

## An Open Letter to Our Florida Neighbors

including The Governor, the Education Commissioner, and members of the FL State Legislature

The United Church of Christ (UCC) in Florida has been a part of the faith community in FL since 1884 and a part of our nation since its very beginning. Our faith is rooted in scripture and Jesus' commandment to 'Love our neighbors as we love ourselves' (paraphrase Luke 10:27). Our commitment to education began with our denominational ancestors, who were founders of Harvard College, seminaries and other institutions of higher learning, including six Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU) and more recently, New College.

In addition to supporting institutions of higher learning, we are also invested in supporting our children and youth through public education. It is our love for and our commitment to our children that compels us to write regarding the new education policies being enacted in our state. Again, we follow the words of Jesus, who said, "Let the children alone—let them come to me. The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (The Inclusive Bible). This is often interpreted as a reminder to value the qualities of children and to be open and accepting towards everyone, regardless of their age or status. It also serves as a call to nurture and protect the young ones, allowing them to grow and develop freely, as well as an invitation to welcome the most powerless among us. We believe that love of neighbor means supporting the autonomy of one's faith and education, honoring the dignity of all, and promoting inclusion are ways of defining the beloved community.

To build a beloved community, we must ensure our children are taught the richness and complexities of our collective past, the good as well as the bad. Teaching children a comprehensive understanding of history will foster empathy, critical thinking, and a deeper sense of unity and will empower them to recognize injustice and discrimination and work towards a more equitable future. Yet it seems that our new educational curricula are focused on making students comfortable rather than challenging them to analyze and evaluate. Further, language expressing slavery as a benefit to African Americans is reckless and harmful; in worst cases, leading to acts of violence like what

we witnessed in Jacksonville on August 26, 2023.

Moreover, we are concerned about the dropping of the AP African American history curriculum in favor of what seems to be a much less comprehensive one, especially Prager U, which purports only one viewpoint. To build a beloved community, one that embraces all its members, we must acknowledge the struggles, triumphs, and contributions of every individual and community that has played a part in shaping our state and nation. A beloved community is not built on obtuseness or the erasure of history. It is built on a strong foundation of knowledge, understanding, and respect for one another. By equipping our children with a holistic view of history, we give them the tools to challenge prejudice and bigotry. We create a generation of leaders who recognize the immense value of embracing diversity and promoting social justice.

Furthermore, we are concerned that our policies and rhetoric toward LGBTQ+ students, parents, teachers, and faculty feel targeted and less safe. We are concerned that books lifting up diversity and the struggle for justice have been taken off library shelves, sometimes as a response to self-censorship because of the political atmosphere that has been created. We are concerned that the mission of New College has been changed and new leadership, some without educational credentials, hurriedly put in place. All of these actions threaten the building of the beloved community.

Just as we are asking you, our educational and political leaders, to remember your responsibilities for the educational policies of our state for all our children and to engage with educators, historians, and community leaders to design an inclusive framework that truly reflects the complexities of our shared past, we acknowledge our own responsibility in the education of our children and youth. We re-commit to providing a safe space for children and youth to learn about one another and about the vision for a Beloved Community.

We express our gratitude to our dedicated educators and librarians and commit to supporting them in helping nurture our children and youth. These educational experts care deeply and play a vital role in shaping the future leaders of our society. They

inspire, challenge, and open young minds to the wonders of knowledge. But too many of them now feel under attack and are contemplating leaving their profession and/or the state.

Let us work together to create a beloved community where every child grows up with an understanding and appreciation for the diverse tapestry that has been woven throughout history. In the words of Jesus, “Let the children come.”

Sincerely,

[Names of Members/Churches and our locations]