

1 RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

2 Submitted by Public Education Advocacy Group, a recognized group of the Connecticut
3 Conference of the UCC

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5 WHEREAS, Jesus said, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to
6 God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17, NRSV), which we interpret to mean
7 that: human beings do not owe religious obligations to the state but only to God;
8 and that therefore religious beliefs and practices should not be mandated by the
9 state; and that protecting freedom of religious expression requires a separation of
10 the jurisdiction of state and church; and

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12 WHEREAS, we believe, as stated by former United States Secretary of Education
13 Richard W. Riley, that: “The United States remains the most successful
14 experiment in religious freedom that the world has ever known because the First
15 Amendment uniquely balances freedom of private religious belief and expression
16 with freedom from state-imposed religious expression”; and

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18 WHEREAS, the U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly held that the First Amendment
19 requires public school officials to be neutral in their treatment of religion,
20 showing neither favoritism toward nor hostility against religious expression in the
21 public schools; and

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23 WHEREAS, in February 2003, the United States Department of Education issued a
24 “Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and
25 Secondary Schools” clarifying the rights of students to pray in public schools, and
26 pointing out that "the First Amendment forbids religious activity that is sponsored
27 by the government but protects religious activity that is initiated by private
28 individuals" such as students; and

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30 WHEREAS, this guidance indicates that under the “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,”
31 as a condition of receiving funds under the Elementary and Secondary Education
32 Act, every local educational agency must certify to its State educational agency in
33 writing "that it has no policy that prevents, or otherwise denies participation in,
34 constitutionally protected prayer in public schools”; and

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36 WHEREAS, we believe that it is equally important for every local educational agency to
37 uphold the principle of neutrality in relation to religious expression in the public
38 schools, and to affirm that it has no policy in effect that would compel students to
39 participate in prayer or other religious activities, or that would allow teachers,
40 school administrators and other public school employees, as representatives of the
41 state, to encourage or discourage prayer, or to participate in such activities with
42 students;

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44 THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that we, the delegates to the 136th Annual Meeting of
45 the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ, reaffirm our
46 commitment to the two-fold constitutional standard of support for privately

47 initiated religious expression and activity by students in public schools and
48 opposition to government-sponsored religious expression and activity by school
49 officials; and
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51 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we request the Office of Justice and Witness
52 Ministries in cooperation with the Public Education Advocacy Group make
53 educational resources available on this subject to every local church, and urge
54 congregations to study this issue; and
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56 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that, the Office of Justice and Witness Ministries in
57 cooperation with PEAG shall offer educational materials and consultative services
58 upon request of a local church when problems involving Religious Expression in
59 the Public Schools arise in order to help ensure that genuine freedom of religion is
60 maintained according to constitutional and established law requiring that no child
61 be compelled to worship in the public school setting.