

RESOLUTION URGING DIVESTMENT FROM FOSSIL FUEL COMPANIES

Submitted as a Resolution for UCC General Synod 29

by the Massachusetts Conference UCC -- Submitted December 2012

Conference co-sponsors: Southwest Conference; New York Conference; Central Atlantic Conference; and endorsed by other Conferences and churches

SUMMARY

The realities of climate change require prophetic and strategic action by people of faith seeking to be faithful to the everlasting covenant God has made with us, with every living creature and with all future generations. If fossil fuel companies simply fulfill their purpose the earth will become inhospitable to life as we know it. This resolution urges all entities of the UCC along with individual members and those affiliated with the UCC to divest from fossil fuel companies. Enacting this resolution is part of a world-wide movement. Along with additional strategies, this resolution seeks to inspire and accelerate an unswerving commitment – as stated in the UCC’s Core Purpose – to “the co-creation of a just and sustainable world as made manifest in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

The actions this resolution recommends are rooted in and an expression of several of our most foundational theological and biblical principles.

In Genesis 9, God makes a covenant not only with Noah, but with all of humanity; a covenant not only with all of humanity, but with every living creature; a covenant not only with all creatures alive today, but with all future generations. In addition to the breadth of God’s inclusive love, God extends that love to future generations. As covenant partners, God calls us to do likewise. It is now clear that the past few generations of humans have burned so much of the earth’s energy reserves that we are on the verge of rendering the earth inhospitable for life as we have known it for all of recorded history. By any measure, this is a violation of covenant.

We live out God’s inclusive love by following the most basic moral instruction of both the New Testament and Hebrew scriptures (Mark 12:31; Matthew 22:39; Luke 10:27; Leviticus 19:18) – a moral instruction found at the core of every world religion: We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves. In keeping with God’s covenant, and because our actions will have significant consequences for future generations, we must recognize that future generations are no less our neighbors than those who live next door to us today. You might think of this as “Golden Rule 2.0.”¹

Few take issue with Paul’s advice to the Christians in Corinth when he declares that *love* is the greatest gift (I Cor. 13:13). And the most quoted verse in scripture, John 3:16, reminds us that God loves the *world!* Let us remember, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” (Gen. 1:31)

In his letter to the Christians in Colossae, Paul states that through Christ, God was pleased to reconcile all things to God’s self. (Colossians 1:20) Nothing is left out. Desmond Tutu refers to the act of reconciling us to all of God’s creation as “Christ’s supreme work.”² To put it in economic terms, with God, there are no externalities. All things must be reconciled – the entirety of our activity must be accounted for.

We have a long way to go before the promise of reconciliation is realized. Through many resolutions over decades, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ has recognized what Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians, declares boldly: that wrecking creation is a sin.³ Many of these resolutions also decry the unjust, disproportionate impact climate change

is already having on those living in poverty and in the least developed countries, the elderly and children and those least responsible for the emissions of greenhouse gases.⁴ For these and other reasons, the United Church of Christ is ever more committed to care for God's creation. This can be seen in the recently (2012) articulated Core Purpose of the United Church of Christ: "... we serve God in the co-creation of a just and sustainable world as made manifest in the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

BACKGROUND

WHAT IS THE SCIENCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE?⁵

Since the beginning of human civilization up until about 200 years ago, our atmosphere contained about 275 parts per million of carbon dioxide. The discovery of oil, the beginning of the industrial age, and rapidly increasing population growth brought increased energy demands and improved techniques to tap into the earth's carbon reserves (oil, coal, gas), reserves which took nature hundreds of millions of years to create. These are the major factors causing the amount of carbon in the atmosphere to rise to its current level (2012) of 392ppm of CO₂. Climate scientists agree that 350ppm of CO₂ is the safe upper limit for CO₂ in earth's atmosphere.

Because CO₂ traps heat in our atmosphere, this rise in CO₂ has resulted in a global temperature rise of 0.8 degrees Celsius causing far more damage than most scientists expected. (A third of summer sea ice in the Arctic is gone, the oceans are 30 percent more acidic, and since warm air holds more water vapor than cold, the atmosphere over the oceans is a shocking five percent wetter, loading the dice for devastating floods.) May 2012 was the 327th consecutive month in which the temperature of the entire globe exceeded the 20th-century average.

What must also be taken into consideration is that previously released carbon continues to overheat the atmosphere. Thus, climate models calculate that even if we stopped increasing CO₂ now, the temperature would likely still rise another 0.8 degrees Celsius.

In 2009, world leaders and climate scientists gathered in Copenhagen. 167 countries (including the United States) responsible for more than 87 percent of the world's carbon emissions signed on to the Copenhagen Accord, which declared: "We agree that deep cuts in global emissions are required... so as to hold the increase in global temperature below 2° Celsius." While this global consensus is remarkable, many scientists have come to think that 2° Celsius is far too lenient a target. For example, NASA scientist James Hansen, the planet's most prominent climatologist, says, "The target that has been talked about in international negotiations for 2°C of warming is actually a prescription for long-term disaster." Having raised the global thermometer almost 1° Celsius, we've experienced the worst drought since the dust bowl, \$40-\$60 billion of damages from hurricane Sandy, Arctic sea ice is disappearing much faster than any scientific model has predicted, and Munich Re, the world's largest reinsurance company, has released a report based on its natural catastrophe database — the most comprehensive of its kind in the world — that concludes: a) global warming is driving an increase in weather-related disasters; and b) "North America is the continent with the largest increases in disasters. ⁶

If an increase of less than 1° Celsius has resulted in these (and other) devastations, it's hard to comprehend what life will be like when we reach 2° Celsius. And yet, over the past several years, as climate models improve, the predictions developed by climate scientists have become more and more dire.⁷ Many scientists now believe that before the end of the century, CO₂ will reach 866ppm, and global temperature will rise over 5° Celsius.⁸

One thing is for sure: it is critically important for humanity to leave as much of the earth's carbon reserves as possible in the ground. The math is simple.⁹ We can release up to 565 more gigatons of carbon dioxide by burning fossil fuels and stay below 2°C of warming. If we burn more than that, we risk catastrophe for life on earth. The problem is that fossil fuel corporations now have 2,795 gigatons in their reserves – five times the safe amount.¹⁰ If fossil fuel companies simply carry out their stated missions by utilizing the known reserves they currently own or have rights to, the earth will become inhospitable to life as we know it.

WHAT TO DO?

The enormity of this challenge demands that the human community engage numerous strategies. For example, we must encourage political leaders to enact laws that will lead to a sustainable planet. In April 2012, the UCC's Mission 4/1 Earth's 100,000 advocacy letters are doing just that. We can also encourage political leaders to take a stand on behalf of a sustainable planet. The massive civil disobedience in August 2011 that resulted in President Obama halting – at least temporarily – the Keystone XL pipeline did just that.

This resolution is part of a worldwide movement which focuses on leaving as much of the earth's carbon reserves as possible in the ground. As part of that worldwide campaign, this resolution proposes that all UCC entities, along with individuals affiliated with the UCC, divest from fossil fuel companies.

WHY DIVESTMENT?

In 1983-1989 General Synod passed numerous resolutions¹¹ committing the various corporate expressions of the UCC to divest from companies doing business with South Africa. Their action began as a prophetic witness. But once thousands of institutions and individuals joined together to divest from companies doing business in South Africa, Apartheid came to an end

Following that path, what begins as a prophetic act of divestment from fossil fuel companies will:

- a) drive public awareness of the incalculable damage being done by the fossil fuel industry as it generates huge immediate profits in exchange for an uninhabitable future;
- b) build public recognition of the urgent need to drastically and rapidly reduce humanity's dependence on fossil fuels;
- c) call widespread attention to the consequences of continuing a "business as usual" approach to extracting, marketing and burning fossil fuel;
- d) lead to inspiring an urgent, accelerated and popular commitment to leave untapped 80% of the known carbon reserves,¹² while developing renewable energy resources capable of meeting humanity's needs – thus making it possible that life as we have known it might continue on God's good earth.

¹ In his blog, Andrew Revkin quotes novelist Jostein Gaarder, using this phrase in speaking about intergenerational responsibility <http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/25/do-humans-need-a-golden-rule-2-0/?partner=rss&emc=rss>

² Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his "Forward" to *The Green Bible NRSV* (Harper Collins, New York; 2008), p. I-14.

³ Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, "To Commit a Crime Against the Natural World is a Sin" in *Moral Ground – Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril* (Trinity University Press, San Antonio, TX; 2010), pp. 135-136.

⁴ The recent DARA report links climate change to 5 million deaths/yr (400,000 due to hunger & disease; 4.5 million to (air) pollution from the carbon economy), and 1.6% of global GDP (1.2 trillion dollars). Unjustly and unethically, the very poor of the world are suffering by far the most from our excesses.

⁵ The most useful source for learning about climate science and issues related to this resolution is Joe Romm's website: <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/issue/>.

⁶ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/weather/2012/10/10/weather-disasters-climate-change-munich-report/1622845/>

⁷ <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2009/05/20/204131/mit-doubles-global-warming-projections-2/> .
<http://www.pwc.com/gx/en/sustainability/publications/low-carbon-economy-index/index.jhtml> . And the World Bank released a report in late Nov. 2012 entitled: "Turn Down the Heat: Why a 4°C Warmer World Must Be Avoided," .

⁸ See 2009 MIT report: <http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2009/05/20/204131/mit-doubles-global-warming-projections-2/> and 2012 Price Waterhouse Coopers report:
<http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2012/11/06/1144431/study-were-headed-to-11f-warming-and-even-7f-requires-nearly-quadrupling-the-current-rate-of-decarbonisation/>

⁹ See Bill McKibben's August 2012 article: <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-20120719>

¹⁰ The Carbon Tracker Initiative, a team of London financial analysts and environmentalists, estimates that proven coal, oil, and gas reserves of the fossil-fuel companies, and the countries (think Venezuela or Kuwait) that act like fossil-fuel companies, equals about 2,795 gigatons of CO₂, or five times the amount we can release to maintain 2 degrees of warming.

The International Energy Agency released its annual flagship publication the World Energy Outlook on Nov. 12, 2012. In the executive summary, the IEA roughly concurred, saying, "No more than one-third of proven reserves of fossil fuels can be consumed prior to 2050 if the world is to achieve the 2 °C goal."

¹¹ 1983: The Fourteenth General Synod adopts as amended the Resolution on Investment and Corporate Responsibility with Regards to South Africa.

1985: The Fifteenth General Synod adopts the Proposal for Action "UCC Full Divestment of All Financial Resources from All Corporations Doing Business with South Africa."

1987: The Sixteenth General Synod adopts "Expanded Criteria for Divestment and Advocacy Related to South Africa" as amended.

1989: The Seventeenth General Synod adopts the Resolution "Boycott of Royal Dutch/Shell Oil," as amended.

¹² The total known reserves are worth about \$27 trillion. If we need to keep 80 percent of those reserves in the ground, that's a \$20 trillion write off for the industry.

¹³ The current list of 200 coal, oil and gas companies can be found here:

<http://www.carbontracker.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/08/Unburnable-Carbon-Full1.pdf>

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, the leaders of 167 countries (including the United States) have agreed that any warming of the planet above a 2°C (3.6°F) rise would be unsafe, and we have already (as of 2012) raised the temperature 0.8°C, causing far more damage than most scientists expected; and

WHEREAS, computer models show that even if we stopped increasing CO₂ levels now, the temperature would continue to rise another 0.8°C, bringing the planet over three-quarters of the way to the 2°C limit; and

WHEREAS, scientists estimate that humans can pour roughly 565 more gigatons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and still have some reasonable hope of staying below 2°C; and

WHEREAS the proven coal, oil, and gas reserves of the fossil-fuel companies, and the countries (e.g. Venezuela or Kuwait) which act like fossil-fuel companies equals about 2,795 gigatons of CO₂, or five times the amount we can release to maintain a 2°C limit of planetary warming; and

WHEREAS the purpose of fossil fuel companies is to make money for their shareholders by providing for the energy needs of the world using the resources they currently own or have rights to tap – and if they simply continue to carry out this purpose, they will raise the temperature of the earth far beyond what is hospitable for life as we know it; and

WHEREAS, because we are a covenant people and affirm Jesus' call to love our neighbors as ourselves, we join God in recognizing our moral obligation to take into account how our decisions and activities affect all of creation now and into the future; and

WHEREAS even though God loved the world and called it very good, humanity's normal, everyday activity is putting God's world in jeopardy; and

WHEREAS over the past five or more decades, many bodies of the United Church of Christ, including the General Synod on numerous occasions, have recognized our moral obligation to be faithful stewards of God's creation as well as acknowledging, in one way or another, that wrecking creation is a sin; and

WHEREAS the Core Purpose of the United Church of Christ states (in part): "... we serve God in the co-creation of a just and sustainable world as made manifest in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,"

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the General Synod calls upon all Covenanted, Affiliated, and Associated Ministries (and their successor bodies), Agencies, Conferences, Associations, Local Churches and members of the United Church of Christ to:

- a) Immediately stop any new investment in fossil fuel companies and instruct asset managers who work for those entities to do the same; and
- b) Ensure that within 5 years none of its directly held or commingled assets include holdings of either public equities or corporate bonds in fossil fuel companies as determined by the Carbon Tracker list¹³; and
- c) Release quarterly updates, available to the public, detailing progress made towards full divestment.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Synod calls upon the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ to inform those fossil fuel companies of the passage and implementation of this resolution.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Synod asks the General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ to engage leaders of other religious traditions and relevant organizations to explore ways that they 145 and their constituents might join the UCC in this action.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Synod encourages all Covenanted, Affiliated, and Associated Ministries (and their successor bodies), Agencies, Conferences, Associations, Local Churches and members of the United Church of Christ to engage additional strategies – including public witness, advocacy for the creation of and enforcement of laws, education campaigns and lifestyle changes – that will reduce the use of fossil fuels and our carbon footprint;

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the General Synod remains profoundly concerned about the disproportionate impact climate change is already having on those living in poverty and in the least developed countries, the elderly and children and those least responsible for the emissions of greenhouse gases, and recognizes the moral mandate for humanity to shift to a sustainable energy plan in a way that is both just and compassionate.

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

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

Regarding the Resolution Urging Divestment from Fossil Fuel Companies submitted as a resolution for UCC General Synod 29 by the Massachusetts Conference UCC (the “Resolution”)

BE IT RESOLVED:

- That the 51st Annual Meeting approves, endorses, and states its support for adoption of the Resolution by General Synod 29;
- That the 51st Annual Meeting endorses, and approves application and implementation of the Resolution within the Minnesota Conference by the Conference, the Conference acting as an Association, Committees, teams and all constituent entities within the Conference. The Annual Meeting also recommends implementation of the Resolution by all Congregations in the Conference and their members. When individuals and entities in the Minnesota Conference divest, the Annual Meeting encourages an equivalent reinvestment in clean energy alternatives.