

RESOLUTION: RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

WHEREAS, Jesus said, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17, NRSV), which we interpret to mean that: human beings do not owe religious obligations to the state but only to God; and that, therefore, religious beliefs and practices should not be mandated by the state; and that protecting freedom of religious expression requires a separation of the jurisdiction of state and church; and

WHEREAS, we believe, as stated by former United States Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, that: “The United States remains the most successful experiment in religious freedom that the world has ever known because the First Amendment uniquely balances freedom of private religious belief and expression with freedom from state-imposed religious expression”; and

WHEREAS, the U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly held that the First Amendment requires public school officials to be neutral in their treatment of religion, showing neither favoritism toward nor hostility against religious expression in the public schools; and

WHEREAS, in February 2003, the United States Department of Education issued a “Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools” clarifying the rights of students to pray in public schools, and pointing out that "the First Amendment forbids religious activity that is sponsored by the government but protects religious activity that is initiated by private individuals" such as students; and

WHEREAS, this guidance indicates that under the “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,” as a condition of receiving funds under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, every local educational agency must certify to its State educational agency in writing "that it has no policy that prevents, or otherwise denies participation in, constitutionally protected prayer in public schools”; and

WHEREAS, we believe that it is equally important for every local educational agency to uphold the principle of neutrality in relation to religious expression in the public schools, and to affirm that it has no policy in effect that would compel students to participate in prayer or other religious activities, or that would allow teachers, school administrators and other public school employees, as representatives of the state, to encourage or discourage prayer, or to participate in such activities with students;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that we, the delegates to the 136th Annual Meeting of the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ, reaffirm our commitment to the two-fold constitutional standard of support for privately initiated religious expression and activity by students in public schools and

opposition to government-sponsored religious expression and activity by school officials; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we request the Office of Justice and Witness Ministries, in cooperation with the Public Education Advocacy Group, to make educational resources available on this subject to every local church, and urge congregations to study this issue; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Office of Justice and Witness Ministries in cooperation with the Public Education Advocacy Group, shall offer educational materials and consultative services upon request of a local church, when problems involving Religious Expression in the Public Schools arise, in order to help ensure that genuine freedom of religion is maintained according to constitutional and established law requiring on the one hand that no child be compelled to worship in the public school setting, and on the other hand that no child be denied the right to private religious expression.