

Submitted by: the Overview Board for Justice & Witness Ministries,
MMTT (Multiracial/Multicultural Transformation Team),
the Cabinet of Eden UCC, Hayward; and the Church Council of First Congregational UCC, Alameda

Adopted by: the Northern California Nevada Conference, United Church of Christ
Meeting at the Asilomar Conference Center, Saturday, May 30, 2009

POSITION STATEMENT AFFIRMING DIVERSITY/MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Brief Statement of Purpose — to create a progressive Christian witness in support of organizations that provide diversity education for their constituents that builds tolerance for “all the people” including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals and families and people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, abilities, and faiths. In particular, this position addresses concerns that school systems are being openly challenged by religious groups who seek to limit exposure to diversity education, and in some cases even to prohibit diversity education in public schools.

Position to be Voted: The 2009 Annual Gathering of the Northern California Nevada Conference, United Church of Christ supports the efforts of organizations, especially school districts throughout California, to develop programs that promote wide-ranging diversity. In particular we believe diversity education should include people of all races, ethnic origins, faiths, abilities, sexual orientations, gender identities, and their families. This type of education has the potential for building acceptance of “all the people” and reducing violence, derogatory speech and bullying.

Specifically, the 2009 Annual Gathering affirms earlier decisions declaring the NCNC to be a Multiracial/Multicultural and an Open and Affirming Conference by

- 1) Supporting diversity enrichment programs, and safe schools curriculum development, including the Castro Valley Unified School District’s “Days of Diversity,” and the Alameda Unified School District’s K-5 LGBT Diversity Curriculum
- 2) Decrying organized and systematic efforts to cast diversity education in negative terms using fear and intimidation;
- 3) Calling for processes and protocols for public discourse that ensure the inclusion of viewpoints representative of a cross-section of the local community in which the school is situated;
- 4) Affirming and supporting congregations, church leaders, and public school districts that are playing a prophetic role in support of diversity education in their communities;
- 5) Encouraging the congregations of the United Church of Christ to speak up in support of diversity education from the point of view of their faith commitment and informed by the Bible’s overwhelming mandate to defend the cause of justice as evidenced in the bold witness of the Hebrew prophets (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, etc.), Jesus’ direct challenge to the exclusionary religious teachings and practices of his day (e.g., Mark 7) and the apostles’ commitment to becoming a more inclusive church (e.g., Acts 8:26-40 and Acts 10:34.)
- 6) Encouraging the congregations of the United Church of Christ to continue to find ways within their churches to address topics of race, ethnicities, abilities, faiths, and sexual orientation, to engage in public witness that affirms diversity, to support those who are engaged faithfully in acts of inclusion, and to celebrate the diversity of individuals and families as a gift of God.

Background Statement – Recently both the Castro Valley School District’s “Days of Diversity,” and plans by the Alameda School District to institute an LGBT K-5 diversity curriculum in its schools, have come under fire by religious groups from within and outside the community who are working in tandem to stop efforts by local school districts to implement diversity enrichment programs, and safe schools curriculum development that seeks to foster respect for “all the people in our neighborhood,” and specifically to give visibility to same-gender parented families and people and reduce anti-gay slurs and bullying, which is rampant within our public schools.

While those who oppose diversity education declare it a threat to “family values” and the “nuclear family,” a look at the Bible reveals that there are numerous types of families described – none of which includes the so-called “nuclear family.” In fact, today, the so-called ‘traditional nuclear family’ (husband working outside the home, wife working inside the home and 2.2 children) represents less than 5% of the population in the US.¹

School districts have a mandate to keep all their children safe from emotional and physical harm by providing lessons to address the ways that words like “gay” are misused by children as early as kindergarten to tease, humiliate and bully fellow students. Developing diversity curriculum and encouraging days of diversity are essential to creating an environment where all children can learn and play in safety, as well as reach their full potential, without fear or intimidation.

The United Church of Christ and the Northern California Nevada Conference have a long history of supporting such efforts. The Rev. John Thomas’ 2008 invitation to engage in sacred conversations on race and the commitment of this Conference to accept the invitation are only the latest indications of such support.

Celebrating diversity and supporting diversity education are ways in which we live into being a Multi-racial/Multi-cultural and Open and Affirming Conference.

Theological Rationale – In the First Letter of John we are reminded that “there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). The love of God that we experience through Jesus dispels our fear of “the other,” whomever they may be and allows us to see and appreciate their full humanity as creations of God.

On this Pentecost weekend, we remember that the most important requirement of discipleship is inclusiveness, born through the ministry of Jesus who tells us, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). There are no exceptions, no foot-notes or qualifiers. Many of the recent lections for the Season of Easter have reminded us of how the earliest apostles came to realize that God accepts “all the people” (cf. Acts 8:26-40 and Acts 10:34).

The community Jesus gathered around him challenged the conventional wisdom of his day that defined who was worthy of inclusion and who was not. In the first century CE where eating together was “symbolic of friendship, intimacy and social unity”² Jesus broke bread with the marginalized, thereby discrediting himself in the eyes of the religious authorities. As we today confront the same kind of marginalization of people because of race, ethnicity, gender, ability, sexual orientation, or gender identity, we as Christ’s body on earth, would do well to follow his lead.

¹ James B. Nelson’s article in the UCC Marriage Curriculum <http://www.ucc.org/justice/pdfs/mdgr.pdf>

² Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, © 2006 Marcus Borg, Harper San Francisco, pp. 157-160.

Resources –The Alameda School Board site that has all the background information on this issue is <http://www.mikemcmahon.info/LGBTCurriculum.htm>. Resources listed in the Alameda School District Curriculum are *Who's In A Family* by Robert Skutch; *The New Girl and Me* by Jacqui Robbins; and the film: *That's A Family*, produced by Groundspark. The United Church of Christ has materials available such as *Protecting Students from Harassment, Bullying and Hate in School*, a resource packet to help congregations teach children to respect and appreciate differences; *Hate Crimes Educational Packets*; *Our Whole Lives*, a series of sexuality education programs for K-1, 4-6, 7-9 and 10-12, that provides accurate information for parents, teachers, pastors and young people to learn about sexuality in the affirming and supportive setting of our churches; and *Created in God's Image: A Human Sexuality Program for Ministry and Mission*. For information on the wide array of biblical family types, consult James B. Nelson's article in the UCC Marriage Curriculum <http://www.ucc.org/justice/pdfs/mdgr.pdf>. Alameda C.A.R.E. (Community Alliance Resource for Education) at www.alamedacare.org is a grassroots group formed of community members advocating for inclusive safe school environments. Other helpful resources include the following:

- **GLSEN**—fosters respect in schools, www.glsen.org
- **PFLAG**—Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays <http://www.pflag.org>
- **People for the Democratic Way**—“Right Wing Watch,” <http://www.rightwingwatch.org>

Recommendations for Implementation – Direct our Conference Minister, the Rev. Dr. Mary Susan Gast to: 1) send a pastoral letter to all NCNC congregations calling them to address the issue of diversity in ways appropriate to their local settings challenging them to be a public witness in their communities, engage in sacred conversations on race, and actively affirm LGBT families and individuals in ways that ensure their equal treatment in our communities; 2) issue press releases throughout the state in support of diversity education in our public schools; 3) place this action of the NCNC UCC in the form required for submission to the 27th General Synod for consideration and action; 4) call on local churches, associations, conferences, the Collegium, the Covenanted ministries, and the 27th General Synod to learn about and advocate for diversity education in our public schools, and; 5) call on local churches, associations, conferences, the Covenanted ministries, and the 27th General Synod to develop and participate in a broad-based ecumenical and interfaith coalition that will advocate for anti-bullying, safe schools, and diversity education in our public schools

Fiscal Impact – Minimal costs associated with sharing news of this resolution with the wider community.

Contact Persons – The Rev. Arlene Nehring, the Rev. Laura Rose, the Rev. Penny Nixon, and the Rev. Drew Nettinga.