The Business Committee of the Thirty-Fourth General Synod has recommended this proposed resolution be sent to a Committee of the General Synod.

Closing the Digital Divide: Calling on the United Church of Christ to Seek Digital Justice and Inclusion

A Resolution of Witness

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1 **SUMMARY**
2 This resolution calls on the United Church of Christ to continue strengthening its longstanding
3 leadership role in the global community in working for digital and communications justice. In
4 the United States and globally, many people do not experience full digital inclusion–that is, they
5 are unable to access electronic communications technology, at an affordable cost, with the digital
6 literacy to use it. Cost, access, and literacy weave together imposing barriers to full civic,
7 economic, and educational inclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the need for virtual
8 access to employment, education, civic, and religious activities and exacerbated the severe
9 impact of gaps in digital inclusion. Moreover, systematic changes in our public and private lives
10 since the beginning of the pandemic demonstrate that online access will continue to be an ever
11 more prevalent need. This resolution calls for: 1) identifying the digital divide–a failure of digital
12 inclusion–as a justice issue; 2) adopting frameworks for ensuring digital justice in UCC
13 programming; 3) advocating for digital communications systems that are accountable to users
14 and workers, are owned by diverse peoples, offer the highest-quality services to all people at
15 affordable prices, and respect and facilitate the autonomy, privacy, and humanity in all people;
16 and 4) reaffirming and celebrating the UCC's leadership in communications rights and equity
17 and the work of United Church of Christ Media Justice Ministry in improving digital equity and
18 communications rights for all people.
19
20 **BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, and HISTORICAL GROUNDING**
21
22 There are times, to be sure, when the Bible speaks directly to a topic, while in the case of digital
23 access, that is simply not the case. The people of ancient Israel and of first century Palestine

24 could not have conceived of the technology that exists in the twenty-first century. However,
25 Jesus' example demonstrated the power of stories and communication to convey messages, set
26 standards for behavior, and provide aspirational vision, and the values and ideals that underlie
27 the issue of equitable digital access are certainly present within the lessons of the Bible.
28
29 At the heart of the issue of digital access is the importance of equity. Far too many in our world
30 lack equitable access to what has become a basic need to thrive in modern society. This lack of
31 equity burdens individuals and harms communities. In the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25,
32 beginning with verse 31, Jesus describes the treatment of "the least of these." He describes how
33 people who took care of those who were hungry or thirsty, those who were strangers or without
34 clothes, or those who were sick or imprisoned are blessed, for he says, "Truly I tell you, just as
35 you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." He
36 emphasizes the importance of communication and connection in describing the need to visit
37 people in prison–visits that, today, often occur over electronic communication. During the
38 pandemic, visiting those who were sick–not to mention those in nursing homes and other forms
39 of congregate housing–also required digital access as physical presence was tightly restricted.
40 Jesus describes how those who ignored people in need do not fulfill their sacred obligations, for
41 he says, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to
42 me." Jesus offers clear instruction in this passage that we are called to ensure that the basic needs
43 of all are met. In this twenty-first century world, access to the internet has become just such a
44 basic need.
45
46 Further, in a world of haves and have-nots, we witness how current systems and networks use
47 factors including location, socio-economic status, and ability to determine the capacity of an
48 individual or a community to gain appropriate or necessary digital access. These attributes can
49 detrimentally affect people even when they have online access, such as when privacy violations,
50 surveillance, or online algorithms adversely target some people over others. Such systems serve
51 as "stumbling blocks" in the paths of those who are constrained. In the Gospel of Luke, chapter
52 17, beginning with verse 1, Jesus says to his disciples: "Occasions for stumbling are bound to
53 come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were
54 hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little
55 ones to stumble." As in Matthew 25, Jesus's concern in this passage is for those who are
56 marginalized and under-resourced. He is warning of the implications of causing or contributing
57 to their disadvantage.
58
59 Similarly, Leviticus 19:13-14 reminds us, "You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not
60 steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not
61 revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the
62 Lord." The passage articulates the responsibility of people of faith to advocate for and give
63 support to people who are treated unjustly by society. Taken with the previous passages, it is not
64 enough to avoid placing "stumbling blocks" before others; we also fail to live up to our call as
65 followers of Christ when we do not act to remove such stumbling blocks. This leads us to work
66 for the removal of stumbling blocks placed in the path of those denied appropriate and equitable
67 digital access.
68

69　The United Church of Christ has been a leader in communications justice since 1959, when the
70　Rev. Everett C. Parker founded the Office of Communication, Inc., now known as United
71　Church of Christ Media Justice Ministry. Dr. Parker's work has long been recognized as one of
72　the UCC's historic "firsts" and his work to ensure that media represents and serves all people has
73　been recognized and honored by organizations inside and outside the church.[1] Since that time,
74　General Synods of the United Church of Christ have addressed the challenges of evolving
75　technologies and communications systems that foster or further systemic divisions between
76　peoples. Previously adopted resolutions have spoken in support of equity, accountability access,
77　and freedom in the use of communications technologies.[2] The Twelfth General Synod, meeting
78　in 1979, adopted *Third World Access to Advanced Communications Technologies*, a resolution
79　that called for conducting "a long-term program to assist Third World nations, through their
80　churches, to gain access to the world's communications systems, to improve their
81　communications capabilities and to use new communications opportunities as they emerge."[3] In
82　1997, the Twenty-first General Synod adopted *Access to the Age of Computer Information*,
83　which named the power of evolving digital communications technology to shape society and
84　create divisions between those with access to new technologies and those without.[4] The
85　resolution encouraged advocacy for broader access and training; it even urged congregations "to
86　explore use of on-line services to connect youth and adults in building understanding of the
87　diverse world in which we live."[5]
88
89　This was a prescient naming of the increasing power of digital communications tools to build
90　and expand community. Conversely, the absence of these tools now hinders community
91　development. Communication tools and resources shape communal identity, playing "a critical
92　role in building peace, security and a sense of identity as well as in promoting justice, mutual
93　accountability and transparency."[6] This power of digital access to bring together and to divide is
94　accelerating. In August 2022, at the convening of the 11th General Assembly of the World
95　Council of Churches, Acting General Secretary Rev. Prof. Dr. Ioan Sauca named the capacity of
96　digital and online communications to strengthen community and collaboration, cautioned against
97　the potential for exclusion, and voiced "the need to uphold a vision of digital justice."[7] Such
98　justice depends on the availability, affordability, and accessibility of digital tools and systems,
99　paired with the skills training, safety, and security to access them meaningfully and without fear
100　of biased treatment or persecution.
101
102　Along with building community and fostering social cohesion, digital inclusion is increasingly
103　necessary for participation in the global economy, for education and expansion of opportunity,
104　for accessing health care and housing and faith communities. The impact of exclusion is
105　detrimental to individuals, to families, and to whole communities–and it is a harm not borne
106　evenly across society. As explained by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights,
107　"The lack of access to broadband internet service among communities of color, low-income
108　households, and rural communities means that many vulnerable households are
109　disproportionately excluded from full participation in our society and, thus, raises a critical
110　equity and civil rights concern."[8] The lack of quality access is a significant stumbling block for
111　many in the United States and around the world. In 2016, the United Nations underscored the
112　importance of digital justice when it augmented Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of
113　Human Rights by affirming "the importance of applying a comprehensive human rights-based
114　approach in providing and in expanding access to the Internet, and [requesting] all States

115   to make efforts to bridge the many forms of digital divide."[9] Access alone is not the goal, though
116   it is an important starting point. Meaningful access–that is, "the possibility for everyone to enjoy
117   a safe, satisfying, enriching, productive, and affordable online experience"– is necessary to
118   ensure all people can equitably utilize the resources of digital connectivity.[10] It is incumbent
119   upon us, as people of faith, to advocate for equitable access to the internet for all who experience
120   stumbling blocks in their access to safe, reliable, quality internet services and to ensure, once
121   they have access to the internet, that they are treated fairly online and have access to the skills
122   and knowledge needed to make full use of those tools.
123
124   While disparities within the United States are closing, the lack of access to and utilization of
125   modern communications technologies continues to harm many people, including people of color,
126   people with disabilities, people living in rural communities and formerly redlined urban
127   neighborhoods, older people, incarcerated people, and people with low incomes. The Department
128   of Commerce recently reported that 82% of White non-Hispanics in the United States used the
129   internet while only 77% of African Americans and Hispanics did; moreover, while 71% of White
130   non-Hispanics used a personal computer or tablet in 2021, only 57% of African Americans and
131   54% of Hispanics did.[11] Children fare somewhat better than adults, yet racial disparities persist.[12]
132   In addition, 15% of adults 50 and older do not have access to any type of internet service, with
133   most reporting that the cost of high-speed internet is an issue.[13] In fact, income is a major reason
134   why many households do not have internet access.[14] Twenty-six percent of families with annual
135   incomes under $25,000 have no internet service subscriptions; another 13% have only mobile
136   access.[15] The majority of these households report a desire to access the internet if it were
137   affordable.[16] Rural residents are less likely to have access to high-speed internet than urban and
138   suburban residents, with nearly 1 in 4 naming this as a major problem in their community.[17] At
139   the same time, the digital redlining of many urban communities is reinforcing inequalities that
140   were entrenched by the systematic denial of resources in the twentieth century.[18] Access is also
141   strongly impacted by disability, as only 54% of Americans with disabilities used a computer or
142   tablet in 2021, compared with 70% of those not reporting a disability.[19]
143
144   The global COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the impact of these inequities as work, school,
145   socializing, worship, shopping, and innumerable other activities moved online.[20] During the
146   pandemic, the digital divide reinforced existing educational disparities that impact wealth and
147   future earning potential. The intergenerational transmission of racial wealth inequality likely
148   played out at rapid speed during the pandemic.[21] Existing stumbling blocks were amplified by
149   the disparate digital access experienced during pandemic-related lockdowns and limitations on
150   schools and businesses. Globally, "an estimated two-thirds of all school children were deprived
151   of essential education services because they had no fixed broadband access at home."[22] The work
152   for digital justice mitigates against future crises, building resilience within communities that are
153   currently excluded.
154
155   There is significant work to be done. Across Africa and within least-developed countries,
156   meaningful connectivity lags much of the rest of the world. While 87% of people in Europe and
157   81% of those across the Americas accessed broadband internet in 2021, that number drops to
158   61% for those in Asia and the Pacific, 33% among people in Africa, and 27% for those living in
159   least-developed countries.[23] Despite the widespread availability of mobile networks globally, a
160   persistent challenge lies in dramatically increasing accessibility so that people can actually get

161 online.[24] On an individual level, global data shows that women, people in rural areas, older
162 adults, and those with lower incomes are more likely to experience digital injustice.[25]
163 Connectivity is also critical for vulnerable persons to maintain relationships and access
164 resources. As just one example, with more than 100 million people forcibly displaced from their
165 homes around the world, meaningful digital connectivity would enable them to stay connected to
166 community, to access information, to receive humanitarian resources, and potentially even to
167 continue earning a living; however, the majority of these people are in developing and least-
168 developed countries where access to such basic support services is restricted if not withheld
169 entirely.[26] While digital inclusion is a tool to counter existing global disparities, much work
170 remains in bridging these multiple divides to enable meaningful, life-enriching, and sometimes
171 life-saving, access.
172
173 In developing and historically colonized countries, the lack of accessibility is also a massive
174 stumbling block hindering community development. Under the framework of its 17 Sustainable
175 Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations has advanced "a plan of action for people,
176 planet and prosperity."[27] These ambitious goals, adopted in 2015, aim to eradicate poverty and
177 address the climate crisis, providing a sustainable future for all. Across all goals, there is a strong
178 correlation between progress and the advancement of digital justice. "Of the SDG's 17 goals and
179 169 targets, not a single one is detached from the implications and potential of digital
180 technology."[28] For this reason, digital inclusion is named as a specific target in Goal 9,
181 Industries, Innovation, and Infrastructure: "Significantly increase access to information and
182 communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet
183 in least developed countries." The significance of this target cannot be overstated, a point made
184 clear by the International Telecommunication Union at the outset of its comprehensive *Global
185 Connectivity Report 2022*: "*Universal and meaningful connectivity* … has become the new
186 imperative for the 2020-2030 Decade of Action to deliver on the Sustainable Development
187 Goals."[29] The power of digital access for building community, combating poverty, growing
188 economies, and improving the quality of life for all people makes meaningful access and digital
189 justice an imperative.
190
191 Taken together, the lack of accessibility, affordability, training, and security create significant
192 stumbling blocks toward achieving digital inclusion, thereby reinforcing systemic barriers
193 against development. Working for digital justice is an extension of the United Church of Christ's
194 ongoing work for the just inclusion of all God's people. Highlighting this issue reflects the work
195 of United Church of Christ Media Justice Ministry and the recent move toward measuring
196 ministry impacts in line with the SDGs by National Setting ministries and partners, including
197 Church World Service. Embracing this opportunity connects directly to the development and
198 humanitarian ministries of Wider Church Ministries supported through One Great Hour of
199 Sharing and the work of Global Ministries and Global H.O.P.E. Strengthening the call for
200 universal and meaningful digital inclusion grows out of the United Church of Christ's historic
201 and ongoing justice work and embodies the vision, United in Christ's love, a just world for all.
202
203 **TEXT OF THE MOTION**
204
205

206 **WHEREAS** few areas of life are not impacted by digital access and use and there is a growing
207 correlation between quality digital access and use and increased economic, educational,[30]
208 health,[31] labor,[32] and social opportunities and mobility;[33] and
209
210 **WHEREAS** thirty percent of school-age children in the United States[34] (two-thirds of those
211 whose family income is below the federal poverty level[35]) and two-thirds of students globally[36]
212 do not have adequate, reliable internet access at home; and
213
214 **WHEREAS** the COVID pandemic laid bare the injustice of the digital divide, further widening
215 educational,[37] economic,[38] and opportunities[39] gaps[40] between those who have high quality
216 digital access and those who do not; and
217
218 **WHEREAS** the United Church of Christ has long recognized the unique power of media to give
219 meaningful voice to diverse peoples, cultures, and ideas and in so doing to shape society; and,
220
221 **WHEREAS** the ability to use new and evolving technologies is essential for strengthening
222 relationships and building peaceful communities, and especially for the hearing, centering, and
223 amplifying of voices of those on the margins;[41] and
224
225 **WHEREAS** disparities in digital access reflect gender,[42] race,[43] geographic,[44] ability,[45] and
226 economic[46] privilege, systemically entrenching existing[47] inequalities[48] in the United States; and,
227
228 **WHEREAS** this divide is similarly[49] experienced[50] globally,[51] further exacerbating[52]
229 inequalities[53] especially for previously colonized nations while also impeding[54] progress toward
230 global commitments to the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals; and,
231
232 **WHEREAS** the work of justice and ministry in the church is critically tied to sustainable
233 development,[55] intersecting with the broad work of the global Sustainable Development Goals[56]
234 and with specific actions including eliminating poverty, embracing sustainability, and
235 empowering others for progress; and,
236
237 **WHEREAS** the United Church of Christ has consistently and repeatedly taken a stand for justice
238 for all God's children including for racial, social, disability, economic, and digital justice;
239
240 **THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED,** that the Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United
241 Church of Christ identifies the globally widening digital divide and lack of digital inclusion as a
242 justice issue, and invites all settings of the United Church of Christ to do likewise while working
243 with, among other organizations, United Church of Christ Media Justice Ministry, raising
244 awareness among constituents, and joining faith-based and other coalitions pressing for digital
245 justice including through increased affordability, accessibility, training, and support; and
246
247 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that the Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of
248 Christ encourages the National Setting, Conferences, and Associations to develop digital-
249 inclusion activities and policies with attention to advocacy, access to internet-enabled devices,
250 skills training, digital programming support, and online content designed to enable and promote
251 self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration; and

252
253 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that the Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of
254 Christ encourages the National Setting, Conferences, and Associations to support rural
255 congregations, and other congregations challenged by the current lack of digital infrastructure, in
256 assessing local internet availability and affordability, networking them for collaborative action;
257 and,
258
259 **BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED**, that the Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of
260 Christ urges all settings of the United Church of Christ to advocate for digital justice and
261 affordable, quality digital access for all, especially those who are left out or held back by
262 systemic inequalities within the United States and around the world.
263
264 **<u>FUNDING</u>**
265 The funding for the implementation of the Resolution will be made in accordance with the
266 overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.
267
268 **<u>IMPLEMENTATION</u>**
269 The Officers of the Church, in consultation with appropriate ministries or other entities within
270 the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.
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[1] See, e.g., "Many join in remembering Dr. Parker's life." *UCC Media Justice* (Sept. 22, 2015), https://web.archive.org/web/20151024003641/http:/uccmediajustice.org/; Larkman, Connie. "Celebrating the legacy of Everett Parker on his 100th birthday." *UCC News* (Jan 4, 2013), https://www.ucc.org/celebrating-the-legacy-of-the/; McFadden, Robert D. "Everett C. Parker, Who Won Landmark Fight Over Media Race Bias, Dies at 102." *New York Times* (Sept. 18, 2015), https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/19/us/everett-parker-obituary.html.

[2] See "Minutes of the Ninth General Synod." United Church of Christ, June 1973, pp. 49-50 (resolution, *Freedom of the Press and the Right of the People to Know*); and "Minutes of the Twentieth General Synod." United Church of Christ, June-July 1995, pp. 32-33 (resolution, *Global Communication for Justice*).

[3] "Minutes of the Twelfth General Synod." United Church of Christ, June 1979, p. 61 (resolution, *Third World Access to Advanced Communications Technologies*).

[4] "Minutes of the Twenty-First General Synod." United Church of Christ, July 1997, pp. 61-2 (resolution, *Access to the Age of Computer Information)*.

[5] "Minutes of the Twenty-First General Synod," p. 62.

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[7] "Report of the Acting General Secretary to the WCC 11th Assembly." *World Council of Churches*, 31 Aug. 2022, https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/A02-Report-of-the-Acting%20General-Secretary-ENG.pdf.

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[15] "AARP Urges Older Americans Struggling to Access and Afford High-Speed Internet to Enroll in New Emergency Broadband Benefit Program."

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