

“Extravagant Witness”—Resolution in support of community investing

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*Beware, God warns, lest you say in your heart,
“My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.” (Deut. 8:11-17)*

The United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, written in the form of a prayer, includes the following concluding assurance: “You {God} promise to all who trust you . . . courage in the struggle for justice and peace.” This affirmation of God’s faithful presence, reflected in the faithful practice of Christ’s Body, has been a persistent theme in the life of the United Church of Christ. With this resolution we, delegates to the 43rd annual meeting of the Southern Conference, hereby urge the Conference staff, affiliated congregations, and individual members to practice “community investing” as a form of Christian discipleship, by depositing or investing savings into financial institutions that focus on serving marginalized communities, here in the U.S. and abroad.ⁱ

Specifically, we recommend that a minimum of 10% of discretionary capital (savings, endowments, emergency funds, etc.) be placed in community investments.ⁱⁱ

1. The call to pursue justice saturates Scripture. In several texts, doing justice and loving God are identical realities. The only heavenly-entrance exam Jesus outlined involves our care of “the least of these” (*cf. Matthew 25:31-46*).

2. The work of charity will always be part of our mission. Too often, though, such work eclipses the demand for structural justice. Ancient Israel’s “gleaning” law—prohibiting landowners to reap to the edges of their fields, to allow harvest by those in need (*cf. Lev. 23:22*)—was an order, not an option.

3. Unfortunately, when it comes to handling money, many people think of only two choices: we hoard it or we abhor it. While Christian discipleship surely includes a commitment to simplicity, it also requires a commitment to steward the assets available to us in ways that mirror God’s preferential option for the poor.

4. As theologian Clarence Jordan once wrote, what the poor need are not social workers but partners. He was not denigrating the former; he was highlighting the work of empowerment, of providing tools for self-development and thereby recovering both sustenance and dignity.

5. By depositing savings into community investing institutionsⁱⁱⁱ, we are removing assets from the control of large financial institutions whose interests are not those of the Gospel but of solely maximizing profit. This need is especially critical in our time, when economic institutions increasingly eclipse the ability of political authorities to ensure our *commonwealth*. Political democracy is no guarantee of economic democracy. Their clashing interests are escalating.

6. Commitment to community investing encourages local congregations to put the question of money—maybe the last taboo in our ranks—on the table for discussion in light of our calling as Christians. Such extravagant witness should signify the UCC’s “extravagant welcome.”

7. Establishing justice requires many things. Because it is relatively simple, safe and accessible to virtually every individual, congregation and denominational office, community investing should be among our common spiritual disciplines. When you tally up the collective savings assets even of people like us—we who don’t come close to the fortunes of sports and entertainment celebrities or corporate chiefs—it’s obvious that we can, if we work together, leverage significant sums of money to serve our convictions.^{iv}

Respectively submitted by the Church Council, Circle of Mercy Congregation, Asheville, NC.

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ⁱ Community investment institutions include both “microlending” (or “microfinance”) organizations that provide small loans for business development and “community development banks” that provide loans for things like housing development. Both provide working capital to individuals and businesses most in need and least likely to receive loans from mainstream investment institutions. While rates of return from community investments are sometimes lower than traditional financial institutions, community investors are motivated by missional convictions, not just financial returns.

Some means of community investing are federally insured, some are not. While not insured, many microlenders have excellent histories of responsible management. For example, Oikocredit, founded in 1975 by World Council of Churches member bodies, has never lost a single penny of investors’ funds.

The significance of microlending to long-term prospects for world peace was recognized when Mohammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, was awarded the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize. Started in 1976 by Professor Yunus with \$27.00 from his own pocket, Grameen Bank today serves more than six million poor families with loans, savings, insurance and other services. The bank is fully owned by its clients and has been a model for microfinance institutions around the world.

Community investing is different from “screened” investing. The phrase “socially-responsible investing” sometimes refers to both “community” and “screened” options. The latter employ a wide variety of ethical considerations (more than the traditional vices of alcohol, tobacco and gambling) to regulate capital investment choices.

ⁱⁱ Federal law prohibits certain kinds of economic institutions—for instance, retirement funds—from offering you the option of choosing investments that offer lower rates of return. This is what is meant by the phrase “fiduciary responsibility.” In this case, federal law trumps biblical injunctions.

ⁱⁱⁱ The UCC’s Wider Church Ministries currently has a \$480,000 investment in Oikocredit.

^{iv} Two brief stories of community investment by local congregations.

Several years ago members of one modest-sized congregation (less than 100 members, most households living on income below the national median) decided to challenge the community to redirect household savings to community investments. To everyone’s surprise, the cumulative total came to nearly \$200,000.

At about the same time another, slightly smaller, congregation decided to set aside a small cash reserve—budgeting annual increments for this purpose toward a goal equal to two months’ operating expenses—as an emergency fund to cover unforeseen contingencies. These funds were then invested in three community investments: 25% with a local microlender that provides small loans and technical training to stimulate new small businesses, working with clients unlikely to qualify for conventional loans; 25% with a community development bank providing home ownership loans to low-income people in the state; and 50% with a microlending agency providing affordable loans to small businesspeople in developing countries. These investments were intentionally loaned at 0% interest, with the “lost” interest returns listed among the church’s annual missions-giving report.

These are but two examples of how congregations can creatively encourage practical ways for members to “put our money where our mouth is.” For too long we have exempted this area of our lives from the claims of the Gospel, and we have allowed the god of maximum return (“fiduciary responsibility”) to rule our choices. To this extent, we have practiced idolatry and are in need of repentance.