of our family in order to avoid conflict” (Study Document, #11).

We affirm with the Study Document that “Past mistakes, however, should not inhibit present commitment. In a spirit of hospitality and welcome we believe we are called to new relationships and new ways of relating, knowing that in those encounters we will have much to receive as well as much to give” (Study Document, #23).

CALLED TO LOVE

Jesus said: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt. 22:37, 39).

Recognizing that we live in an increasingly pluralistic world, this interreligious statement built on the vision for a just world for all offers a theological, moral and spiritual basis for the United Church of Christ’s ongoing commitment to support and pursue relationships with partners of many faiths. Christians in the United States hold privilege and power, which continue to contribute to the oppression and dehumanization of people of other faiths. In our pursuit of justice the central themes point us to revisiting our views and commitment to interreligious engagement.

This is a priority for our time, because the world is increasingly complex. People are more interconnected than ever before, thanks to the technological revolution. The access to information and understanding of other religions and spiritualities has also resulted in increased fear of people of other faiths and heritage. Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment are spreading across the United States and globally, anti-Semitism and racism are on the rise, the rights of indigenous people continue to be of concern as they continue to experience marginalization and these negative views are readily accessed via technology.

As people’s religious identities change rapidly there is a call to faithful response to the realities that are becoming more evident among us. More and more people are identifying as multi religious with a focus on the spiritual and less on the religious, i.e. Hindu-Christian or

282 Buddhist-Christian or other hyphenated expressions that are rooted in multiplicity rather than the
283 historic mono-religious experiences of the Divine.

284
285 Likewise, some are adherents to one religious tradition and yet they practice the sacred
286 rituals of multiple traditions. Yet others identify as ‘religious hybrids.’ It is no longer unusual
287 for members of our communities of faith to have married persons with a faith tradition different
288 than their own, for their children to choose such a practice or for members of families to be a part
289 of multiple religious households. God calls us to faithfully respond to the changes in our current
290 context. These complexities are framed among the thousands of recognized world religions.
291 These complexities are present in our communities and in the churches we serve and attend.
292 How do we live into these challenges that also hold promise and opportunity for the growth and
293 life of the church and all of God’s people?

294
295 For us to love our neighbor as ourselves means we must commit to learning about our
296 neighbors. Our transformation and love of God is strengthened in our ability to see God present
297 in those among us. This commitment encompasses the internal and the external. Issues of
298 racism, sexism, ableism and other manifestations of injustice directed at identifying and
299 upholding differences as a barrier to right relations are expressions that challenge our own ability
300 to be in right relations with the Divine among us. We offer confession and a call to action to
301 local congregations, to take up the call to live out deep, mutually-transformative relationships
302 with individuals and communities of other faiths.

303 304 **BACKGROUND**

305
306 This is not the first time our denomination has addressed our commitment to interfaith
307 relationships, we draw upon the conversations we had at General Synod in 1999 and 2005. In
308 1999, the General Synod requested that the church study and respond to the document of the
309 National Council of Churches “*Interfaith Relations and the Churches.*” *A Study Resource on*
310 *Interreligious Relations for the United Church of Christ* (2005) professed, “The foundation upon
311 which we engage in interreligious relationships is our belief that God is sovereign of the entire
312 cosmos and that all humanity is created in God’s image. We believe that the community of the
313 whole inhabited earth is a gift which together we are called to nurture.” (p.3)

314
315 The United Church of Christ, out of its commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, has
316 spoken in solidarity in the past about relations with people of other religions and the traditions
317 that they represent. The General Synod spoke twice on relations with people of other religions
318 and the traditions they represent: with the Jewish community (1987) and with the Muslim
319 community (1989). Our engagement in interreligious relationships is shaped by the historic and
320 cultural traditions, which are part of our theological heritage. These 16 years later, it is to address
321 our call once again, to name and embrace the mystery of God revealed across time and tradition,
322 in light of our rapidly-changing world and the accompanying fears resulting in hatred and
323 bigotry.

324
325 In 2005 the General Synod of the United Church of Christ received and
326 adopted a document called *A Study Resource on Interreligious Relations*. Now twelve years
327 later it is time to revisit, and discern the ways in which the United Church of Christ will move

328 forward in an increasingly multi-religious world. The 2005 study resource set the stage for such a
329 time as this, challenging the United Church of Christ to do four things:

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- 331 1. Reflect upon the reasons for engaging in interreligious relations;
- 332 2. Examine the contexts in which such relationships occur;
- 333 3. Name the distinctive gifts that the United Church of Christ brings to these encounters;
- 334 and
- 335 4. Discern God's call to us as we live and work alongside people of other religious
- 336 traditions.

337

338 The study resource asserted that we affirm "*our distinctive beliefs and our witness to the*
339 *gospel of Jesus Christ. We celebrate boldly the richness of the Christian encounter with God*
340 *revealed in the particular person of Jesus Christ and recognize that we are called to spread this*
341 *good news of God's message of healing and reconciliation. We affirm our continuing and*
342 *unambivalent mandate, as a part of the whole Church, to engage in life-enhancing relationships*
343 *with all of God's creation. The foundation upon which we engage in interreligious relationships*
344 *is our belief that God is sovereign of the entire cosmos and that all humanity is created in God's*
345 *image. We believe that the community of the whole inhabited earth is a gift which together we*
346 *are called to nurture.*" (Paragraph #3)

347

348 This 2005 Study Resource articulated a paradigm for our current interreligious
349 engagement, and pushes us further to broadening and deepening our Christian witness by
350 acknowledging and accepting all faith traditions. Past mistakes do not need to inhibit authentic
351 commitment. Today we are called into new relationships and new ways of relating, we have
352 much to receive as well as to give in dialogue, witness, welcome and hospitality. We are called
353 anew in these days to be visionaries for right relationship and bearers of God's love.

354

355 **TRANSFORMATION**

356 These changes that are evident across the religious landscape offer opportunities for
357 transformation for our lives, for the church and for the world. The *Baar Statement: Theological*
358 *Perspectives on Plurality* issued by the World Council of Churches states: "We have seen and
359 experienced the goodness, truth and holiness of God among followers of other paths and ways
360 than that of Jesus Christ" (p.4). The Spirit moves beyond our definitions, descriptions and
361 limitations "as the wind blows where it wills" (John 3:8).

362

363 The World Council of Churches Baar Statement affirms that: God, the Holy Spirit has
364 been at work in the life and traditions of peoples of living faiths. Can we affirm that the Holy
365 Spirit will lead us into fresh and unexpected discovery of new wisdom and insight as we learn
366 more from our neighbors of other faiths? Authentic dialogue opens both partners to a deeper
367 conversion to the God who speaks to each through the other. Through the witness of others, we
368 can truly discover facets of the divine mystery which we have not yet seen or responded to (Baar,
369 5).

370

371 We can no longer push aside those who are hold different religious views and practices.
372 They are members of our families, our communities, and these traditions have shaped us as well.
373 The advancements of pluralism and the reactions against them now define our national life.

374 Every day, our existence in a pluralistic world has the potential to strip away another layer of our
375 provincialism, the complacent unawareness of other faiths, yielding other forms of emancipation.
376 We hear the testimonies of those among us whose faith has been nurtured in and because of their
377 relationships to others of other religious traditions and faith practices. We draw on the ancient
378 tradition and call of God who invites us to meet God in the other and experience hospitality to
379 the stranger who teaches us more about God and draws us deeper into knowing more of God and
380 more of ourselves.

381
382 “Through encounters with people of other religions we hope to find new understanding
383 and to discover fuller and more meaningful ways to live in reconciled communities together.”
384 We engage in interreligious relationships out of gratitude for the gifts we have received from a
385 generous and loving God. Can we affirm that the Holy Spirit, which we understand to be the
386 comforter promised by Jesus, will lead us into fresh and unexpected encounters? Can we affirm
387 that it is morally, ethically, and spiritually wrong for any person, group or religion to claim
388 exclusive access to God, God’s love, grace or salvation? (*Disciples of Christ and Interreligious*
389 *Engagement*” #13). We testify that embracing and affirming all traditions of faith is God at
390 work, working through us and in the world. “United in Christ’s love, a just world for all!”

391
392 **A CALL TO ACTION**

393 The vision of a just world for all is an inclusive proposition for all people and includes
394 our interreligious engagement. The affirmation of all religious, faith, and spiritual traditions
395 acknowledges the familiar and the unfamiliar, and leaves room for that which is yet to be named.
396 The United Church of Christ has long been theologically engaged with Muslims and Jews in
397 interreligious dialogue as well as the common source of these faiths as “religions of the book” or
398 “Abrahamic traditions.” In approaching and receiving, seeking to meet and welcoming all
399 traditions, we invite the unity of the spirit.

400
401 The list of religions holds too many to name and yet, we are willing to receive the
402 presence of the Divine in spiritual expressions as well as places where the Divine is not revealed
403 in the ways that are familiar to or similar to our Christian practices. Learning about other
404 traditions and assisting in the recovery of traditions that were vilified in the past, particularly
405 indigenous traditions and those brought into the Americas by enslaved Africans is the work of
406 justice and love.

407
408 **A Litany Affirming our Commitment to Live Inter-religiously**

409
410 We celebrate boldly the richness of the Christian encounter with God
411 revealed in the particular person of Jesus Christ.

412 We recognize that we are called to spread this good news of God’s
413 message of healing and reconciliation.

414 We engage in interreligious relationships because we believe
415 that God is sovereign of the entire cosmos,
416 that all humanity is created in God’s image.

417 We affirm our desire to expand our relationships with God’s creation.

418 Therefore,

419 We find ourselves called to re-interpret cherished traditions.

420 We listen carefully to religious people throughout the world.
421 We pray for the common good, sharing fears and hopes.
422 We confess, and we ask for forgiveness.
423 We try to forgive the unforgivable.
424 We cultivate wonder and awe, and we admit limits.
425 We acknowledge differences, and explore commonalities.
426 We welcome diversity and avoid judgment.
427 We honor the redemptive work of all religious traditions.
428 We seek fellowship with our neighbor rather trying to change our neighbor.
429 We understand that engagement with others makes us vulnerable.
430 Yet,
431 We believe that the church can experience transformative love.
432 We know that Jesus' prayer "That they may all be One," is stretching our faith.
433 We affirm the community of the whole inhabited earth as a gift we are called to serve.
434 Amen.