

**Proposed Witness Resolution: Upholding Voting Rights and Opposing Attempts at  
Voter Suppression and Discrimination in Michigan**

1   **WHEREAS**, the United States Supreme Court in a 2013 ruling has removed the most  
2   significant enforcement provision (Section 46) of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that would  
3   require pre-emptive approval of voting rights laws in states and counties with a history  
4   of voter suppression and discrimination,

5   **WHEREAS**, the U.S. Justice Department under the current Attorney General has backed  
6   off from prosecuting significant state voting rights laws with potential for voter  
7   suppression and discrimination,

8   **WHEREAS**, the Michigan State Legislature has repeatedly attempted to pass laws, often  
9   in “lame duck” sessions, which would result in the potential for significant voter  
10   suppression and discrimination,

11   **WHEREAS**, the new Presidential Election Integrity Commission presents another threat  
12   for possible voter suppression and discrimination.

13   **THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that we, the Michigan Conference of the United Church  
14   of Christ, call upon governmental leaders in the United States at all levels, including the  
15   President and Attorney General, and governmental leaders in the State of Michigan,  
16   including the Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney General and all legislators to  
17   actualize democracy in this country and state by:

- 18       1) Upholding the rights of all citizens to vote without undue hardship;
- 19       2) Removing impediments to voter registration (e.g. allow automatic registration  
20           when interacting with the Secretary of State office);
- 21       3) Banning Photo ID Laws which tend to discriminate against racial and ethnic

- 22 minorities, people with disabilities and elderly voters;
- 23 4) Banning the Purging of voter rolls;
- 24 5) Banning Felon disenfranchisement;
- 25 6) Banning Transgender disenfranchisement;
- 26 7) Criminalizing the giving out of Disinformation about voting procedures;
- 27 8) Providing for Equality in Election Day Resources;
- 28 9) Providing for Non-partisan administration of elections;
- 29 10) Providing for Non-partisan determination of voting districts;
- 30 11) Criminalizing any form of Poll Tax or Literacy or English requirements;
- 31 12) Criminalizing any form of Caging scheme to challenge voter residence based on
- 32 home foreclosure lists;
- 33 13) Declaring Election Days as Holidays, or changing them to a full weekend;
- 34 14) Allowing “no excuse” Absentee Ballot including mail-in voting procedures for all;
- 35 15) Allowing same day voter registration at the polls on Election Day itself.
- 36 16) Providing for a secondary, independent form of verification of individual ballots in all
- 37 elections in all 50 states and all territories.

38 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ call

39 upon our Local Churches, Members, Clergy, and Conference Minister to study this Resolution,

40 Background and Rationale and present calls for action to our state and

41 national legislators and executive officials to implement these and other suggestions to

42 encourage, and not suppress, voting by all eligible citizens in Michigan and nationwide.

43 Submitted by the Detroit Metropolitan Association Social Justice Mission Area Team.

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## Background Information – Voting Rights Resolution 2017

In a Democracy, such as the United States purports to be, the policies of federal and state governments should be to encourage citizen participation in the voting process as much as possible, and certainly not to impose laws with undo restrictions on voting, especially if they have the effect of discriminating against racial or ethnic minorities. In 2013, the United States Supreme Court in a 5-4 ruling removed the most significant enforcement provision (section 4b) of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which stipulated that certain states and counties (mainly in the South) that had historically restricted voting rights on racial minorities, had to obtain permission from the U.S. Department of Justice before making any changes in local voting rights laws. But of course, as soon as these restrictions were removed, several of these same states enacted restrictive voting rights laws aimed at voter suppression.

The Michigan State Legislature, apparently succumbing to unfounded fears of voter fraud, has also repeatedly attempted to pass more restrictive voting laws. This has often happened in “lame duck” sessions, when bills are pushed through rapidly with little attempt at obtaining citizen input. Voter I.D. laws, such as requiring a state issued pictured driver’s license, in order to register to vote, effectively discriminate against persons that do not drive, and are more likely to be older, persons of color, low-income, handicapped or immigrant ethnic minorities. In addition, the Michigan Legislature has exhibited its willingness in the past to circumvent the will of the electorate by passing a second Emergency Manager Law (EML) after the first was rescinded in a Citizen’s Ballot Initiative, and essentially inoculated this second EML by including a gratuitous appropriations attachment. Furthermore, in a 2013 MICUCC Resolution on Disenfranchisement of Citizens under the EML, it was pointed out that this law resulted in “Systemic Racial Bias, loss of voting rights for all Michigan citizens and discrimination against the poor.”

With this background, the U.S. Department of Justice, under the current Attorney General, has backed away from challenging recently enacted restrictive voting rights laws, such as in Texas, and in fact, has promoted the enactment of national laws which would have the affect of causing voter suppression and discrimination, such as requiring picture I.D.’s for voter registration in all states. In addition, the new Presidential Commission on Electoral Integrity presents another major threat for voter suppression.

Other voter suppression tactics include periodic purging of voter rolls using no or bogus justifications, blanket felon conviction disenfranchisement, and disenfranchisement of transgender individuals because their self-identified sex does not match their “birth certificate” gender designation. Deliberate Disinformation about voting procedures has been given out to cause minorities to spoil their ballots or not vote at all, and these unethical practices should be criminalized. Any form of a Caging scheme to challenge voter residence based on foreclosure lists, which has happened in Michigan, should also be criminalized, as well as any form of Poll Tax, Literacy or English language requirement.

Elections should be administered by trained, non-partisan officials, to avoid even the appearance of a possible conflict of interest, and not by persons elected under a party designation. Voting districts should be drawn up by non-partisan officials based on current census information, and not by State Legislators intent on partisan Gerrymandering. Government resources to administer elections should be sufficient in all precincts, including low-income neighborhoods, to provide enough polling places and facilities to avoid greater risks of voting machine break down and resulting long lines, so that voter participation is not discouraged, especially among ethnic and racial minorities. Allowing easy or “automatic” voter registration with encounters at Secretary of State offices would widen the electorate. Declaring Election Days as National Holidays or voting on weekends would help many working adults with little flexibility in taking time off from work to be able to vote. Allowing “no excuse” Absentee Ballot voting would make voting easier for everyone and encourage taking time to consider all candidates and issues on the ballot and not just those at the top. And why not allow same day voter registration on Election Day itself? If there were any legitimate question, the ballot could be considered “provisional” until evaluated later.

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## Biblical/Theological Rationale for Voting Rights Resolution

*“Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless...”* Isaiah 10:1-4, NRSV

*“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”* And they were utterly amazed at him.” Mark 12:17, NRSV

The Old Testament Prophet Isaiah reminds leaders they are called and pre-warned by God to be accountable and responsible to even the least among their constituents, especially the oppressed and the poor. Accordingly, in 2017 America, our leaders must be called to loathe oligarchy in all its forms and to work against attempts to suppress the vote and deprive citizens of their Democratic rights.

In the New Testament, Jesus teaches that we are called to fear God and render to those in charge their due. This means we as citizens and the voting public, as the children of God, must not neglect or shrink from our civic duty to speak our individual and collective voice, to not allow those who would “lord it over us” to trample on our God-given rights. We, as American citizens, are like our leaders, called to be accountable and responsible to defend and protect the freedom and democracy we are blessed to have by participating in the Franchise and holding leaders (President, Governor, Representatives in Federal, State and local government) attentive to our concerns and needs.

In this 50<sup>th</sup> year after the 1967 riots and civil unrest America still evidences an unwillingness to take lessons from that rebellious time. Too many in current leadership are determined to reverse and dismantle hard fought for voting rights, using bogus fear mongering mistruths about voter fraud. Case in point: a recent study found that over the 14 year period from 2000 to 2014, in 1 billion votes cast only 31 were classified fraudulent. *Washington Post* article, August 6, 2014 by Justin Levitt, political expert and professor with Loyola Law School, Los Angeles.

Add to this voter apathy, distrust in leaders and disdain for governmental intrusion and we have a pot of despair, hopelessness and confusion approaching its boiling point. In the apocalyptic words of Amiri Baraka/aka, Leroy Jones: “If it could happen then, it can happen again”. *Revolution '67, PBS Premiere: July 10, 2007. Produced & Directed by Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno*

The UCC is especially poised—if we have a mind to—at this time in our nation’s history to bring new directions, to bring us back from the brink and to bring the faithful to do what we are called by God to do. Because, from its Congregational roots in America’s 16<sup>th</sup> century, the UCC has evidenced a long history of supporting voting rights and worked to remove barriers to participation in our electoral process.

In the words of Michael Readinger, “The United Church of Christ continues to shape the way politics, policy and ministry unfold. Driven by the belief that we are called by God to work for justice; our predecessors have been present in great movements for change. Examples include the formation of the Congregational Church of America to avoid religious persecution in Europe, movements for Abolition, Women’s Suffrage and Civil Rights, battles for reproductive justice and the right to be a conscientious objector, and recent efforts to achieve marriage equality”. *Readinger, Michael, Commentary, UCC Witness For Justice (WFJ) page, March 03, 2016*

UCC history reflects that we have always evidenced a marriage of active prayer and civic duty, a.k.a. suffrage: “Origin and Etymology of Suffrage, first Known Use: 14th century: From Middle English, Anglo-French, and Medieval Latin *suffragium*; political support. Other synonymous uses: The right to vote in political elections; ballot; a vote given in assent to a proposal or in favor of the election of a particular person; a series of intercessory prayers or petitions.” *Miriam Webster online search.*

Voting must be seen by all (citizens and leaders alike) as active participatory prayer, at the heart of the democratic process. It is the most fundamental access point for individuals to engage in public dialogue and have a voice in public policy-decision making that shape the future of our local, regional, national and global collective life. This must be seen as a God-given occasion for the UCC to deploy all of its Civil Rights accruments for the optimum outcome. It is our call, our sacred responsibility and our duty. When we have so directed and moved our congregants, then we have done what God has commanded, and we can save all. (See Ezekiel 3: 17 and Luke, 17:10).