

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

“Who will speak for the Trees?”¹ A Resolution on the Rights of Nature

A Resolution of Witness

Submitted by the New Hampshire Conference of the United Church of Christ
“We abuse land because we see it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”²
Aldo Leopold

SUMMARY

The manifestations of climate change have radically escalated with increased severity, and it is more than likely we have ten years to dramatically change our relationship to nature.³ This resolution on the Rights of Nature calls for a change of human relationship to nature from apartheid with nature, views nature as “object” and a “commodity” for our benefit, profit, and exploitation to recognition that we are citizens of the Earth, interconnected to the web of life. Indigenous peoples as well movements in the Southern Hemisphere have pioneered the rights of nature, connecting human and environmental rights. More recently, the environmental rights have appeared as justice movements internationally to defend Nature.⁴ It has evolved to defend and restore damaged bio-regions and preserve biodiversity and prevent increasing rapid species extinction. In the US, the Rights of Nature has countered the legal granting of corporation the rights of a person. The UCC has long history in the defense of human and environmental rights since a group of Black women placed their bodies to block trucks with toxic PCBs being dumped in their locale. This led to UCC development of environmental racism and two historical studies.⁵ The UCC has opportunity to address our need as a church and humanity’s need to change our relationship of relating to Nature as an “it” to a “thou.”

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL GROUNDING

Our biblical traditions share the notion of the land as divine gift. Leviticus 25:23 and Psalm 24:1 make clear that God owns the land. The phrase “the land of God” (*‘erets Yhwh*) in the Hebrew scriptures assumes God’s ownership. There was tension between the perspective that “the Earth is the Lord’s” (Ps. 24:1) and the appropriation of the land or the Earth as “theirs.”

Genesis 1:2 “the earth was formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind (*ruach*) swept over the face of the waters.” God’s Spirit is involved in, abides, and sustains creation. As humans wound the Earth through ecocide, we are wounding the Spirit.

Genesis 2:2-3 “On the seventh day, God finished the work that God completed, and God rested on the seventh day from all work God had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because of it, God rested from all the work that God had done.” God delights in creation. When we see Nature from the eyes of God, we see Nature as beloved.

In the Hebrew scriptures, there is a developed creation-centered spirituality, an on-going relationship with God as Creator and Spirit who abide in the natural world, sustain the world, and

35 developed in actions defending divine distributive justice and recognition when sharing (in the
36 wilderness), there was abundance. The stories of Jesus feeding of the multitude embodies the
37 notion of abundance in creation when we share resources.

38 **Matthew 5:5** “Blessed are the meek (*praus*), for they will inherit the earth.” The Earth-loving
39 Jesus speaks of the meek. The meek understand the Earth as as a divine gift to be used with
40 reverence and gratitude. Embedded in this eco-beatitude is the inverse: Non-meek (*apraus*) is
41 construed as the violent, who will not inherit the Earth.

42 **Matthew 22:37, 39** The Earth-loving Jesus annoyingly reminds God inclusive insistence on
43 loving our neighbor. That inclusiveness included beyond family and tribe to include outsiders,
44 Samaritans and Gentiles, enemies, and our contemporary construal of Nature/Earth as
45 commodity to be recklessly exploited and abused by humanity. Love Nature is consistent with
46 the inclusiveness of Jesus’s creation-centered spirituality that would include wildlife and habitats
47 (Nature) as we love ourselves.

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49 **How This Resolution Differs**

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51 Though this resolution depends upon the past history of UCC environmental resolutions and
52 makes explicit what these resolutions intend is human change with Nature. The 17 resolution
53 “The Earth is the Lord’s, Not Ours to Wreck: Imperative for New Moral Era” (2017) recognizes
54 the Earth belongs to Earth, that it is a divine gift to us. We are called to co-live with the Earth
55 with respect and nature. This resolution “Who will Speak for the Trees?” invites us to makes a
56 spiritual/human to change our human relationship to Nature, not as an “it” but as a “thou,” alive
57 with the presence of God’s Spirit and part of God’s beloved community. We are all members of
58 the community of the Earth; we are co-participants in Nature and are called to respond
59 compassionately to the cries of Nature.

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61 The resolution recognizes an important reality for living on Earth claimed by the deceased the
62 eco-theologian Thomas Berry, “The universe is not a collection of objects, but a communion of
63 subjects.” Nature needs to be recovered as primordial “thou.” This becomes a forceful and
64 antidote to making Nature an object to be used without respect and reverence.

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66 **TEXT OF THE MOTION**

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68 **WHEREAS** all rights, human and the more than human lives, depend on the flourishing and
69 vital natural cycles of life, and healthy Earth living systems. We are all interconnected to all
70 living beings, and when we diminish or fail to recognize the rights of the natural world, we
71 diminish our own life. Humanity and nature are interconnected, The Rights of Nature recognizes
72 a reciprocal and responsible human relationship with Nature.⁶

73

74 **WHEREAS** The UCC has a long history of creation-care, starting with the recognition of
75 environmental racism in the 1980s, its studies on toxic pollution (1987, 2007, 2020), responsibly
76 and the campaign of the Three Great Loves: Neighbor, Children, and Creation (2017), programs
77 on Green and Creation Justice Churches, and the formation of Environmental Justice Teams. The
78 United Church of Christ Synod has passed resolutions that directly express concerns for
79 Earthcare.⁷

80

81 **THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** that the Thirty Third General Synod of the United Church
82 of Christ declares that

- 83 • humans need a dramatic shift from the point of view that the Earth and all her resources
84 are available to our sole benefit.
- 85 • Nature is not there for enslavement, and it is wrong for people of faith to view nature as
86 property that we own and may abuse.
- 87 • We proclaim publicly, “The Earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it, the world, and those
88 who live in it (PS. 24:1).”
- 89 • The Earth is an original gift to sustain all life.

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91 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that Thirty-Third General Synod of the United Church of
92 Christ calls for prophetic action by listening to the cries of the Earth and by adopting this “Rights
93 of Nature” declaration. We boldly proclaim the following principles in the public square:

- 94 • Promote compassionate care, foster love, and co-live responsibly with the Earth
95 Community of Life.⁸ Safeguard the common goods, space and shared resources of the
96 Earth, for humanity and biokind; uphold the rights of ecological integrity, biodiversity,
97 and healthy bioregions. Advocate intergenerational responsibility for the biotic
98 community of the Earth and gratitude of the natural world as divine gift. The
99 interdependence of humans and Nature is fundamental to sustainable life on Earth. Co-
100 living with Nature involves distributive justice, a fair sharing and responsible
101 participation of natural resources.
- 102 • Uphold ecological principle that the Rights of Nature supersedes harmful and destructive
103 property rights, for the balanced cycles of the natural world must be protected as a
104 common good for the present and future generations of human life and biokind. The
105 Rights of Nature counters corporate rights to exploit and violate Nature. Restore the
106 repealed EPA regulations and protections. Promote economies of life rather than
107 unregulated extractive economies that exploit resources. Seek financial reparations and
108 restoration to the habitats when corporations and/or government projects harm and
109 damage habitats.
- 110 • Support the Indigenous peoples, the Earth Charter, and nature rights movement to grant
111 legal standing as corporations have legal rights.⁹ Require all corporate and/or
112 governmental land and water projects to perform environmental impact studies on
113 minimizing damage to habitats (waterways, lands, and atmosphere) and wildlife. Local
114 communities or environmental organizations have a right to represent the unheard voices
115 cries of Nature.
- 116 • Foster respect and gratitude for Nature as divine gift. Combat attitudes of relegating
117 Nature as mere capital for profit nor trashed as dumping ground for toxic waste.
- 118 • Promote the rights to Nature to be free from undue human harm, the right healthy
119 habitants, the right to species flourishing, a right to a fair share of the bio-region and its
120 goods, and the right to fulfil their ecological potential without undue human
121 infringements.
- 122 • Prioritize renewable energies over fossil fuels; the economies of life such as the Green
123 New Deal have over extractive and unbridled economies that pollute and damage the
124 Earth. Encourage organic farming and regenerative agriculture; support family farming
125 and local farmer markets; reduce usage of pesticides and insecticides negatively

126 impacting the soil, aquifers, and other life. Work for food justice and security for all
127 people.
128 • Respect all treaties with indigenous nations, that includes their lands and kinship natural
129 relations. Ally and support indigenous peoples in their de-colonization of Nature, protect
130 their kinship rights and access to sacred lands.

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132 **BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED** that the Thirty-Third General Synod of the United Church of
133 Christ calls on individual churches to respond to the Rights of Nature by taking the following
134 actions:

- 135 • Participate in the Season of Creation for September Sundays.¹⁰ Include Creation care
136 during each liturgical season (Earth-seders, Tenebrae, Easter sunrise service outdoors,
137 and Earth Day. Preach every six weeks often on Earth Justice. Celebrate outdoors or
138 bring the outdoors into the church.
- 139 • Ritualize environmental grief: Bio-Diversity Day (May 22), Remembrance for Lost
140 Species (November 22). Start environmental grief support groups.
- 141 • Foster love of God’s creation, organize walks in botanical gardens and wilderness, plant
142 trees, take nature hikes, and attend UCC summer camps.
- 143 • Study and implement Kairos Document, Call to Action, a 10- year Mobilization Plan on
144 Climate Change and Inequality.¹¹.
- 145 • Become a Creation Justice Church and Green Hub of God’s green grace,
146 https://www.ucc.org/how_it_works_becoming_a_creation_justice_church
- 147 • Subscribe to the UCC Environmental Justice newsletters and environmental newsletters;
148 share webinars, and read and study on creation care and climate change. These are
149 spiritual practices to equip us for creation care.
- 150 • Work for the Green New Deal (the transition to renewable energies) Advocate for the
151 Rights of Nature and take part in climate strikes and non-violent protests.
- 152 • Organize locally, partner and build local community networks with conservationist and
153 environmental groups. Many folks in these organization have had spiritual experiences
154 within nature, recognize and find common ground to restore damaged environments.
- 155 • Be creative and imaginative in our defense of the Rights of Nature.

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157 **FUNDING:** The funding for the implementation of the resolution will be made in accordance
158 with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

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

¹ Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax*, New York, Random House, 1971. At the same year when Dr. Seuss published *The Lorax* with the haunting moral question, “Who will speak for the Trees?” a young law professor Christopher Stone, who was teaching property law published the article, “Should Trees Have Standing?” He argued that there was no legal barrier to granting rights to nature since rights were granted to ships and corporations. See the original and expanded rationale of the resolution. [https://www.nhcucc.org/uploads/documents/conference-ministries/annual-meetings/Resolution%20of%20the%20Rights%20of%20Nature%20\(3\).pdf](https://www.nhcucc.org/uploads/documents/conference-ministries/annual-meetings/Resolution%20of%20the%20Rights%20of%20Nature%20(3).pdf)

² Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*.

³ World Meteorological Organization, State of Global Climate, 2020, Provisional Report, https://library.wmo.int/doc_num.php?explnum_id=10444

⁴ The word “nature” is a secular term used to describe the material world, both animate and inanimate. Nature is a term for what the Abrahamic religions interpreted as “creation” because of creation’s relationship to God. The word nature is less employed in other religious cultures. “Land” is the analogous linguistic category for nature, used in indigenous spiritualities and in the Hebrew scriptures. Nature is the more inclusive term.

⁵ James H. Cone, “Whose Earth, Is It, Anyway?,” in *Earth Habitat*, ed. by Dieter Hessel & Larry Rasmussen, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001, loc. 350. Quoted from: Bunyan Bryant & Paul Mohal, *Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards: A Time for Discourse*, Westview Press, 1992, 2. See also: “A Movement Is Born: Environmental Justice and the UCC: http://www.ucc.org/a_movement_is_born_environmental_justice_and_the_ucc

⁶ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1998, pp. 108-109; James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological integrity and Christian Responsibility*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1991. A Bill of Biotic Rights (rights of nonhuman life) pp. 186-189; *The Stillheart Declaration on the Rights of Nature and the Economics of the Biosphere* (2013) <https://peoplesrightsplanetsrights.wordpress.com/tag/stillheart-declaration/>; John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics*, New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2006. (Roman Catholics), *Principles of Christian Ecological Ethics*, pp. 219-220.

⁷ Past General Synod Resolutions: 2013, *Mountain Top Removal: Coal Mining in Appalachia; Urging Divestment from Fossil Fuel Companies to Address Climate Change; On Making UCC Church Buildings More Carbon Neutral*; 2015, *Transition From Fossil Fuels to Renewable Energy*; 2017, *The Earth Is the Lord’s, Not Ours to Wreck: Imperatives for a New Moral Order*; 2019, *Let Justice Roll: Declaring Support for the Green New Deal, Affirming the Intersectionality of Climate Justice with All Justice Issues*,

https://www.ucc.org/environmental_resolutions_at_general_synodRespect

⁸ Principle of the Earth Charter. <https://earthcharter.org/read-the-earth-charter/preamble/>

⁹ Alexis Bunten, “What Do the Rights of Nature have do with Indigeneity?” *BioNeers*, <https://bioneers.org/rights-nature-indigeneity/>; Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund, <https://celdf.org/>; Mari Margold,

“Marching towards Change: Faith and Governance in the Movement for the Rights of Nature,” Center for Humans and Nature, [Marching Toward Change—Faith and Governance in the Movement for the Rights of Nature | Center for Humans & Nature \(humansandnature.org\)](https://humansandnature.org/). David R. Boyd, *The Rights of Nature: A Legal Revolution that Could Save the World*, FVW Press, 2017.

¹⁰ Season of Creation, <https://seasonofcreation.org/>

¹¹ UCC Kairos Document, https://www.ucc.org/a_kairos_call_to_action