Resolution Establishing an Exploratory Commission on Human Genetic Technologies

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN THE U.S.A.
"GENETIC TECHNOLOGIES COMMISSION"/GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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APPROVED TEXT

Resolution Establishing an Exploratory Commission *on* Human Genetic Technologies

In light of the urgency of issues of ethics and policy related to new genetic technologies and the relative absence of an ecumenically effective voice from member communions within the growing national debate, and

Given the variety of constituencies within the life of the Council that have been challenged by the questions raised by new genetic technologies, and

Noting that several of the member communions have in membership scientists, theologians, ethicists and others concerned with these questions, who have not had the opportunity to have ecumenical discussion, and

With a clear understanding of the need for resources which will enable and equip church members to study, reflect and participate in the national debate emerging around these issues, and

Subject to funding confirmation;

It is recommended that:

An *Ad Hoc* Exploratory Commission on Human Genetic Technologies be formed to include representatives of Eco-justice Working Group, Faith and Order, ethicists and others with experience and interest in this field to serve as a steering commission broadly representative of the member communions. (The Commission to be named by the General Secretary and President upon recommendation by communions, working groups etc.) In accordance with NCC Standing Rules care shall be taken to assure a diversity of participants as regards gender, race, communion affiliation, age, region of the country. Special care shall be taken to include in membership persons with and/or representing the disability community.

This Commission be charged with guiding the work of the "Imatatio Dei" project including:

- **Production of a summary of NCCCUSA and member communion statements, studies and other materials concerning bio-technology**
- **Inventory and evaluate extant outreach, education and advocacy efforts and materials related to bio-technology and public policy**
- **Evaluate the merits of a long term effort in this area including engagement with the bio-technology industry, and regional ecumenical bodies and ongoing theological and ethical inquiry. Estimate the costs of such an ongoing effort and the availability of such program funding and report the Commission's findings to the May 2003 Executive Board Meeting.**

11/21/02

Background

In recent months a confluence of interests and initiatives concerning new genetic technologies have converged within the life of the NCC. Among these signs of increasing interest and urgency around the ethical dimensions of new genetic technologies have been:

- An invitation to the General Secretary to address a major bio-technology conference
- In response to the General Secretary's address, inquiries from both the bio tech industry and public interest groups concerning the churches' work in this area
- New speaking invitations to the General Secretary
- The Eco-justice Working Group established a bio-technology task force
- Staff from Ministries in Christian Education engagement in reviewing educational materials on this subject
- A briefing for program staff as an orientation to the pertinent ethical issues was followed by a discussion about the councilwide concerns at stake in the questions of new technologies
- A request from the Bio-technology Industry Association to organize an "ethics track" of study for its annual meeting in July 2003.

In order to give some clarity and coordination to these various concerns the Research and Planning Office and the Development Office worked to consolidate the emerging questions into a coherent programmatic response. Central to such a coherent response was the commitment to councilwide involvement including constituency from groups like Faith and Order, advocates for persons with disabilities, and ethicists as well as the offices already involved. Moreover, in these days of fiscal constraint it is necessary that in addition to constituency ownership and interest financial resources must accompany any new initiative at its inception. The Planning and Development offices, in discussion with other elements of the Council, developed a planning grant proposal entitled "Imitatio Dei" which would allow the Council to initiate a process of study discernment and policy consideration on this timely topic. These efforts were reported for information to the October Executive Committee by Jaydee Hanson, of the Eco-justice Working Group and staff. **The CS Fund has now allocated $25,000 as a planning grant for the Councils' efforts in this area. This paper outlines that response and is reported <u>for</u> <u>action</u>.**

Underlying Assumptions

1. The new human genetic technologies are a threshold challenge for humanity. If used properly they hold great promise for preventing disease and alleviating suffering. If abused they could open the door to a powerful new eugenics that would objectify human life and undermine the foundations of human civil society.

2. The rapid development of these technologies has created a "civil society deficit." There are few broadly-based citizen organizations or movements arguing for human genetics policies based on human rights, social and economic justice and global inclusion.

3. In recent years advocates of a new eugenic future for humanity have become increasingly vocal and explicit.

4. Bans on the most dangerous eugenic technologies need not impede potentially beneficial medical applications.

5. People of different nations, cultures, religions and philosophies can find ways to work together in support of the policies needed to protect our common humanity

6. Working together through the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA member communions can explore the theological, ethical and policy questions related to new genetic technologies and can offer counsel and study resources to individuals and communities for their reflection.

The New Human Genetic Technologies: Basic Science

The two most troubling new human genetic technologies are *Inheritable Genetic Modification (IGM)* and *Reproductive Human Cloning.*

A. GENETIC MODIFICATION: Genes are strings of chemicals that determine the structure of proteins, the basic building blocks of the human body. They are found in the nucleus of each cell. Genetic modification means changing the genes in a living cell. There are two very different applications of genetic engineering:

a) *non-inheritable genetic modification(also called somatic modification)* means changing the genes in any cells except sperm and egg cells. Such changes are not passed on to future children. Non-inheritable genetic engineering is currently used in clinical studies as a possible cure for many diseases, e.g., cystic fibrosis.

b) *inheritable genetic modification (IGM)* means changing the genes in sperm, eggs or very early embryos. IGM changes not only the genes in the child conceived from such sperm, eggs or early embryos, but in all the descendents of that child as well. IGM opens the door to a future of genetically enhanced "designer children."

* IMPORTANT: IGM is NOT needed to allow couples at risk of passing on a genetic disease a way to avoid doing so. Other methods, notably pre-implantation screening, are available to do that more readily. IGM would only be needed if parents wanted to create a child with traits for which neither of them carried genes. That is, it would be necessary if, and only if, they wanted to create a *genetically enhanced child.*

B. HUMAN CLONING is a form of asexual reproduction that creates an embryo that is the genetic duplicate of an existing or deceased person. A cloned embryo can be used in two ways:

a) *Reproductive cloning* - the clonal embryo would be implanted in a womb and brought to term to create a child. If a person creates a child by cloning themselves, the child would neither be their son or daughter, nor their twin brother or sister. The child would be a new category of biological relationship: their clone.

b) *Research cloning* - the clonal embryo is used for research purposes, eg., to harvest stem cells from it to generate tissues with therapeutic applications.

Where Do We Draw the Lines?

Persons of faith must be equipped to enter the policy debates that now attend genetic technologies. This discernment process will involve distinguishing between applications that are safe and beneficial and command wide acceptance, those that are problematic but can be allowed if tightly regulated, and those that are clearly undesirable and need to be proscribed:

A. Many applications of genetic science are benign and beneficent and are widely supported. These include many applications involving pharmaceuticals, diagnostics, non-inheritable genetic modification for medical purpose, fertility therapeutics, and forensics.

B. Other applications may offer medical benefits but also raised serious social, moral and ethical questions. People may differ in good faith concerning whether they should be freely allowed, allowed but regulated, or banned. These applications include many types of research using human embryos, including the creation of clonal human embryos.

C. Still other applications have few if any medical applications, could gravely endanger the well-being of individuals and society, and are widely opposed. These include reproductive human cloning and inheritable genetic modification (IGM.)

What Policies Do We Need?

Most knowledgeable persons agree that a minimal core of social policies are needed to protect humanity from the most dangerous applications of the new human genetic sciences, while allowing us to realize the positive medical applications. Such policies presently address:

1. national and global bans on reproductive human cloning
2. national and global bans on inheritable genetic modification (IGM)
3. effective, accountable regulation of all other human genetic technologies

As these and other such policies are formulated, adopted and implemented the voices of persons of faith will be important within a broader national debate.