

A PROPOSED WITNESS RESOLUTION, DETROIT METROPOLITAN ASSOCIATION

SOLIDARITY WITH THE DISENFRANCHISED CITIZENS OF DETROIT AND ALL ECONOMICALLY DEPRESSED MICHIGAN CITIES OR SCHOOL DISTRICTS WITH STATE APPOINTED EMERGENCY MANAGERS

1. WHEREAS, urban governments and school districts have suffered disproportionately due to
 2. State financial cutbacks in revenue sharing and school funding;
 3. WHEREAS, due to these cutbacks and the ensuing financial crises the Governor appointed
 4. Emergency Managers, supplanting the authority of locally elected officials in these financially
 5. depressed cities and school districts;
 6. WHEREAS, the State Legislature and Governor have circumvented the Citizen Ballot
 7. Initiative (CBI) rescinding the Emergency Manager Law (EML) by enacting a new law
 8. with a budget attachment, making it impossible to be challenged by a CBI;
 9. WHEREAS, these appointments have effectively disenfranchised about one (1)
 10. million Michigan citizens including over 50% of the African American population of
 11. Michigan resulting in Systemic Racial Bias, loss of voting rights for all Michigan citizens and discrimination against the poor.
 12. THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Michigan Conference of the United Church of
 13. Christ (MCUCC) calls upon its churches and leaders to advocate for a halt to the implementation
 14. of the EML, including the bankruptcy proceedings in Detroit, by contacting all appropriate state
 15. officials and the Detroit Emergency Manager encouraging them to seek other means to assist the
 16. financially strapped cities and school districts in Michigan that do not result in the
 17. disenfranchisement of its citizens.
 18. BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT MCUCC urge our churches and leaders to write letters
 19. of petition on behalf of these afflicted cities to the UCC General Minister and President, the
 20. Collegium of Officers, and to state and federal legislators and officials, including the U.S. Attorney General,
-

21. Eric Holder, and the President of the United States, Barack Obama, to address this crisis with the
22. same urgency and support with which the bankruptcies of banks and automobile companies were
23. addressed in 2008.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

DISENFRANCHISEMENT OF ECONOMICALLY DEPRESSED MICHIGAN CITIES AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS WITH STATE APPOINTED EMERGENCY MANAGERS

Although the beginning of economic decline in many urban areas of Michigan can be traced back to the “white flight” from Detroit and other cities in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s and the de-industrialization and subsequent erosion of the tax base in the decades that followed, these problems came to a head with the Economic Recession starting in 2007. The Governor and State Legislature reacted by cutting revenue sharing for cities and local governments and cutting school funding for K-12 education. The city of Detroit alone has lost over \$200 million dollars each year as a result.

An Emergency Financial Manager (EFM) Law was passed by the State Legislature and signed by the Governor. Although this Law was allegedly enacted to aid financially troubled cities and school districts and try to avoid bankruptcies, but, in fact, the EFM Law eliminated the authorities of democratically elected officials. Fearing large-scale disenfranchisement, a Citizens’ Ballot Initiative (CBI) voiding the Emergency Financial Manager Law was passed by a majority of Michigan voters in November 2012. However, the State Legislature cynically circumvented this CBI by quickly passing in a lame duck session a new Emergency Manager Law but with a superfluous budget attachment for the purpose of making it impossible to be challenged constitutionally by a CBI.

Emergency Managers have been appointed by the Governor in several Michigan cities and school districts including Detroit, Highland Park, Pontiac, Flint, Inkster, Benton Harbor, Ecorse and Allen Park. In all of these cities the Emergency Managers usurp the authority of democratically elected officials and unilaterally can break and re-negotiate all contracts and agreements, including reducing salaries and benefits of current and past employees.

Emergency Managers may also initiate bankruptcy proceedings (as in Detroit) and subsequently dismiss employees, sell city assets to satisfy creditors and reduce or void contracts and pensions, including those of municipal retirees who are not eligible to receive Social Security benefits. Detroit’s appointed Emergency Manager has even made disparaging remarks about the city saying it has been “dumb, lazy, happy and rich” in a Wall Street Journal interview, playing into a common misconception of blaming the people of Detroit who have been the victims in an economically depressed city and state replete with legislative mismanagement, political corruption, and decades of a declining tax base due to a plethora of factors.

In the 8 Michigan cities with Emergency Managers listed above, it should be noted that over 78% of the population is African-American. In fact, over 50% of Michigan’s total African-American population of 1,403,437 reside in these cities, effectively disenfranchising the majority of African-Americans in Michigan in local elections.

Disturbingly, there appears to be a similar trend in other states with disenfranchisement of African-American, Latino and other minority voters with laws designed to make it more difficult for minorities or economically depressed people to vote or have their votes count. And this trend is positioned to be expanded as a result of the Supreme Court effectively cutting the heart out of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by a 5-to-4 vote, freeing nine states, mostly in the South and New York, to change their election laws without advance federal approval.

BIBLICAL/THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE
DISENFRANCHISEMENT OF ECONOMICALLY DEPRESSED MICHIGAN CITIES AND SCHOOL
DISTRICTS WITH STATE APPOINTED EMERGENCY MANAGERS

In Psalm 46 the Psalmist wrote the song of a timeless faith that began, *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we shall not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea...”* (1-2) The Psalmist’s great affirmation also is that *“God is in midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.”* (46.5)

Yet those who live in many of Michigan’s cities and are part of urban school districts are feeling tumult rather than refuge and strength of God. In Allen Park, Benton Harbor, Ecorse, Flint, Highland Park, Inkster, and Pontiac, plus most recently the City of Detroit the Governor of the State of Michigan has unfairly taken away the voting rights of city residents. He has declared that these cities are in such financial situations that Emergency Financial Managers must be appointed. They come to the cities empowered by the state **to use any means** to settle debts regardless of the cost to the democratic process, voting rights, human rights, and dignity.

Prejudicial laws, racist economic policies, and discriminatory corporate practices are lasting historic influences that continue to be factors in the current crisis. Even today, 51% of the total African American population in the State of Michigan lives in the affected cities. Their disenfranchisement is deeply felt. Racism and classism are profoundly intertwined with the economic issues.

In Isaiah 58 God’s voice echoes with the truth that the prophet heard and declared: *“If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday... Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.* (10, 12)

Yet the State of Michigan has disinvested in the cities and contributed in major ways to the problems now faced. For example: In 1998 Michigan Governor John Engler and Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer concluded the following agreement. The State would provide \$333.9 million annually to the City in revenue sharing funds while Detroit would lower its city income tax rates. With the ensuing economic recession, Detroit received far less than promised. Estimates are that Detroit lost \$220 million in revenue sharing each year, plus over \$400 million in tax revenue due to the city reductions.

In 2008 when General Motors, Chrysler, and Wall Street Banks were in dire financial situations, the Federal Government provided enormous funds for bail-outs. They declared that those corporations were too big to fail. Yet there is no such cry for the restoration of streets to live in, in the Michigan cities. All that public officials and pundits say is that this is an unprecedented situation and the emergency financial manager strategy is an experiment. But only justice can lift this curse of poverty, racism, and disenfranchisement.

In the ancient days when the exodus community was establishing the nation of Israel, the city was already on the hearts and minds of the people. God's plans were revealed in the instructions to designate six cities as *cities of refuge*. *These six cities shall serve as refuge for the Israelites, for the resident or transient alien among them...* (Numbers 35.6) As the Bible concluded with a vision of God's just and merciful future, the Revelation of John envisioned a day when God's presence would be fully known *in the city*. *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the middle of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and its leaves are for the healing of the nations.* (22.1-2)

In the ancient Biblical vision and the prophetic voice regarding the fulfillment of history, the city was conceived as a place of refuge, healing and peace. Instead, at present in our cities, ghettos, barrios, and poverty zones predominate. As people of faith, we are called to take action. Therefore the churches, institutions, and members of the Michigan Conference of the United Church of Christ faith community are called upon to consider this Resolution of Witness in solidarity with the people who live in Michigan's cities and are in crisis, as those who would seek to be restorers of streets to live in.