

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

**Supporting Survivors Of Rape and Sexual Violence Through An Ongoing Church-Wide
Observance of Break The Silence Sunday (BTSS)**

A Prudential Resolution

Submitted by

St. John's United Church of Christ of Cecil, Wisconsin with the concurrence of
Trinity United Church of Christ of Shiocton, Wisconsin;
St. John's United Church of Christ of Black Creek, Wisconsin;
Orchard Hill United Church of Christ of Chillicothe, Ohio;
Valley City Congregational United Church of Christ of Valley City, North Dakota;
Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ of Bethesda, Maryland;
Second Christian Congregational United Church of Christ of Kittery, Maine;
Bethesda United Church of Christ of Bethesda, Maryland;
First Congregational United Church of Christ of Rochester, New Hampshire;
Alfred Parish Church United Church of Christ of Alfred, Maine;
Trinity United Church of Christ of Manchester, Maryland;
Claremont United Church of Christ of Claremont, California;
Epiphany United Church of Christ of St. Louis, Missouri;
Berkeley Chinese Community Church United Church of Christ of Berkeley, California;
First Congregational United Church of Christ of Grand Junction, Colorado;
First Congregational United Church of Christ of Indianapolis, Indiana;
Immanuel United Church of Christ of West Bend, Wisconsin
Chinese Congregational Church United Church of Christ of San Francisco, California;
Pilgrim United Church of Christ of Grafton, Wisconsin;
Peace United Church of Christ of Webster Groves, Missouri;
Wisconsin Conference United Church of Christ
and the Penn Northeast Conference UCC

Summary

Lifting up the Biblical witness to compassion and courage and responding to the crisis of rape and sexual violence in our society, this resolution calls upon General Synod for a new and vital ministry of care and advocacy for survivors of sexual violence, and forthright prophecy to a society which hides, belittles or condones such abuse.

Historical Background ~ Actions Of Previous General Synods

In 1981, at General Synod Thirteen in Rochester, New York delegates approved a Resolution On Violence In Relation To Women. The Resolution read, in part, "Whereas the United Church of Christ believes that the local church can provide sanctuary from the many forms of physical and sexual violence experienced by women and others in American society through healing actions of support for victims, and public policy education and advocacy; Whereas the United Church of Christ recognizes that the climate of violence involving women is an urgent and present reality in our society." The Resolution went on to call for a pronouncement and proposal for action to be

considered at the following General Synod, and to call on churches and other parts of the United Church of Christ to study the issue and to “minister with sensitivity to victims of violence.”

In 1983, at General Synod Fourteen in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania the delegates were presented with the Pronouncement and an accompanying Proposal For Action Related To The Pronouncement On Violence In Relation To Women, recognizing the responsibility the church has because of a history of mixed interpretation of biblical story and theological doctrine in regard to women and children.

The Pronouncement concludes by saying, “We are called as a Church to be a sanctuary for those who are abused. Jesus foreshadowed this ministry in his story of the Good Samaritan, who cared for one victimized by the violence of his society. Among us today the victims of violence and abuse lie by the side of the road: beaten, humiliated, bruised, and exploited. Too often the Church, like the Priest and the Levite of the Gospel story, has passed by on the other side. We are called to be the Samaritan – to support, shelter, love, and heal those who are victims of violence of this world.”

Few other resolutions, pronouncements, or calls to action by General Synods have assumed and affirmed the role of the church in supporting victims of rape and sexual violence: General Synod Seventeen (1989, Fort Worth, Texas) adopted a Resolution In Support Of the Ecumenical Decade Of Churches In Solidarity With Women; General Synod Nineteen (1993, St. Louis, Missouri) adopted a Resolution On The Brutalization And Objectification Of Women In Times Of War, particularly relating to the systematic use of rape as a means of terror and ethnic cleansing during the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina; General Synod Twenty-Nine (2013, Long Beach, California) adopted a Resolution on Resisting Actions Seeking To Undermine The Status Of Women In Society; and General Synod Thirty-One (2017, Baltimore, Maryland) adopted a Resolution Of Witness In Support Of Adult Survivors Of Child Abuse and Neglect.

Historical Background ~ Break The Silence Sunday

Break The Silence Sunday was created in 2016 by the Rev Moira Finley (Wisconsin) as a resource for churches to actively support survivors of sexual violence, particularly in the context of worship. The goal is three-fold: to help congregations learn about the reality and scope of the problem of sexual violence; to create communities where survivors can share their stories and be received with hope and love; and for congregations to commit themselves to prayerfully consider ways in which they can support survivors, be advocates for change in their communities, and around the world. Materials, available each February, include complete liturgies, prayers, scripture reflections, sermon suggestions, music resources, statistics, ideas about talking to and with children and teens, and the Break The Silence Sunday Clergy Commitment. Resources and a historical archive are added to the website (breakthesilencesunday.org) each year as well.

Reaffirming the Spirit present in these documents, lifting up the Biblical witness to compassion and courage, and responding to the crisis in our contemporary society, we call upon General Synod for a new and vital ministry of care and advocacy for survivors of sexual violence, and forthright prophecy to a society which hides, belittles or condones such abuse.

Biblical and Theological Background

The scriptural testimony of Genesis (1.26-27, 5.1-2, 9.6) as well as Psalm 8.3-8, James 3.9 and others declare that all humanity is created in the very image of God, the human body being holy and sacred. Following in this scriptural tradition, the theology and practice of the United Church of Christ affirms the sacredness of all bodies. Violations of any human body, particularly the intimate nature of the violation of rape and sexual violence, are therefore violations against the image and body of God.

In addition, the testimony of 2 Corinthians 5.17 declares that through faith in Jesus Christ we are all a new creation, and in numerous healing stories in the Gospels (Matthew 9.20-22, Mark 5.25-34, Mark 10.46-52, Luke 17.11-19, and Luke 18.35-43) Jesus reaches out to those who are in need of healing and hope with the words, “your faith has made you whole”. Speaking the truth of our stories is a part of what can save us, can restore our bodies and our relationships with God and with others. The community of the church can offer a powerful place for stories to be told and honored, and for healing to begin, but only if the church is willing and able to listen. Survivors need the listening heart of the church’s community to support them in their healing journey.

Finally, in Judges 19 the story of rape and violence ends with a clear call to the faithful to, “Consider it, take council, and speak out” (Judges 19.30). The church is called to nurture and care for those who suffer at the hands of others, and to speak out about injustice. Instead of supporting the wounded, the church has perpetuated theologies that do additional damage, including those that glorify suffering, leave survivors believing they should stay in abusive relationships, and advocate for unconditional forgiveness of perpetrators. Too often, historically, the church has chosen silence when face to face with survivors of sexual violence instead of bravely and courageously supporting and nurturing survivors, and speaking out against the violence that was perpetrated against them.

TEXT OF THE MOTION

WHEREAS, in the more than thirty years since General Synod Fourteen the church has made little progress in truly supporting survivors of rape and sexual violence;

WHEREAS, survivors of rape and sexual violence are hesitant to come forward and share their stories with clergy or congregations because of theologies that perpetuate, glorify, or even encourage suffering and that advocate quick and uncomplicated forgiveness;

WHEREAS, the church, across traditions, has often been complicit in protecting perpetrators within their own communities and congregations, and

~~WHEREAS,~~ the church ~~often has~~ perpetuated~~s~~ the victim blaming and shaming, mirroring the painful doubt and disbelief survivors face in the wider society, and contributinges to the rape culture in which we all live;

WHEREAS, due to the intensely personal nature of the crimes, the relationships that often exist between perpetrator and victim, and the challenges of the criminal justice system, the scope of rape and sexual violence is difficult to measure.

WHEREAS, it is estimated that every ninety-eight seconds someone in the United States is sexually assaultedⁱ;

WHEREAS, the most conservative statistics estimate that one in every six women and one in every thirty-three men in the United States will be the victim of an attempted or completed sexual assault in their lifetime and that an estimated 63,000 children are sexually abused each year.

WHEREAS, we are in the midst of a cultural transformation, in the United States and around the world, with the *#metoo* movement empowering survivors to come forward and share their stories of rape, abuse, sexual harassment, and other sexual violence;

WHEREAS, with the testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee by Dr. Christine Blasey Ford during the confirmation hearings for Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, the United States has clearly seen the challenges survivors face in coming forward with their stories, particularly after many years of carrying those stories in silence;

WHEREAS, the backlash many survivors face after telling their stories often forces them back into silence and fear, and frequently complicates or damages healing already accomplished;

WHEREAS, the scriptural testimony of Genesis (1.26-27, 5.1-2, and 9.6) along with Psalm 8.3-8, James 3.9 and others affirm that humanity is created in the very image of God;

WHEREAS, in Judges 19 the story of rape and violence ends with a clear call to the faithful to, “Consider it, take council, and speak out” (Judges 19.30);

WHEREAS, in numerous healing stories in the Gospels (Matthew 9.20-22, Mark 5.25-34, Mark 10.46-52, Luke 17.11-19, Luke 18.35-43) Jesus, reaching out to those in need who have come to him for healing and hope, declares “your faith has made you whole”, recognizing that the speaking the truth of our stories can save us;

WHEREAS, the scriptural testimony of 2 Corinthians 5.17 declares that through faith in Jesus Christ we are all a new creation;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Thirty--Second General Synod calls upon the national church leadership, Conferences, Associations, and local churches to speak out in support of survivors of rape and sexual violence, offer care to individuals, including silent supportive witness in courtrooms, and advocate for sexual violence prevention education;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the national setting of the United Church of Christ, as an act of repentance and commitment to healing add an annual-yearly observance of Break The Silence Sunday (BTSS) to its calendar with the suggested date of the fourth Sunday of April so as to occur within national sexual assault awareness month;

181 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that local churches be invited to participate in ~~a yearly~~ an annual
182 observance of Break The Silence Sunday, on the suggested Sunday or any date or dates deemed
183 appropriate, honoring within their worship, -education, and community contexts the stories and
184 struggles of survivors of rape and sexual violence, and encourage such an observance in the
185 ecumenical community;

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187 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED due to the sensitive nature of the topics of Break The Silence
188 Sunday, that all settings of the church are encouraged to treat survivors of sexual violence and
189 their stories (paying particular attention to the needs of communities of color, LGBTQ+
190 identifying people, and people with disabilities) with due care and preparation, allowing time for
191 education, self-care, and gathering of resources;

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193 BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that all settings of the United Church of Christ be encouraged to
194 educate clergy and laity on how to support survivors of rape and sexual violence including
195 trauma-informed care, and to advocate on behalf of those not yet ready to speak openly so that
196 the voices of survivors do not speak alone.

197 FUNDING

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

201 IMPLEMENTATION

202 The Officers of the Church, in consultation with appropriate ministries or other entities within
203 the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.
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ⁱ Information gathered by the National Crime Victimization Survey, the United States Department of Justice, the United States Department of Health and Human Services as well as other governmental and non-profit organizations via the Rape Abuse Incest National Network, RAINN; for further information on statistics and the prevalence of sexual violence visit <https://www.rainn.org/about-sexual-assault>