

Prudential Resolution: A Commitment to Gender Safety & Equity

Submitted by Woodside Church of Flint – in Cooperation with Detroit Metropolitan Association

- 1 **WHEREAS:** The United Church of Christ, following the life and example of Jesus, takes a firm,
2 unyielding stance for the human rights and safety of all women everywhere, and refuses to
3 condone any form of violence against vulnerable people;¹ and
- 4 **WHEREAS:** Sexual harassment or sexual assault is violence, and in the US, one in five women
5 can expect to be raped in her lifetime; and
- 6 **WHEREAS:** Human trafficking is an international, life-destroying epidemic of sexual and
7 economic violence primarily affecting women; and
- 8 **WHEREAS:** Virtually every woman experiences some form of sexual violence perpetrated by
9 men, and all women, both cisgender and transgender, are routinely objectified and constantly
10 subjected to the violence and degradation of unwanted sexual advances, comments and
11 exploitation; and
- 12 **WHEREAS:** Women risk further violence, loss of employment, ostracism or death in daring to
13 say no or confront the harasser, and penalty of being silenced or not believed when they dare
14 to report; and
- 15 **WHEREAS:** Such violence is under-penalized by the justice system, and women are commonly
16 blamed for the violence done to them; and
- 17 **WHEREAS:** Sexual assault is still deemed appropriate fodder for jokes, and women who object
18 are labeled humorless, “too sensitive,” or poor sports; and
- 19 **WHEREAS:** Women fear for their lives in situations that men would find benign or pleasant;
20 and
- 21 **WHEREAS:** Gender expression continues to be a minefield for women: where women are
22 pressured to exude the amount of femininity that is comfortable for men – “too feminine” is
23 seen as helpless or intentionally seductive, but “too masculine” is considered confrontational
24 and disrespectful of men, and where women are still judged on their appearance and their
25 potential as sexual conquests, rather than on their skills, ideas, achievements, or other non-
26 sexual/non-gendered attributes; and
- 27 **WHEREAS:** Women are still victims of economic violence, primarily in that they are paid less
28 than men for the same or similar work, overcharged for “women’s products,” and penalized in
29 ways that men are not for carrying out the responsibilities of home and family; and

¹“Violence in Relation to Women”, General Synod Pronouncement in 1983, Page 52-54

“Brutalization & Objectification of Women”, General Synod Resolution in 1993 – Page 45-46

“Fund for victims of Sexual Harassment & Abuse in the Church”, General Synod Resolution in 1993, Page 136, 137

“Reaffirming UCC Denouncement of Violence against Lesbian & Gay People with that Antiviolence Statement”, General Synod Resolution 2003, page 56

“Resisting Actions Seeking to Undermine the Status of Women in Society”, General Synod Resolution in 2013, Page 36-38

30 **WHEREAS:** Women’s lives are a battlefield for self-determination, especially as reproductive
31 choice is still a war waged by men against women, women’s achievement is still stunted by
32 male barriers and gender-based expectations, and “women’s issues” are still secondary
33 considerations in our research and political arenas; and

34 **WHEREAS:** All of these realities are founded in misogyny, homophobia and racism, which are
35 antithetical to the way of Jesus;

36 **THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that we, the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ,
37 denounce, and confess our complicity with, the “rape culture” that perpetuates the danger to
38 women, and establish as a part of our Associations and Conference “Boundary Awareness
39 Training” and “Fitness Reviews” a program of Gender Safety to respond to interpersonal or
40 pastoral issues that are raised by individual women, reinforcing the power Associations have
41 to sanction clergy and church leaders where offense has been determined; and

42 **BE IT ALSO RESOLVED** that we commit ourselves to the physical and sexual autonomy of
43 women: the right of every woman to have the choice not to have any other person invade her
44 personal space without permission; the right of every woman not to be touched, or abused,
45 either emotionally or physically, in any way by another person; the right of every woman to
46 express her gender in whatever ways she chooses; the right of every woman to clearly state
47 what she deems appropriate language, humor, and comments, in any situation, anywhere; the
48 right of a woman to expect that any such action will in no way be held against her for any reason
49 in the workplace or in any social situation; and

50 **THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that we do this work with intentionality and awareness of the
51 added threats and realities of violence experienced by women holding multiple marginalized
52 identities such as race, sexuality, economic insecurity, and disability. **BE IT ALSO RESOLVED** that
53 we call upon the Prophetic Integrity Mission Area Team to develop or discover, and disseminate
54 through all available Conference communication means, educational and liturgical resources
55 for congregational and community use; and to work for the human rights, safety and economic
56 autonomy of all women everywhere, including but not limited to the right of every woman to
57 make her own reproductive and other health choices, and the right of women to access the
58 same educational resources and opportunities and receive the same benefits of employment
59 as accrue to men; and

60 **BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED** that this resolution be submitted to the UCC 2019 General Synod,
61 with recommendation that the whole United Church of Christ identify or develop educational
62 materials for congregational and community use, and establish such protocols for response as
63 named above for use throughout the Wider Church.

A Commitment to Gender Safety & Equity

Biblical/Theological Support & Rationale

Our scriptural traditions have a love/hate relationship with women. A brief survey would have to include the second-place perception of Eve in the garden (and blame placed on her when things didn't go according to plan); the rapes of Tamar, Dinah, Bathsheba and so many nameless others – women raped as punishment for the behaviors of men, women forced to marry their rapists, women blamed and shunned for having been the victim of rape; then Ruth, Leah, and Rachel all bartered for by men, and the daughters of Lot offered as a trade-off so that the violent men of Sodom would not hurt the male visitors; the extreme makeover of Esther for the king's pleasure; the traditional – though misplaced – slut-shaming of Mary Magdalene; the economic exploitation of the schizophrenic woman in Paul's way (who by his healing he left more economically vulnerable than before); the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, who then had to get out of bed to prepare a meal for all the men. Together with the silencing and disappearance of so many women from the stories of faithful leadership, a picture emerges of a culture that really doesn't like women. From the very pages of scripture, the women cry out "Me Too!"

Christian faith, the Christian church itself, from ancient beginnings to current reality, has grown up around the notion that women don't matter, or matter less than men, or matter exclusively for the ways that they serve or bring pleasure to men. In concert with the age-old contention that God is most certainly male, women have been reduced to the value of their productivity – how many children, meals and loads of laundry they can produce.

Sure, we are probably telling many of these bible stories incorrectly, but merely the acknowledgement of "wrong-telling" has not healed the gaping wound that is our attitude toward women. While we surely see women in strong leadership positions in this 21st century, we also see the disparity: most women still live in vulnerable circumstances, still are taught that safety and success depend on how well they appease the men who run the world. And even the women at the top live with the threat of violence or retribution for offending men. We see powerful men in every industry – including church – take advantage of women for personal pleasure. And we see a country that has elected as president a man who bragged of sexual assault, in fact elected this man *despite* his bragging of sexual assault. To be clear, the #MeToo resurgence of attention is only a resurgence of *attention*; the *fact* of pervasive sexual violence has never dimmed.

But the Bible. Though it devalues women in so many ways, in many other ways our scripture tells another story: Sophia, wisdom, is the female person of God. The midwives defied pharaoh. Rahab, from her brothel, helped Israel succeed in conquest. Deborah was a judge. "There is neither male nor female," wrote Paul (though we debate whether he meant it). Jesus shared a table with women and gave them place. The women were Jesus' most faithful disciples and the first witnesses of the resurrection, according to all four evangelists; they were the funders and foundational members of the earliest Christian congregations, according to Luke.

Thus, the same scriptures that demean women also call us continually to a posture of gender equity, a new clarity of the richness that is the breadth of human creation. Women matter, even if we have to discard half the Bible to get there.

Women matter. We all say it. Biblically, the United Church of Christ makes the case that women matter, that women are to be on par with men in all things. But claiming our faith is in the details: how we live matters more than what we say. So, while we try to live as God's people, as followers of Jesus, we also know that we are also charged to be witnesses beyond our own doors – advocates and allies for the safety and dignity for all women. We share responsibility for repairing the breach, responsibility for restoring streets to live in – streets in which we all can safely abide.

This resolution, then, (as most resolutions) is to remind us, to invite us, to call us again into a faith where all of creation is good, where all people are created in the image of God, where all of us are to embrace a reign of God that tends to a world of care and consideration for all.

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Supportive Statement

This is a supportive statement and call to all people to honor and respect the human rights of women, insuring that no woman is subject to sexual harassment or any form of physical or emotional abuse in any setting, including the work place, social settings, and the privacy of their own home.

On October 15, 2017 Alyssa Milano cried out, as did earlier “#MeToo” founder, Tarana Burke. She cried out to all women who have been harassed, abused, either sexually or emotionally, and to all women who have been assaulted in any way shape or form. Through Tarana Burke’s coining the “MeToo” initiative, and through Alyssa Milano’s popular personality and advocate activities, they helped give voice to a long-standing crisis in this country and in the world. The crisis in this country goes back to the very beginning of our nation. A crisis known all too well to women, especially those suffering the agony and demoralizing hardship of captivity and slavery. A crisis in which all too often people have simply chosen to look the other way. A crisis in which the woman herself is often blamed and mislabeled as if she is the very cause of the abuse. A crisis that is often considered shameful to even mention or talk about.

In the #MeToo initiative, Alyssa Milano is asking for help for all. She is putting the crisis out there in front of everyone, so that everyone can once and for all understand not only the danger and harm done to women, but also the critical need to put a stop to it. In her calling attention to the crisis, she is giving people an opportunity to talk about and understand the problem, and to make sure that there will never again be a woman who is told that she is the cause of the abuse.

Milano is providing an opportunity to look closely at social interactions, and to promote discussion and education, which will insure that this abuse never happens again to any woman. Tarana Burke’s initiative and Alyssa Milano’s words, proclaim that abuse of any kind is not alright, it is not something which can be endured and forgotten, and, most importantly, it is not something which can continue under any circumstance.

Not only do we have a responsibility to prevent sexual abuse and violence, there is a responsibility to call it out. Just as Tarana Burke and Alyssa Milano have done with #MeToo, it is important to send a message that sexual violence is not alright, and there is zero tolerance for such abuse. Learning and remembering to love and respect all women, as was the example set by Jesus, will help to make this crisis cease – and create a better world for all women.

Detroit Metropolitan Association