



Federal Law Felt As Attack by Public School Teachers

When I drive past the schools where many of my grown children's teachers continue to nurture our community's children, I think about those teachers, and I give thanks for them—for Marlene Karkoska, who taught my children to read and then motivated them to read over a hundred books in first grade—for Viola Andrews, whose writing assignments delighted my son and helped him discover his voice in fourth grade—for Zelda Segal, whose way of teaching long division inspired my daughter to love conceptual mathematics—for Cal Rose, the history teacher who turned my adolescents into citizens—for Cass McBride, the English teacher who divided the class into multiracial groups to discuss the subject of race in *Huckleberry Finn* and then made those groups report out and discuss some more—and for Claude Holland, who celebrated academic achievement and each child's special gifts all the while coaching track and field. These people and many others blessed our family.

I thought about these teachers again last summer during the week I spent at the United Church of Christ's General Synod in Atlanta. Three times I was stopped by public school teachers who realized that I work on public education and who wanted to share their pain in these times when the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) demands that schools quickly increase achievement as measured by standardized test scores. They told me how painful it is for your school to be labeled a failure when you are doing the best you can in a career you thought you loved and when many of your students are thriving.

Paul Osgood, a member of the Justice & Witness Ministries Board and a science teacher in a Kansas City area middle school asked,

"How can a school that got fourth place on the national SIGMA math test fail Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under NCLB? This school is also the site serving English language learners in the district. The forty students who are learning English did not pass AYP in math, even though they passed in reading. It will be advertised in the newspaper that the school did not make AYP in math, but not that the students at the school were fourth in the nation on the SYGMA test. The teachers already know they need to work hard to help the ESL students, and they are doing that. But next year state funding is also being cut, and teachers are being cut, and class size is being increased."

The teachers who spoke with me shared dismay about pressure driving good teachers out of the profession. They also told me how much they worry about the children who are so far behind and who are being further burdened when they are identified as the cause of their school's failure. They worry about alarming and accelerating student dropout rates in a high-stakes testing environment when they know that staying in school will determine a child's future.

One woman stood up at the end of a workshop on the church and public education advocacy. Here is what she said: "I am so grateful to realize that the United Church of Christ is trying to lift up the justice concerns in *No Child Left Behind*. This is such a hard time to be a teacher. It just never occurred to me that my church would stand with me, a teacher, in these difficult times."

Devaluing teachers ...

In July of this year, the Harvard Civil Rights Project published a new book on the *No Child Left Behind Act*, a book that charges: "The law is really, in many ways, a theory about what is wrong with teachers and school organizations and how to coerce improved performance... NCLB assumes that teachers and their schools can be branded, criticized, and required to make large changes with shrinking real resources (from state and local cutbacks) and that there will be very positive and rapid outcomes."¹ The Harvard authors worry that the law is encouraging the best teachers to leave the most challenging teaching assignments in big city schools and they point out that, "NCLB treats educational improvement as a regulatory rather than an educational and professional problem... The law threatens to dissolve schools and remove teachers, a potentially drastic career-destroying sanction, unless their children achieve at a level that is vastly higher than in the past."²

The anti-teacher attitude described by the Harvard study is articulated by Michael Petrilli, who helped implement NCLB as an official with the U.S. Department of Education from 2001-2005. In a snide, July 2005 *NY Times* opinion piece, Petrilli disdains educators: "*No Child Left Behind* was perfectly suited for the situation. Its primary mechanisms are sunshine and shame: gathering statistics and alerting the community when a school is not doing right by all of its students. In urban districts, this shaming appears to have had little traction."³

How easy it is to watch someone do a complex task and imagine one could do it oneself—playing



the piano, both hands together on the right keys at the perfect tempo with elegant phrasing—hitting a home run—writing a short story with an ironic twist at the end. Since most adults have experienced twelve years of watching teachers, many of us imagine we could do a better job of teaching than a lot of the teachers we remember. We don't spend so much time considering the collection of skills, the emotional drain and the grinding hard work that define excellent teaching.

Many middle and high school teachers manage five classes of around 30 students every single day; that adds up to 150 students. They plan lessons for students of mixed abilities, often assigning materials at several different reading levels and then weaving all this back together coherently in class. They manage discussions aimed at encouraging all to join in, affirming all who participate, and moving each student to new discoveries through group work.

Teachers make time to listen to sad and angry children and confused adolescents. They know how to celebrate accomplishments. They try to pay attention and identify students who may have serious problems or may be abused. They grade hundreds of

"For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us... the teacher, in teaching..."—Romans 12: 4-7

mundane assignments without forgetting how each one fits into a pattern of skill development needed by each child. You can be sure they call on their best skills to try to manage each class, because an out-of-control class is every teacher's worst fear.

How does the law work?

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) operates through sanctions and penalties for poor outcomes as measured by standardized tests. States must set a schedule by which test scores are expected to rise, until 2014 when all students in the United States are expected to have achieved proficiency in reading and math. As an incentive to boost achievement among children in historically under-performing groups, NCLB mandates disaggregation of test

See TEACHERS, p. 3.

What's Inside?

Cover Story on Teachers... Do you know teachers who are struggling with the mandates and sanctions in the *No Child Left Behind Act*? This story reflects on public school teaching and the struggles of teachers in these difficult times. Pages 1 and 3.

Study Guide for Task Force Report...

Whose Child Left Behind? Why? is being mailed to all UCC congregations along with this 2006 *Message on Public Education*. Here, on page 2, is a study guide to help your congregation discuss the report of this four-year Task Force.



Study Guide for Resolution "For the Common Good"... Would you like to challenge members of your congregation to question a popular culture of individualism, consumerism and personal gratification and to reflect on public morality as an alternative to an exclusive focus on personal piety? Here on page 4 is an introduction to this new General Synod resolution, a brief history of the idea of the common good, and a study guide to help your group consider the role of government for providing services and regulation on behalf of shared objectives and human cooperation.

For additional copies or more information, contact Jan Resseger, Minister for Public Education and Witness, UCC Justice & Witness Ministries <ressegerj@ucc.org> (866-822-8224 x 3711)



Study Guide for UCC Public Education Task Force Report

The man being interviewed by the newspaper reporter said he had not voted in the school tax election. "But if he had, both he and his wife would have voted no. 'I don't know much about the schools except everybody hates them,' he said."¹ This kind of attitude is challenged by the Rev. William Sloane Coffin: "Evil is not so much the work of a few degenerate people... as it is the result of the indifference and negligence of the many."²

A new resource from the United Church of Christ's Justice & Witness Ministries will help you become better informed by taking an inside look at public schools across the United States. *Whose Child Left Behind? Why?* is the story of a denomination-wide Public Education Task Force that, since 2001, has visited four school sites across the United States and reflected on these experiences.

It is a collection of voices. It includes a theological reflection to help your congregation think about public morality in the context of our nation's largest civic institution. It is a glimpse into public schools in four very different locations—high schools in greater Cleveland,



Ohio—elementary schools in Phoenix, Arizona and on the nearby Gila Crossing Indian Reservation—elementary and magnet schools in Hartford, Connecticut—and an elementary, middle and high school in tiny Wartburg, Tennessee. UCC congregations are receiving a copy of *Whose Child Left Behind? Why?* in an all-church mailing along with this *2006 Message on Public Education*. You will also find the resource on-line in pdf format at <http://www.ucc.org/justice/education/whosechildleftbehind.pdf>.

Whose Child Left Behind? Why? is designed to help you think about barriers to academic achievement in the larger context of national education policy and to think about the challenges in the particular places the Task Force visited. Finally it will serve as a springboard for you to think about your own community's schools.

When a group as diverse as the UCC Public Education Task Force visits schools, the members bring their eyes, ears and life experiences with them, and the reflection weaves a tapestry of many points of view. While the group was relatively small, it included people from all geographic regions, public school educators, lay and ordained church leaders, and representatives of United Black Christians, Ministers for Racial, Social and Economic Justice, the Council for Hispanic Ministries, the Pacific Islander and



Asian American Ministries, the Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns, and the Disabilities Ministries. Each section begins with reflections from particular members of the Task Force about their own personal experiences in the schools we visited.

In the summer of 2001, when the Task Force was formed, there was not a federal *No Child Left Behind Act*, whose mechanisms were to command that achievement gaps be eliminated and to punish the schools and school districts unable to raise achievement quickly as measured by standardized tests. The hundreds of sequential mechanisms and regulations of this massive federal law, signed by the President in January 2002, have unfolded during the time our Task Force has been deliberating. While the

goals of this law are important, that educators hold high expectations and envision a bright future for children in all demographic groups, members of the UCC Task Force believe that many systemic barriers to quality education cannot be controlled through standardized testing and sanctions for schools that struggle to raise scores. The report includes a section for each of its primary conclusions: that (1) segregation matters, race matters, poverty matters; (2) school finance matters; (3) civil rights cases in the courts matter and are still necessary; (4) rural isolation and rural poverty matter; (5) a child's language, culture, and identity matter and how the school's culture and the child's culture are folded together matters; (6) good teaching matters, and respecting and supporting educators matters; and finally (7) congregations supporting public schools matter.

The Public Education Task Force used an action-reflection model, because we believe that public policy today is too frequently developed according to ideology and presented through sound bites. We discovered that we ourselves benefitted from the opportunity to reflect together from the point of view of our faith on the complex realities in the public schools we visited. It is our hope that members of your congregation will study our report and then find a way to visit one or more public schools followed by your own reflection together. Or you might



reflect together with your congregation's public school educators or school volunteers about the realities they are experiencing. After you set aside some time for reflection together, then think whether further actions present themselves to you.

Please think about which groups in your congregation would appreciate the opportunity to read and discuss this new resource. Make sure it gets into the hands of your social action committee, your youth group, your women's fellowship, or your congregation's public school educators. It is available on-line at <http://www.ucc.org/justice/education/whosechildleftbehind.pdf>. For additional paper copies contact Jan Resseger <ressegerj@ucc.org> or (866-822-8224 x 3711).

Notes

1. Janet Okoben, "West Side 'no' vote sealed tax's fate," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, B1, August 4, 2005.
2. William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 52.

Study Questions

1. The biblical and theological reflection (pp. 6-7) explores the difference between private righteousness and public morality in the context of the words of *Isaiah 58*: "Loose the bonds of injustice." "Remove the yoke." "Satisfy the needs of the afflicted." What are the ways public institutions and laws can become a yoke that curtails opportunity for particular individuals, particularly for children? Think about the public schools in your own region and think about ways that the rules, course schedules, transportation schedules, curriculum, funding levels, staff salaries, district boundaries, and traditions make some children feel more welcome or have greater or lesser access to education. What injustices can you name? Brainstorm a list. You may not agree, but try to accept each person's contributions, realizing that each person's experience shapes his or her point of view. Listen carefully to each other.

2. The report points out that segregation, race, and poverty continue to be barriers to achievement for many children in America's public schools. Are the schools in your area segregated by race and poverty? Remember that demographic data continues to demonstrate that white, dominant culture children are the most racially isolated children in the United States. In most cases the schools simply reflect the demographics of the area surrounding the school. How does racial and economic diversity matter for children? Think about the Task Force's statement that, "a school's location and the sense of the type of community it symbolizes have a great deal of influence on the character of the school... Different communities have a different sense of entitlement..." (p. 8) Now consider what might be called the hidden curriculum in your community's high school. What messages do the school's traditions convey to the children there about themselves? about racial and economic groups of children? about the value of diversity?

3. The Task Force reports on school funding problems in every location it visited (pp. 10-12). The *No Child Left Behind Act* focuses our attention on outcomes as reflected in standardized test scores, while members of the Task Force believe we must continue to wrestle with the inputs through public investment. Have members of your group noticed disparities in public investment from one school district to another? Think about your community's schools. Can you think of services that need to be offered but which your school district cannot afford? What would your group add to your community's schools if your schools had more funding?

4. The Task Force reports on the effect of a civil rights case in the Connecticut state court system (pp. 12-14). Because of U.S. Supreme Court precedents since 1972, the federal courts have been disengaging from desegregation cases in the past thirty years. Many states, however, have on-going school funding litigation. What has been the role of the courts in civil rights and school funding in your state? What has litigation accomplished and what remains to be accomplished through the legislative process?

5. The Task Force visited city, suburban, and rural schools. Which kind of school district do members of your congregation understand well? What are the challenges for schools in other settings that you would like to explore further?

6. The Task Force found its conversations about language and culture at school to be the most challenging politically (pp. 17-18). Think about language, culture, and diversity biblically. What passages in scripture can you name that speak to these concerns? Do you think it is beneficial for students to be bilingual, or should gaining fluency in the English language imply the loss of a native language? In the next two decades, as our nation's schools become more diverse — racially, demographically, and linguistically—and as children of the white, dominant culture become a minority, what steps can the church take (1) to work for schools that celebrate diversity and (2) to build public support for generous funding for schools that educate students from many cultures?

7. On the two sides of the back cover of the Task Force Report is a guide for setting up school visits for a group in your congregation. Would members of your group consider visiting a school or schools in your area? If you need assistance with this project, please contact Jan Resseger <ressegerj@ucc.org> or (866-822-8224 x 3711).

scores by race, poverty, ethnicity, students with disabilities, and English language learning status. If students in any group do not reach annual Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks, the school is ranked “in need of improvement.”

When a school is unable to lift itself out of this status, it is sanctioned with increasingly punitive consequences. In the first year, Title I funding, heretofore earmarked to support instruction, must be set aside to transport students who wish to transfer to more successful schools. In subsequent years the district must set aside Title I funds to pay for supplementary tutoring outside the school day. Finally “failing” schools are to be reconstituted with new staff or made into charter schools.

The conclusions of the new Harvard study confirm the fears and frustrations being expressed by public school teachers: “When it comes to reforming schools, we do know some things—that it takes resources, an effective strategy, and several years of hard work to turn around poorly performing schools. We also know that improving student performance requires an investment in developing the capacity of educators and organizations to respond effectively.... The current NCLB system, which relies on arbitrary performance targets and assumes a linear progression toward those targets, lost legitimacy as large numbers of schools were labeled as failing and subjected to sanctions. NCLB was designed to help schools serving low-income and minority students, yet our evidence suggests that they are the ones most likely to be negatively impacted by the law.”⁴

Valuing what teachers do ...

James Comer, M.D., the noted child psychiatrist, associate dean of the Yale University School of Medicine and founder of the Yale Child Study Center and the Yale School Development Program, has devoted his career to making explicit the importance of the relational nature of schooling. He writes, “Trust and respect are critical issues.... It is the



power and importance of these relationship issues, intangible and non-quantifiable, that troubles me about our society’s overreliance on numbers—quantitative research, survey data, test scores....”⁵

Thomas L. Friedman, the *New York Times* columnist, paid tribute in a graduation speech at Williams College last June to the commitment of the school teachers who had prepared the graduating seniors for their lives at Williams by instilling a love of learning. Friedman excerpted from the work of slam poet Taylor Mali, lines that portray the voice of a school teacher describing her work: “You want to know what I make? I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could ... I can make a C-plus feel like the Congressional Medal of Honor and an A feel like a slap in the face if the student didn’t do his or her very best... I can make parents tremble when I call home or feel almost like they won the lottery when I tell them how well their child is progressing... You want to know what I make? I make kids wonder, I make them question, I make them criticize, I make them apologize and mean it, I make them write and I make them read, read, read. I make them show all their work in math and hide it all on their final drafts in English... I make them understand that if you have the brains, then follow your heart. And if someone ever tries to judge you by what you make in money, you pay them no attention... You want to know what I make? I make a difference.”⁶

In its final 2005 report, *Whose Child Left Behind? Why?*, the United Church of Christ’s Public Education Task Force writes, “Education is a human endeavor of caring that depends on the dedication of teachers, principals, and other school staff. Learning best takes place in an environment where teacher and child have developed a personal relationship that makes each child feel valued.”⁷ The report includes statements submitted by public school teachers as part of a 2002 opinion survey of congregational leaders and teachers across the UCC. While the federal government officials enforcing NCLB sanctions against educators may be trying to motivate with sunshine and shame, as Petrilli alleged, the teachers we surveyed described their own high expectations for themselves and their students. Here are the words of a public school teacher in the Nebraska UCC Conference: “I try to practice what I preach. To encourage parent involvement I’m involved. I attend students’ activities to model what I expect of parents and to be supportive of students. I tutor students and work with parents to help them learn how to help their students learn. Being an advocate for my students is one way to help parents learn to advocate.”⁸

Today it is especially important for congregations to support public schools. Pastors, consider preaching about the importance of teachers in these times when society seems to value only what can be measured or counted. Think about ways to offer support for public school educators. Rev. Fred Schwerdt, at Immanuel UCC in Shillington, Pennsylvania, recently convened a small group of school teachers in his congregation to discuss whether there is a need for a larger supportive gathering for teachers. He writes,



“We’ve been talking about issues of stress due to NCLB, parental pressures, administrative pressures, and needing to be a disciplinarian or absentee parent, all the while trying to teach. The teachers said they appreciated the church taking this initiative.”

Another way for congregations to support education is through formal partnerships. Financial contributions will be valued and volunteer tutors and mentors will be treasured. Provide a breakfast or special lunch for the teachers in your congregation’s partner school. Think of ways your congregation can get more actively involved in supporting public education and public school educators in your community. This resource features a prayer to celebrate teachers.

After speaking at the Williams College Commencement, Thomas Friedman devoted a *NY Times* column to describing one of the college’s annual traditions: presenting awards to four superior high school teachers nominated by members of the senior class. Friedman quotes Williams President, Morton Owen Shapiro, “When you are at a place like Williams and you are able to benefit from these wonderful kids, sometimes you take it for granted. You think we produce these kids. But as faculty members, we should always be reminded that we stand on the shoulders of great high school teachers.” Friedman quotes an Illinois high school teacher’s reaction after learning she would receive an award at Williams: “I just found it very affirming... as an acknowledgment that my days have value, my life has had some worth. Public school teachers don’t get that very often... A lot of my young colleagues were really excited and pleased for me, and everyone wants to hear when I get back what happened and that is really important, because we are not getting people rushing into education.” Friedman concludes his column, “Imagine if every college in America had a program like Williams’s, and every spring, across the land, thousands of great teachers were acknowledged by the students they inspired: ‘No Great Teachers Left Behind.’ How about it?”⁹

Send the story of how your church supports teachers to Jan Resseger <ressegerj@ucc.org> to help us share your good work.

A Prayer for Teachers

God of Love ... Thank you for every teacher who notices a child’s special gift. Thank you for teachers who are listeners and gentle guides. Thank you for teachers who expect much and love enough to demand more. Thank you for the special teacher each one of us remembers.

God of Mercy... Sustain teachers who give everything they have and feel abandoned when society expects too much. Strengthen teachers who assume the blame for so many problems beyond their control. Help exhausted teachers rest.

God of Strength... Encourage teachers to care and inspire them to nourish. Motivate teachers to keep on learning for the fun of it and to make learning fun for children.

We wonder at teachers who know how to quiet a class of five-year-olds or help fourth grade girls be empathetic. We admire teachers who enjoy middle school writers, or teach physics or math or civics. We cannot even imagine how to help every single student achieve Adequate Yearly Progress. Bless the people who are expected to accomplish these miracles and who know how to comfort children when miracles don’t happen.

God of Justice... help our nation find a way to steward our vast wealth to support teachers in their special calling, wherever they teach and whatever the race or religion or gender or wealth of the children.

We pray these things in the name of our great teacher, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Notes

¹. Gail L. Sunderman, James S. Kim, and Gary Orfield, *NCLB Meets School Realities: Lessons from the Field* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2005), p. xxxii.

². *Ibid.*, p. xxxiii.

³. Michael J. Petrilli, “School Reform Moves to the Suburbs,” *NY Times*, July 11, 2005.

⁴. Gail L. Sunderman, James S. Kim, and Gary Orfield, *NCLB Meets School Realities*, p. 125.

⁵. James P. Comer, M.D., *Leave No Child Behind: Preparing Today’s Youth for Tomorrow’s World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 181-182.

⁶. Thomas L. Friedman, “Journalism as Life,” Commencement Address at Williams College, Sunday, June 5, 2005. Poem paraphrased is: Taylor Mali, “What Teachers Make,” <http://www.taylormali.com/index.cfm?webid=13&showPrint=true>.

⁷. United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries, *Whose Child Left Behind? Why?*: Final Report of the UCC Public Education Task Force, 2005, p. 19. On-line at <http://www.ucc.org/justice/education/whosechild-leftbehind.pdf>.

⁸. *Ibid.*, (P. 20).

⁹. Thomas L. Friedman, “Behind Every Grad...,” *NY Times*, A 23, June 10, 2005.

General Synod passes resolution “For the Common Good”

In Atlanta, Georgia, in July of 2005, the twenty-fifth General Synod of the United Church of Christ passed a resolution “For the Common Good”¹ that addresses public morality and the ways our nation should bring justice and compassion into its civic life.

Summary of the Resolution

The resolution presents today’s troubling social and economic context as its statement of need. In the United States five years into the twenty-first century, the income disparity between the rich and the poor has widened to the greatest degree since the 1920s. Three of every four poor children across the United States now live in working families where parents’ salaries cannot lift a family out of poverty. Approximately 80 million people have lacked health insurance at some time during the past two years. Economic and racial residential segregation has significantly increased during the past quarter century, and public schools, grossly unequal in the opportunities

This resolution proclaims that while as a matter of justice and morality we must strive always to expand the individual rights guaranteed by our government for those who have lacked rights, we also must affirm our commitment to vibrant communities and recognize the important role of government for guaranteeing the achievement of the shared objectives of the community.

they provide, have become as segregated in many places as before the Civil Rights Movement. Our nation has not considered guaranteeing universally available, affordable, quality child care. Environmental contamination compromises the health of poor people and people of color, contaminates the lands of indigenous peoples, and destroys the integrity of God’s creation.

There are significant on-going efforts to privatize education, health care, and other public goods and services. Tax cutting to reduce funding levels is being used as a strategy to reduce dependency on government services.² Congress continues to reduce taxes on the wealthiest Americans who are most able to pay, placing a greater responsibility for paying taxes on lower and middle income groups. The ensuing revenue cuts are reducing the capacity of government to provide services on behalf of the common good and contributing to our generation’s passing an enormous burden of debt to our children.

Despite these alarming trends, we hear too little in the media about these serious social and economic issues and far too little constructive dialogue about them. A strong sense of individualism is firmly entrenched in the American psyche and ethic; all good and well, but a just and good society balances individualism with the needs of the community. This resolution proclaims that while as a matter of justice and morality we must strive always to expand the individual rights guaranteed by our government for those who have lacked rights, we also must affirm our commitment to vibrant communities and recognize the important role of government for guaranteeing the achievement of the shared objectives of the community. The resolution argues that our nation has abandoned the common good by moving too far in the direction of promoting individual self interest at the expense of community responsibility.

In this resolution General Synod 25 invites UCC churches to proclaim the importance of community at a time when many in Christian churches are lifting up personal righteousness, the work ethic and family values as the solution to our nation’s problems. According to the resolution, a theology of private righteousness does not and cannot address racial and economic injustices that make it difficult for even those people who demonstrate private virtue, hard work, and tenacity to thrive.

Growing from Jesus’ call in *Matthew 25* that nations “do for the least of these” by addressing basic human needs a long time ago in a more agrarian biblical society: food, water, clothing, healing, compassion, and hospitality, the UCC’s new resolution speaks to public morality today by adding contemporary basic needs: a decent job, sufficient income, health insurance, affordable housing, quality public education, affordable child care, and a healthy environment.

The resolution lifts up the abundance with which our nation is blessed and our consequent responsibility as citizens to ensure that those who have much share through taxes with those who have less. It declares that paying taxes for government services is a civic responsibility of individuals and businesses.

While the UCC’s General Synods have addressed many of the particular concerns named here, resolution-by-resolution over the years, General Synod 25 asserts that today a conversation is largely absent about how the concerns raised in this resolution must be linked together as essential components of a good society.

Brief History of the Common Good

The common good is an ancient concept. In the third book of the *Politics* (350 BC), Aristotle declares: “Now what is just or right is to be interpreted in the sense of ‘what is equal’; and that which is right in the sense of being equal is to be considered with reference to the advantage of the state, and the common good of the citizens.”³ And in the seventh book: “... a state is not a mere aggregate of persons, but a union of them sufficing for the purposes of life.”⁴ Public ethics and justice are themes throughout the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. In the NRSV translation, in *1 Corinthians 12:7*, Paul names the common good: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

In a famous 1630 sermon on-board a ship arriving in Massachusetts, John Winthrop, our own Puritan forebear, preached about the beloved community, a city on a hill: “We must delight in each other; make others’ conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body.”⁵

James Madison writes that, “...the public good, the real welfare of the great body of the people is the supreme object to be pursued; and that no form of Government whatever, has any other value, than as it may be fitted for the attainment of this object.”⁶ And the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States lists elements of the common good to be guaranteed by the new government: “establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity...”

Today the common good is the heart of Catholic Social Teaching. Vatican II (1965) defines the common good as, “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment.”⁷ A 1998 statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops declares: “In a global culture driven by excessive individualism, our tradition proclaims that the person is not only sacred but also social. How we organize our society—in economics and politics, in law and policy—directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community... Our Church teaches that the role of government and other institutions is to protect human life and human dignity and promote the common good.”⁸



Notes

1. The resolution is on-line at <http://www.ucc.org/synod/resolutions/gsrev25-5.pdf>.
2. See *2005 JWM Message on Public Education*, p. 4. <http://www.ucc.org/justice/education/mpe2005.pdf>
3. Aristotle, *Politics* (350 BC), translated by Benjamin Jowett, Book 3, p. 13. Accessed at <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.3.three.html>.
4. *Ibid.*, Book 7, p. 8.
5. Governor John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630), on-line at <http://religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity/html>.
6. James Madison, “*The Federalist* No. 45, January 26, 1788, James Madison,” in Jacob E. Cooke, *The Federalist* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1961), p. 309.
7. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy,” in Robert Bellah, editor, *Individualism & Commitment in American Life: Readings on the Themes of Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1987), p. 436.
8. U.S. Catholic Bishops, “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, website for Social Development and World Peace, <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/socialteaching.htm>, accessed 7/18/05.
9. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* [1776] (New York: The Modern Library, 1937), p. 777.

Study Questions

1. In the context of this long history, think about how the UCC’s 2005 General Synod 25 resolution speaks to the social, economic and political circumstances in which our nation finds itself today. The resolution points out that past UCC General Synods have raised many of the issues named in the resolution one-by-one, but declares that circumstances call for a new statement in these times when it has become necessary to defend the public space itself. Do members of your group share the resolution’s sense of urgency? Why or why not? The resolution examines the common good in the context of *Matthew 25*. What other biblical statements speak to public morality and the common good?

2. In the story of the last judgment in *Matthew 25*, Jesus says that nations will be judged by how well they meet basic human needs in the agrarian biblical society of his times: food, water, clothing, healing, compassion and hospitality. The background section of the UCC’s resolution presents a contemporary, twenty-first century list of basic human needs that adds: a decent job, sufficient income, health insurance, affordable housing, quality public education, affordable child care, and a healthy environment. Does your group agree with the basic needs the resolution identifies for our times? What would you add or leave out? Why?

3. It is often alleged that if we could level the playing field to be sure everybody starts out at the same place, then we could depend on American individualism—each person’s initiative and hard work to get ahead. The assumption is that then there would be no need for institutions to assist those who lag behind. Do you think there are barriers to opportunity today? Make a list. Examine the wherefore section of the resolution for suggestions. Consider further the example of the Civil Rights Movement, which was, in essence, an effort to secure government protection as the only recourse to ensure rights that had historically been abridged. Do members of your group believe it is the role of government to protect and expand the rights and opportunities of the marginalized? If you do not agree that this is an appropriate role for government, and as Christians who accept the teaching of Jesus that nations must do for the least of these, what alternative model can you propose? It is sometimes alleged that religious institutions should carry the full burden of caring for the vulnerable. Do you believe this is a realistic solution to economic and racial injustice?

4. In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith, the father of market economics, discusses the role of government and the necessity for taxation:

“The subjects of every state ought to contribute towards the support of the government, as nearly as possible, in proportion to their respective abilities; that is, in proportion to the revenue which they respectively enjoy under the protection of the state. The expense of government to the individuals of a great nation, is like the expense of management to the joint tenants of a great estate, who are all obliged to contribute in proportion to their respective interests in the estate.”⁹

Today in contrast we hear it alleged that people should be offered personal choices in a marketplace of services, and that when all the personal choices are added together, their aggregate will actually have achieved the interests of the greater society. The background section of the UCC’s 2005 resolution challenges that notion: “...there is no evidence that choices based on self interest will protect the vulnerable or provide the safeguards and services needed by the whole population.” The be-it-resolved section declares that: “The sum total of individual choices in any private marketplace does not necessarily constitute the common good.” Consider the effect of privatization. You may wish to consult a UCC Justice and Witness Ministries resource, *Privatization*, on-line at <http://www.ucc.org/justice/private.pdf>. Compare and contrast the role of public and private institutions. What services do you believe ought to be publicly provided? What should be handled in the marketplace? Why?

5. Public schools are a foundational social institution in our democracy, and are our nation’s largest civic institution. Think about the role of public education for promoting the common good. Read together the new report of the United Church of Christ’s Public Education Task Force, *Whose Child Left Behind? Why?*, a resource that is also enclosed in this mailing. What changes need to be made in public schools to help them do a better job of promoting the common good?