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Support for federally funded research on embryonic stem cells

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United Church of Christ

Support for federally funded research on embryonic stem cells

Background

In the pronouncement on "The Church and Genetic Engineering," the Seventeenth General Synod (1989) noted significant developments in the field of genetics. It spoke of the development of genetics from the foundation of modern genetics by the Austrian monk, Gregor Mendel (1822-1884), to the discovery of the structure of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) by James Watson and Francis Crick (1953). Since then research in the field of genetics and genetic engineering has opened new ways to produce products such as insulin, interferon, growth hormones and several other proteins used to treat various diseases. In 1990, the Human Genome Project was initiated by the United States Department of Energy and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to map and sequence all the genes of human beings by the year 2005. The Genome Project was completed early and last year (2000) the completion of the project was announced with great fan-fare by President Clinton.

A major development in genetics since 1995 has been in the area of human stem cell research. Such research shows great promise for treatment of several diseases which have been nearly untreatable. Stem cells, which can be obtained from embryos, bone marrow, and lymph nodes, are undifferentiated cells, i.e., they have the capability of becoming any type of human cell when properly treated. In 1998 human stem cells were, for the first time, derived from pre-implantation embryos. These cells have been successfully grown for prolonged periods in culture without losing their potential to develop into various human tissues. In addition to advancing basic knowledge in developmental biology, stem cells have practical application, particularly in the fields of transplantation medicine, pharmaceutical research and the development of new drugs. Of particular importance is the promise of new treatments for Juvenile Diabetes, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, and heart diseases.

Research has shown that embryonic stem cells, i.e., those derived from human embryos, generally those resulting from in vitro fertilization, have greater potential in medical research because they are unlimited in their ability to become various human tissues. While research using embryonic stem cells is opposed by some people, others support such research because of its potential for saving lives and enhancing the quality of life for persons with various diseases. The NIH-established guidelines, known as "National Institutes of Health Guidelines for Research Using Human Pluripotent Stem Cells," were put in place to help ensure that NIH-funded research in this area is conducted in an ethical and legal manner. These guidelines make it clear that NIH funding of research using embryonic stem cells from human embryos can involve only embryos that were created for the purpose of fertility treatment and that were in excess of clinical need. These guidelines were approved by the Clinton administration.

Summary

This resolution calls upon the Twenty-third General Synod of the United Church of Christ to support federally funded embryonic stem cell research. Such research may enable the development of new approaches to diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of some of our most devastating diseases such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, Juvenile Diabetes and heart disease.

WHEREAS, Jesus set an example, by his ministry of healing and caring for the sick and disabled, challenging us to follow his example by supporting the healing and caring ministry in our own day, and

WHEREAS, human embryonic stem cells can form virtually any type of human cell and thus have the potential to form tissues for any part of the body, and

WHEREAS, many scientists agree that research on embryonic stem cells is more promising than that of adult stem cells that have only a limited capability to form certain cell types, and

WHEREAS, many scientists believe that embryonic stem cell research could relieve suffering and possibly cure patients with a variety of disorders such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, juvenile diabetes, spinal cord injury, Huntington's disease, and muscular dystrophy, and

WHEREAS, there are currently over 25,000 frozen embryos in IVF (in-vitro fertilization) clinics that probably will eventually be discarded, and

WHEREAS, the NIH developed guidelines regulating federally funded research on stem cells, provided they were taken from frozen human embryos derived from in vitro fertilization and which would be discarded after the treatment of infertile couples, and

WHEREAS, in Spring 2001 the present administration canceled the inaugural meeting of a National Institutes of Health (NIH) committee that was to review the applications for federal grants to study human embryonic stem cells; and

WHEREAS, there is bipartisan support for research using human embryos, including many Democratic and Republican legislators, and

WHEREAS, research on embryonic stem cells is already underway in privately funded laboratories where regulations and guidelines do not apply, and

WHEREAS, the support for federally funded research will impose ethical guidelines and oversight, and

WHEREAS, by banning the research, we foreclose the possibility of doing all we can to improve the lot of the living, and in many cases giving them new life,

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod of the United Church of Christ supports federally-funded embryonic stem cell research within ethically sound guidelines (including concern for justice, privacy, access to the benefits of the research for all) and the limitations set forth by the National Institutes of Health, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod requests the General Minister and President of UCC to send a letter to the President of the United States urging approval of federal funding for embryonic stem cell research within NIH guidelines, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod requests Justice and Witness Ministries to advocate for allocation for stem cell research before the appropriate Congressional committees, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod requests Conferences, Association and Local Churches to work diligently in support of the legislation allowing stem cell research, providing appropriate guidelines for such research, and allocating funds to support the research, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls upon the Covenanted Ministries to provide leadership and study materials for education,

discussion and theological reflection about the ethical issues of developments in the field of stem cell research.

Funding for this action will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

These resolutions are a part of the minutes of the General Synod. Although the actions have been voted, final approval of the General Synod minutes will occur during the October 2001 meeting of the Executive Council. These minutes will be available in January 2002.