

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

**FAITHFUL ADVOCACY FOR INTERSECTIONAL AND TRANSFORMATIONAL
HEALING IN HARM REDUCTION**

A RESOLUTION OF WITNESS

Submitted by the Metropolitan Association of the New York Conference

1 **Summary**

2
3 According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in a one-year period ending
4 in April 2021, over 100,000 beloved people died from an entirely preventable cause of death,
5 accidental drug overdose.¹ The national response to the overdose crisis has been largely shaped
6 by the criminalization and dehumanization of people who use drugs, disproportionately
7 impacting Black, Brown, and Indigenous people.² In the enduring spirit of Nixon’s “all-out
8 offensive against public enemy number one (illegal drugs),”³ the war on people who use drugs
9 has decimated families⁴, incarcerated millions of mostly Black and Brown people and the
10 communities they live in⁵, enabled the spread of infectious diseases such as HCV and HIV,⁶ and
11 failed to prevent problematic substance use or make evidence-based treatment for substance use
12 disorder more widely accessible.⁷

13
14 There is a more loving and just way, and that way is Harm Reduction. Harm Reduction has been
15 proven to save lives,⁸ heal communities, and is positively transforming social narratives and
16 policies on drugs and the people that use them. Harm Reduction finds its roots in the creativity
17 and wisdom of people with lived and living experience of substance use.⁹ Harm reduction is
18 understood as a set of practices for minimizing drug related harm, a person-centered philosophy
19 for addressing substance use across the spectrum, as well as a movement for social justice which
20 recognizes the multitude of social determinants that impact a person’s relationship with
21 substance use and their vulnerability to drug related harm.¹⁰

22
23 **Biblical, Theological, and Historical Grounding**

24
25 Our Christian faith is rooted in communications of God’s messages of love, justice, and
26 liberation for God’s people. This calling is woven throughout the Bible, from the prophetic
27 voices in the first Testament, in the poetry of the Psalmists, and into the New Testament
28 teachings. We therefore take seriously these biblical calls “to act justly, to love mercy, and to
29 walk humbly with your God,” (Micah 6:8), “let justice roll down like water and righteousness
30 like an ever-flowing stream,” (Amos 5:24), and Isaiah’s command to “to loose the bonds of
31 injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?”
32 (Isaiah 58:6).

33
34 Theologies of justice and liberation necessarily address the structural violence and systemic
35 barriers to flourishing as well as the weaponization and misuses of power that exploit people’s
36 human rights and dignity. In this way, justice and liberation are inextricably tied to systems of

37 power and seek to not only tend to the harms caused, but also to repair the root beds of harm and
38 inequity.

39
40 Our Christian faith calls us to follow Jesus’ teachings and the examples of Jesus’ ministry, which
41 express; that love is the ultimate power, that compassion and healing are foundational to his
42 ministry, that people who were marginalized and suffering are centered, and that called people of
43 faith to restore relationships, build the beloved community, and take action to actuate justice.
44 These calls and commandments are woven throughout the ministry of Jesus and reflected in the
45 Gospel message, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have
46 loved you, you also should love one another, “(John 13:34), “for just as the body is one and has
47 many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with
48 Christ. For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or
49 free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:12), and “owe no one
50 anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.
51 (Romans 13:8)

52
53 Understanding the theologies of love and justice as communicated in these scriptures, a few
54 truths are apparent. In the community of the Beloved, there can be no liberation for any people
55 unless there is liberation for all people, and that this justice and liberation is an expression of
56 God’s love for creation. Love and compassion are the ultimate authorities, and that any law that
57 stands in violation of these principles are neither biblical nor of God. And lastly, that the highest
58 aspiration of humankind is to love God, and love neighbor, as God first loved us.

59
60 This love and justice in action and as embodied by God is mirrored in the philosophy and praxis
61 of Harm Reduction. Harm reduction is an invitation into relationship, to connection, into
62 community. For people who use drugs and the people who love those who use them, this
63 connection, this inclusion, this invitation shaped by compassion and loving regard for the
64 fullness of one another’s humanity is the embodiment of harm reduction. It is the expression of
65 radical welcome, the welcoming of all stories and paths; it calls people by name and attends to
66 and cherishes the particularities. It is a hospitality that seeks people out, meets them where they
67 are at and invites them into loving community. Harm reduction makes sacred space which invites
68 people, all people, especially people who find themselves at the many margins, people who are
69 creatively, desperately, intently, and faithfully struggling to find ways to carry their burdens. It
70 makes space for people to tell their stories, be their stories, and to tell and be their whole stories,
71 to show up with their whole selves. It foregrounds the wisdom and leadership of people with
72 lived and living experience of substance use, ensures that more people have an opportunity to see
73 reflections of themselves in all our communities and sacred places, see themselves reflected in
74 this divine whole we call community. Harm reduction is love that stands in awe at the burdens
75 that people carry, rather than with judgment at how they get through.

76
77 Harm Reduction is defined by Harm Reduction International as “[referring] to policies, programs
78 and practices that aim to minimize negative health, social and legal impacts associated with drug
79 use, drug policies and drug laws. Harm reduction is grounded in justice and human rights. It
80 focuses on positive change and on working with people without judgement, coercion,
81 discrimination, or requiring that they stop using drugs as a precondition of support.

82 Harm reduction encompasses a range of health and social services and practices that apply to
83 illicit and licit drugs. These include, but are not limited to, drug consumption rooms, needle and
84 syringe programs, non-abstinence-based housing and employment initiatives, drug checking,
85 overdose prevention and reversal, psychosocial support, and the provision of information on
86 safer drug use. Approaches such as these are cost-effective, evidence-based and have a positive
87 impact on individual and community health.¹¹

88
89 Over the past 40+ years, in the United States, harm reduction has grown from a fringe social
90 justice movement to the mainstream public health and social and racial justice movement that it
91 is today. The quantitative and qualitative evidence base for harm reduction has grown
92 substantially during this time, as has its popularity among care providers, policy makers, and
93 other public health and government officials. In 2021, the Biden Administration identified Harm
94 Reduction as a federal drug policy priority,¹² and federal agencies including the Substance Abuse
95 and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and
96 the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) co-hosted the first-ever
97 federal harm reduction summit and designated the first-ever dedicated federal funding
98 specifically for Harm Reduction as part of the American Recovery Act.^{13 14}

99
100 The United Church of Christ has long been part of this struggle. From the local church to
101 General Synod, from International Overdose Awareness Day and World AIDS Day observances
102 to overdose prevention trainings, safer injection kit assembly parties, condom and naloxone
103 distribution events, there have been and continue to be significant responses from a variety of
104 settings in the UCC. A number of General Synod resolutions have elevated the need for a
105 compassionate and more just response to substance use, and health equity for people who use
106 drugs including: “Compassionate Response to Substance Abuse” ; Calling for Comprehensive
107 HIV Prevention in Church and Community; On Recognizing Opioid Addiction as a Health
108 Epidemic, Ensuring Access to Treatment and Pharmaceutical Corporate Responsibility”;
109 “Dismantling the New Jim Crow”; “Reclaiming the Churches Ministry of Health and Healing”;
110 and, “Racism as a Public Health Issue.”

111
112 However, the scale of these responses has not yet reached a level equal to the need, nor does it
113 employ a harm reduction lens, promote the understanding that drug related harm is not an
114 individual, moral issue but a community justice issue, nor do they address the root causes of
115 substance use related harm and the dehumanization of people who use drugs. Additionally,
116 understandings about substance use and its drivers of harm have shifted as more resources and
117 research have been focused on the issue. Finally, a growing evidence base on substance use
118 disorder and its treatment suggests many of our understandings about substance use (cultural and
119 scientific) are considerably out of date.

120
121 The message of our faith is clear when it comes to justice and love for our most marginalized
122 neighbors, responses to societal ills rooted in compassion and community not punishment or
123 isolation, awareness, and education not stigma, and focused on preventing the harms of
124 substance use and other social injustice not just treating the symptoms. This Resolution is calling
125 the church to be both prophetic and pastoral in its response to the crises of racialized drug policy,
126 accidental overdose, and other harms of the war on people who use drugs. This Resolution is
127 calling the church to the gospel of Harm Reduction.

128
129
130
131
132
133
134
135
136
137
138
139
140
141
142
143
144
145
146
147
148
149
150
151
152
153
154
155
156
157
158
159
160
161
162
163
164
165
166
167
168
169
170
171
172
173

Text of the Resolution

WHEREAS more than 932,000 people have died since 1999 from a drug overdose, and during 2021, more than 108,000 overdose deaths were recorded in the United States, an increase of 15% from the almost 94,000 overdose deaths during 2020.¹⁵¹⁶

WHEREAS increases in drug overdose deaths are disproportionately affecting Black and Indigenous people in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, fatal overdoses increased by 44% among Black people in 2020 compared with the year prior and rises in fatal drug overdose among American Indian and Alaska Native people — together saw a 39% increase over the previous year.¹⁷

WHEREAS U.S. drug policy drives the number of drug overdoses and overdose fatalities with the promotion of policy which centers the criminalization of people who use drugs, is rooted in racism, punishment, and harsh enforcement measures which fuel social marginalization, health inequities and crises, and mass incarceration.¹⁸ More people are sent to prison in the United States for nonviolent drug offenses than for crimes of violence, and Black men are sent to state prison on drug charges at 13 times the rate of white men.¹⁹

WHEREAS structural barriers to compassionate, evidence-based, non-coercive, and culturally responsive care and treatment for substance use related health concerns, and substance use disorder, such as stigma, lack of services which address substance use across the spectrum, lack of healing centered engagement, lack of culturally sensitive services, and limitations imposed on prescribers/medical providers, means that many people who use drugs fall beyond the continuum of care.²⁰

WHEREAS the stigmatization of people with lived and living experience of substance use and overdose fosters isolation, disconnection, and reinforces the narrative of substance use as a moral, sinful, individual issue rather than the complex, collective, psycho-social-spiritual-health issue that it is.²¹

WHEREAS pregnant and parenting people with lived experience of substance use face barriers to care, including threats of family separation, criminalization of substance use, and lack of access to culturally responsive, full-spectrum reproductive and other health care.²²

WHEREAS migrant communities experience a significant burden of harm from the war on people who use drugs, including profiling based on race, intrusive government surveillance, anti-immigrant violence, and elevated rates of detention and deportation, for low-level, non-violent drug related offenses. According to Human Rights Watch, deportations of non-citizens who had been convicted of drug possession increased 43 percent during a five-year period.²³

WHEREAS congregations and diverse settings of the United Church of Christ have been invited to adopt Just World Covenants to strengthen their engagement in building justice through their “ministry, mission, and witness” such as W.I.S.E (Welcoming Inclusive Supportive Engaged),²⁴ Open and Affirming,²⁵ and Immigrant Welcoming,²⁶ among others.

174
175
176
177
178
179
180
181
182
183
184
185
186
187
188
189
190
191
192
193
194
195
196
197
198
199
200
201
202
203
204
205
206
207
208
209
210
211
212
213
214
215
216
217
218
219

AND WHEREAS adopting a covenant to become a harm reduction engaged congregation or community is a way of demonstrating commitment to live out the Gospel as expressed in the values of Harm Reduction and to bring about healing and justice for communities impacted by drug overdose and the war on people who use drugs, especially in communities of color.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that The Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of Christ encourages United Church of Christ congregations to adopt covenants which commit to harm reduction values and practices and build communities of compassionate care, hospitality, and advocacy in partnership with people with lived experience of substance use and overdose, and their loved ones.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that The Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of Christ encourages congregations, associations, and conferences to work to eradicate drug-related stigma, dehumanization of people with lived and living experience of substance use and overdose, educate themselves on harm reduction and intersectional justice issues impacting people who use drugs and people who have experienced an overdose.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that The Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of Christ encourages advocacy by all settings of the church for broader and more just access to harm reduction services and programming including syringe access programs, overdose prevention programs, expanded naloxone access and distribution, overdose prevention centers, access to evidence-based drug treatment, healing centered engagement, access to medication for opioid and other substance use disorders, as well as funding to support these harm reduction services.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that The Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of Christ requests that the United Church of Christ Board establish an annual Harm Reduction Justice Sunday to be observed on the third Sunday of August, in advance of International Overdose Awareness Day - August 31st.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that The Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon the United Church of Christ Board to compile a list of materials, resources, and policies concerning substance use to be made available to all settings to help in their development and adoption of harm reduction policies.

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that The Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of Christ encourages activism and advocacy by all settings of the church for the development and adoption of harm reduction policies grounded in science, compassion, health, and human rights. This policy advocacy should include leadership of people with lived experience of substance use and overdose, and with all persons most vulnerable to structural violence including Black, Indigenous, and people of color, LGBTQAI+ people, people who are not citizens, people experiencing poverty and people who are houseless, people who are incarcerated and with other criminal legal system involvement, people living in rural areas, people who are pregnant, women, and young people.

220 **FUNDING:** The funding for the implementation of the Resolution will be made in accordance
221 with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

222
223 **IMPLEMENTATION:** The Officers of the Church, in consultation with appropriate ministries
224 or other entities within the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.

¹ https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2022/202205.htm

² <https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/IdentifyingtheRootCauses-ofDrugOverdoseHealthInequities.pdf>

³

<https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2016/06/26404/#:~:text=At%20a%20press%20conference%20on,%E2%80%9Cwar%20on%20drugs%E2%80%9D%20began>

⁴ <https://www.movementforfamilypower.org/ground-zero>

⁵

https://www.unodc.org/documents/ungass2016/Contributions/Civil/DrugPolicyAlliance/DPA_Fact_Sheet_Drug_War_Mass_Incarceration_and_Race_June2015.pdf

⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/pwid/opioid-use.html>

⁷ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/11/30/drugs-punitive-laws-policies-and-policing-practices-and-hiv/aids>

⁸ <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/harm-reduction#:~:text=Harm%20reduction%20plays%20a%20significant,diseases%20such%20as%20HIV%20FHCV>.

⁹ <https://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>

¹⁰ <https://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/>

¹¹ <https://hri.global/what-is-harm-reduction/>

¹² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/21/fact-sheet-white-house-releases-2022-national-drug-control-strategy-that-outlines-comprehensive-path-forward-to-address-addiction-and-the-overdose-epidemic/>

¹³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/briefing-room/2021/12/16/readout-white-house-hhs-host-national-harm-reduction-summit/>

¹⁴ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/briefing-room/2022/03/28/president-biden-calls-for-increased-funding-to-address-addiction-and-the-overdose-epidemic/>

¹⁵ <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/deaths/index.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/deaths/index.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/s0719-overdose-rates-vs.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.vera.org/publications/overdose-deaths-and-jail-incarceration/national-trends-and-racial-disparities>

¹⁹ <https://www.vera.org/publications/overdose-deaths-and-jail-incarceration/national-trends-and-racial-disparities>

²⁰ <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/harm-reduction#:~:text=Harm%20Reduction's%20Place%20in%20and,%2C%20overdose%2C%20and%20substance%20misuse>.

²¹ <https://nida.nih.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/04/addressing-stigma-surrounds-addiction>

²² <https://www.perinatalharmreduction.org/>

²³ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/16/price-too-high/us-families-torn-apart-deportations-drug-offenses>

²⁴ <https://www.mhn-ucc.org/becoming-wise/>

²⁵ <https://openandaffirming.org/>

²⁶ <https://new.uccfiles.com/pdf/Becoming-an-immigrant-welcoming-congregation-updated-Nov-1-2012.pdf>