

The following resolution was approved by the delegates at a plenary of the Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of Christ, held in Indianapolis June 30-July 4, 2023.

FAITHFUL ADVOCACY FOR INTERSECTIONAL AND TRANSFORMATIONAL HEALING IN HARM REDUCTION

A Resolution of Witness

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 2020.¹²

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.³

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.⁴ 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.⁵

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.⁶

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.⁷

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.⁸

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

39 drug related offenses. According to Human Rights Watch, deportations of non-citizens who had
40 been convicted of drug possession increased 43 percent during a five-year period.⁹

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42 **WHEREAS** congregations and diverse settings of the United Church of Christ have been invited
43 to adopt Just World Covenants to strengthen their engagement in building justice through their
44 “ministry, mission, and witness” such as W.I.S.E (Welcoming Inclusive Supportive Engaged),¹⁰
45 Open and Affirming,¹¹ and Immigrant Welcoming,¹² among others.

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

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

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

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64 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that The Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of
65 Christ encourages advocacy by all settings of the church for broader and more just access to
66 harm reduction services and programming including, but not limited to: syringe access programs,
67 overdose prevention programs, expanded naloxone (medication to reverse opioid overdose)
68 access and distribution, overdose prevention centers, access to evidence-based drug treatment,
69 healing centered engagement, access to medication for all substance use disorders, as well as
70 funding to support these harm reduction services.

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

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

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82 **BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED** that The Thirty-Fourth General Synod of the United Church of
83 Christ encourages activism and advocacy by all settings of the church for the development and
84 adoption of harm reduction policies grounded in science, compassion, health, and human rights.

85 This policy advocacy should include leadership by people with lived experience of substance
86 use and overdose, and persons most vulnerable to structural violence including, but not limited
87 to: Black, Indigenous, Latiné APIDA (Asian Pacific Islander Desi American), and other people
88 of color, LGBTQIAN+ people, people who are not citizens, people experiencing poverty and
89 people who are housing insecure, people who are incarcerated and with other criminal legal
90 system involvement, people living in rural areas, people who are pregnant, women, young
91 people, veterans and persons with disabilities.
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93 **FUNDING:** The funding for the implementation of the Resolution will be made in accordance
94 with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.
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96 **IMPLEMENTATION:** The Officers of the Church, in consultation with appropriate ministries
97 or other entities within the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/deaths/index.html>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/deaths/index.html>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2022/s0719-overdose-rates-vs.html>

⁴ <https://www.vera.org/publications/overdose-deaths-and-jail-incarceration/national-trends-and-racial-disparities>

⁵ <https://www.vera.org/publications/overdose-deaths-and-jail-incarceration/national-trends-and-racial-disparities>

⁶ <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/harm-reduction#:~:text=Harm%20Reduction's%20Place%20in%20and,%2C%20overdose%2C%20and%20substance%20misuse.>

⁷ <https://nida.nih.gov/about-nida/noras-blog/2020/04/addressing-stigma-surrounds-addiction>

⁸ <https://www.perinatalharmreduction.org/>

⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/16/price-too-high/us-families-torn-apart-deportations-drug-offenses>

¹⁰ <https://www.mhn-ucc.org/becoming-wise/>

¹¹ <https://openandaffirming.org/>

¹² <https://new.uccfiles.com/pdf/Becoming-an-immigrant-welcoming-congregation-updated-Nov-1-2012.pdf>