

MFSA Plumbline

Resist Censorship



Understanding the Issue

All too often churches have been complicit in the censoring and banning of books, often out of ignorance. Controlling what is taught, or not allowed to be taught, is dangerous and anti-democratic, and a growing threat. “The censorship of truth, books, and memory is a precursor to eliminating the voice and influence of a people from the governing of their own country.”¹ Therefore, whenever such material is threatened with removal or banning, we urge our United Methodist churches, conferences, agencies, and affiliated institutions to resist this censorship

Values

- Openness
- Democracy
- Diverse perspectives
- Empathy
- Reason
- Education

Options

Do we or do we not want to give critical denominational support for United Methodist resistance against the anti-democratic practice of censorship?

Do we or do we not want the General Board of Church and Society and the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry to take leadership in addressing this critical issue?

Do we or do we not want to support educators?

Analysis

- Seeing one’s own identity in literature increases self-esteem and self-worth.
- Seeing oneself in literature is life-giving and affirming.
- Exposure to diversity in literature creates empathy in real-life.
- Censorship targets books centered on race, gender, and sexuality.
- The majority of banned books are written by women, people of color, and diverse identities.
- Access to knowledge / censorship of knowledge is a justice issue.
- Wholesale banning by outside organizations undermines the professionalism of educators.
- Book banning is anti-democratic and evidence of a nation at risk.

¹ <https://www.naacpldf.org/critical-race-theory-banned-books/>

- Eliminating Black History or topics relating to race or racism perpetuates a nation built on white supremacy.
- Censorship further alienates already vulnerable and marginalized groups.
- United Methodist Social Principle 164 E states: “Every person has the right to education” and “We endorse public policies that ensure access and choice that do not create unconstitutional entanglements between church and state.

Resources

- Legal Defense Fund on banned books:
<https://www.naacpldf.org/critical-race-theory-banned-books>
- Complete List of Banned Books:
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1hTs_PB7KuTMBtNMESFEGuK-0abzhNxVv4tgpI5-iKe8/edit#gid=1397437044
- Harris, Elizabeth A., and Alexandra Alter. “A Fast-Growing Network of Conservative Groups Is Fueling a Surge in Book Bans.” The New York Times. The New York Times, December 12, 2022.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/12/books/book-bans-libraries.html>.
- Tolentino, Kristin. “Lost Horizons: In The Current Wave Of Book Banning, Nothing Less Than The Ability To Know Ourselves Is At Stake.” Church and State 75, no. 9 (October 2022).
<https://www.au.org/the-latest/church-and-state/articles/lost-horizons-in-the-current-wave-of-book-banning-nothing-less-than-the-ability-to-know-ourselves-is-at-stake/#>

Recommended Action

Vote YES on 20784-CA-Howe page 1202 ADCA supplement “Resist Censorship”, and if possible, amend to remove the “whereas” and “therefore” language. In the New York Conference approved legislation, this language was not present, and was added without the authors’ consent. With this inserted language, the grammar is incorrect. Seek to pass as listed below.

Resist Censorship Original Language

Our faith teaches that each person is a precious child of God and that each of the mosaic of peoples that make up our churches and our nations is precious in the sight of God.

We affirm our United Methodist opposition to “censorship by superiors, school boards, or any control imposed by churches, governments, or other organizations.” [2016 UM Book of Resolutions, pp. 470-480]

Our churches and our nations are seriously harmed when the perspectives and the histories of certain constituencies are excluded from libraries, schools, curriculums, and class discussion. We are alarmed by the explosion of such actions by school boards, educational authorities, and governmental bodies. We as United Methodists are appalled by the rise of wholesale book banning and governmental directives to exclude honest historical accounts and multidisciplinary descriptions of vulnerable populations, particularly peoples of color, formerly colonized peoples, LGBTQIA+ peoples, and women. The voices of

the entire community need to be heard, including those of differing abilities, backgrounds, genders, experiences, and economic situations.

We support constructive conversation related to books and educational materials that recognize the diverse identities of students and the professionalism of educators and school administrators. We recognize the right of parents to guide their children's reading through dialogue with teachers but resist wholesale demands that deny the choices of other families.

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<https://www.naacpldf.org/critical-race-theory-banned-books>

Therefore, whenever such material is threatened with removal or banning, we urge our United Methodist churches, conferences, agencies, and affiliated institutions to resist this censorship. When constructive material is banned or distorted, we call for analysis in the light of our theological task, incorporating scripture, reason, experience, and tradition. We encourage United Methodist educators to stand on principle and United Methodist congregations to offer spiritual, moral, and material support in the event that educators lose their jobs under pressure from groups or individuals with agendas contrary to our United Methodist social teachings.

We urge creative strategies to counter censorship, such as sponsoring "freedom schools" and reading programs and promoting electronic library lending. We encourage our pastors and teachers to cultivate a discerning perspective among those they serve, that truth, diversity, and the honest understanding of history may inform our discipleship and mission. We request the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry and the General Board of Church and Society to take leadership in addressing these issues of censorship.

This document was prepared in collaboration with New York MFSA