

1                   **FRESH, POTABLE, LIFE-SUSTAINING WATER FOR ALL**

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3   **WHEREAS**, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), under the direction of the un-  
4 democratically appointed Emergency Manager, and now the Mayor, has engaged in water shut-offs  
5 for non-payment of Detroit residents, including families with small children, the elderly and the  
6 infirm, often with little or no warning;

7   **WHEREAS**, the DWSD has not shut off water for corporations that have not paid their water bills;

8   **WHEREAS**, the United Nations Human Rights Commission has declared that “Disconnection of  
9 water services because of failure to pay due to lack of means (is) a violation of the human right to  
10 water and other international human rights;”

11   **WHEREAS**, the Emergency Manager has proposed privatization of the DWSD and the new  
12 regional plan still allows for that possibility;

13   **THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED**, that the Michigan Conference of the United Church of  
14 Christ, call upon governmental leaders at all levels in the State to stop all residential water shut-offs  
15 on delinquent accounts and ensure that all residents of Michigan and of Southeastern Michigan, in  
16 particular, have access to fresh, potable water that is provided cooperatively through a system that:  
17 1) Is priced fairly for all people; 2) Restores those whose water was disconnected due to  
18 inability to pay; 3) Establishes fair due process on delinquent accounts; 4) Creates programs to  
19 assist with special financial needs; 5) Holds accountable corporations and other high volume users  
20 to pay their fair share.

21   **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that we, the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ,  
22 to ensure access to fresh potable water for all, call for the DWSD to remain a system of public trust  
23 for the benefit of all and not be privatized.

24   **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ call  
25 upon our Local Churches, Members, Clergy, and Conference Minister to study this Resolution,  
26 Background and rationale, present its calls for action to all governmental officials who are  
27 responsible for the health and safety of Michigan residents, and, when/where possible, be resources  
28 for drinking water distribution, water education, and water advocacy.

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**Biblical/Theological Rationale**  
**Condemning the Inhuman/Inhumane Shut-offs of Water to Detroit Residents**  
**by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department under Governor-Appointed Emergency Manager**

“God has taken God’s place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods, God holds judgment: ‘How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.’ – Psalm 82:1-4

Here the biblical chant, “How long?” is taken up by God on behalf of the victims of oppression. It is God who is pleading their case among the gods. The gods are those who would “lord it over others”. The weak and the destitute are those least able to fend for themselves when wicked forces prevail; and the wicked are those who exhibit increasing lack of caring, compassion and concern for the weak, the orphan, the lowly and the destitute. The weak and the lowly have rights in God’s judgment. They have the right to the tree of life and the waters that nourish it.

Genesis begins: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and the darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. God called creation forth from the water. Water is the gift of life and that which sustains all life. No one can live without water. To deny access to water is to deny access to life in that place. What was freely given by God as something essential for life should not be commoditized. Water is part of the Commons, an essential resource for our common life together.

Today in Detroit, Michigan, amidst the largest basin of fresh potable water in the world, residents, American citizens, some of whom are among them the weak, the lowly, the needy, the elderly, the infirm, children, are being set upon by their water being shut off. Water is the most precious and absolutely necessary resource for sustaining all life on earth. We hear God pleading their case with the Powers that be.

This is a matter of such human/humane proportion that it has captured the attention of the United Nations which has responded to the appeal submitted on behalf of the citizens of Detroit: “Disconnection of water services because of failure to pay due to lack of means constitutes a violation of the human right to water and other international human rights.” Similarly, it has reached the hearts of our northern neighbors in Canada who have mobilized to ship and supply water, free of charge, to those in need in Detroit.

Certainly people of all faiths and caring traditions should feel troubled – if not embarrassed – by these increasingly oppressive conditions facing the tax-paying citizens of Detroit and Southeast Michigan. So we implore our Conference, Associations and Congregations and members to become the action, the face and the voice of resistance to this inhuman/inhumane act of depriving residents’ access to clean water for drinking and sanitation.

Isaiah 55:1 says: *Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. Let the one who has no money come . . .* An open letter signed by faith leaders and congregations in the Detroit Metro Area and beyond reminds: *In our traditions, water is a free grace, part of the great gift that underlies all creation. We drink it as life itself. We wade through it to freedom. And in conversion we are immersed and sprinkled and cleansed. In season we know to honor it even by fasting from it. It is the lifeblood of the planet, circulating as rain and river. Water is the very emblem of the commons, what we hold together as one . . .*

We of the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ are charged by our still-speaking God to speak and act on behalf of those who are most vulnerable: the poor, the elderly, the infirm, the children. Denying residents of water further harms the already vulnerable and swells their ranks in ways that are inhumane and preventable. How can we remain silent when our neighbors are being denied this most basic human right? When there is no water, mothers cannot make formula for their children; people who have returned home from surgery cannot clean their wounds; parents cannot cook; no one can flush a toilet or bathe. Persons responsible for the care of children or elders are in danger of having their loved ones removed from the home by protective services.

Today, in Detroit and Southeast Michigan and throughout the worldwide UCC family of churches, congregations, associations and conferences we absolutely must hear and heed God still speaking in the apocalyptic message of Jesus found in Matthew 25: 31-46, which reads in part: “...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’...”

Accordingly, we implore the Michigan Conference to join our voices with faith leaders and bodies throughout the Detroit Metro Area, the state of Michigan, nationally and internationally who have declared:

- In the name of humanity, stop the shut-offs.
- To Detroiters we say, defend and protect your neighbors from shut-off.
- To faith communities we say, become stations of water distribution as well as places of education providing ongoing information about this issue, community support and resistance to oppression.
- To water workers, we say refuse to cut off your fellow citizens. To the Water Board, we say reverse this inhumane policy.
- To the Mayor and City Council, we say stop compounding this travesty with rate increases and other complicity. Revive and reinstitute the Water Affordability program and denounce the mass cut-offs.
- To the Governor we say, call off this action taken under emergency management.

To our still-speaking God, we pray in the words of the Prophet Amos: “. . . let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”.

## FRESH, POTABLE, LIFE-SUSTAINING WATER FOR ALL Background Information

Fresh, potable water is necessary for human life and those of us living in Michigan are blessed to be in the Great Lakes Basin which contains over 20% of the world’s surface fresh water supply. For a large portion of southeastern Michigan, including all of the city of Detroit and large portions of Wayne, Oakland and Macomb Counties, high quality fresh potable water as well as sewage services have for decades been supplied by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) as a public utility from water drawn from the Great Lakes system which by International Treaties has been considered a “Commons” to be held in public trust as a Bio-ecosystem protected for current human consumption and use, and to be sustained for generations to come.

The recent (hopefully now past) policy of Detroit residential shut-offs, without regard to many peoples' inability to pay, by the DWSD, acting under the authority of an un-democratically Governor-appointed Emergency Manager (see prior 2013 Michigan Conference UCC Resolution: "Disenfranchised Citizens ....."), appears to be a violation of this public trust. Although the DWSD has an obligation to collect money from users to finance this public utility, unfortunately there has been a long history of inconsistent management (for several years the DWSD had been under the over-sight of a Federal Judge) and current efforts to improve cash-flow from delinquent customers have fallen unfairly on the poor, many consisting of families with small children, the elderly and infirm, who suffer disproportionately from water deprivation. Indeed in Detroit it is a crime, and rightly so, to deprive water from pet animals, yet dependent humans have had their water shut off by the city, often with little or no warning. These shut-offs have drawn attention to Detroit from experts from the United Nations Human Rights Commission who have stated: "Disconnection of water services because of failure to pay due to lack of means constitutes a violation of the human right to water and other international rights."

Spokespersons for the DWSD have stated that slightly over half of the 17,000 residential accounts that have been shut-off through mid-July 2014 have had their water restored after payment was made, but what about the other half who have been financially unable to establish a plan for payment? Some telephone numbers that have been given out for help have turned out to be non-functioning and assistance programs have either not been funded at all or are seen as grossly inadequate for the needs of poor people in a city with a poverty rate nearly 40% and unemployment close to 20%. A Detroit Residents' Water Affordability Plan as originally proposed basing residents' payments on ability to pay could have prevented this current financial crisis in the first place. A modified Water Affordability Plan was passed by the Detroit City Council in 2006 but never implemented. Instead, Council adopted a fund to bail some people out, a "Band-Aid" solution that has not worked.

Depriving Detroit residents of fresh water, with sudden inability to drink, bathe, cook or prepare baby formula, or flush toilets, can quickly become an acute health problem for vulnerable individuals and even threatens public health problems rarely seen except in developing countries with inadequate infrastructures. Because a majority of Detroit's poor are persons of color, the water shut-offs also represent another morally unacceptable instance of institutional racism.

Living in a region of relative fresh water abundance, it is especially unacceptable that we so far have been unable to come up with a water supply system that meets the basic needs of all of our residents in southeastern Michigan at a fair and affordable cost. As stewards of this water "Commons" that is so precious for us as a society, we must not simply turn over responsibility of this vital resource to the vicissitudes of private enterprise. To this end we implore all officials, elected or not, who have influence on this issue, to work together to preserve a public over-sight of what is in reality a regional water and sewerage system, with shared responsibility for administration and up-keep and improvement of infrastructure over the entire region and create an equitable system for usage charges that applies fairly to city and suburban consumers alike and provides for subsidized charges for the basic needs of residents unable to pay, such as outlined in the Water Affordability Plan. Let us as society provide fresh, potable life-sustaining water for all!