

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

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

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6 (A Prudential Resolution)
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10 **Submitted By:** The Kansas-Oklahoma Conference
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13 **Summary Statement**
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15 The Kansas-Oklahoma Conference invites the Twenty-seventh General Synod to call for a study of the
16 involvement in the eugenics movement of our predecessor denominations, our churches, and clergy.
17 The purpose of such a study will be to determine what the history actually is, whether some of the
18 ideology affects our current conversation about current issues, and whether the United Church of
19 Christ should consider apologizing for our involvement.
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24 **Background**
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26 Issues of genetics, immigration, race, and sexual orientation are central to current public policy
27 discussions.
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29 One concern is the possibility that genetic therapies might be used in a way that is prejudiced against
30 difference. People with physical and mental disabilities could be targeted. Sexual orientation could
31 also be targeted (see the call by Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
32 for the use of genetic therapies to alter the sexual orientation of gay fetuses,
33 http://www.albertmohler.com/blog_read.php?id=891).
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35 There is also a growing anti-immigrant attitude in the United States, which occasionally ventures close
36 to language about racial purity.
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38 Even the measurements used in our current No Child Left Behind education policy may be grouping
39 and categorizing people in unjust ways with lasting effects.
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41 As a society we must dialogue about the ethical issues involved, and the Church should participate in
42 the theological conversation by looking at its own history within the eugenics movement, which lasted
43 from the mid-nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century.
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45 The purposes of eugenics were to support the births of desirable hereditary stock and to lessen or
46 prevent the births of those with undesirable hereditary stock, in an effort to prevent degeneration of
47 particular races and nations. *Positive eugenics* was the term used to denote encouraging white middle-

48 and upper-class women to take on the full-time roles of mother and wife so that they would have as
49 many healthy, normal children as possible. *Negative eugenics* was the term used to denote restricting
50 immigration of those understood as providing poor stock to the nation, and segregating from society
51 and/or involuntarily sterilizing members of the “socially inadequate classes” of society. These classes
52 included the epileptic, the poor, the feeble-minded, the insane, the deformed, and certain criminals.
53 From 1907 to 1963, over 63,000 people were involuntarily sterilized in the United States.

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

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

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

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

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

83

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

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

96

97 One of the founders of marriage and family therapy in the United State was eugenicist Paul Popenoe.
98 He also founded the Human Betterment Foundation which assisted California in sterilizing over 20,000
99 people. Popenoe, a Mayflower descendent, taught Sunday school for many years in the
100 Congregational Church, according to his son David Popenoe. Paul Popenoe was convinced of the
101 usefulness of churches in the eugenics education effort. Many church ministries appear to have been
102 involved in the movement. One example is the Life Adjustment Institute of the Mount Pleasant
103 Congregational Church of Washington, D. C. which taught eugenics as a part of marriage and family
104 education, as did much of the health education in public schools. This was part of a larger movement
105 supported by President Hoover and the White House Conference on Child Health and Protection,
106 which declared that “there shall be no child in America that has not the complete birthright of a sound
107 mind in a sound body,” an idea supported by the American Child Health Association and a national
108 sterilization organization called “Birthright.”

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

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

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

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

130 131 **Theological Rationale**

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

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

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144 We pride ourselves on our historic firsts, breaking new ground in the realms of race, gender, and
145 sexual orientation. Yet, welcome, inclusion, and affirmation are not the only aspects of our faith

146 tradition's history. We must examine the darker side, express contrition, if appropriate, and evaluate
147 the extent to which we or other members of society may still hold the tenets of eugenics.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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193 **THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that the Twenty-seventh General Synod of the United Church of
194 Christ encourages conferences, associations, congregations, agencies, and ministries of the United
195 Church of Christ to join in active study and education on issues dealing with our history of
196 involvement in the eugenics movement; and the ethical implications on eugenics today.

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

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203 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of
204 Christ is requested to develop a study packet for individual churches so that each might study its own
205 history, as well as that of the UCC and the larger society.

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207 **FUNDING**

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

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213 **IMPLEMENTATION**

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215 Justice and Witness Ministries is requested to implement this resolution.

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219 **Source Materials**

220
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