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Date: October 30, 2026
Subject: **Pastoral Statement on the Arraignment of Vermont Clergy ("The Clergy 7")**

To the Congregations, Communities, and Ecumenical Partners Across Vermont and Beyond,

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, who calls us into works of love, justice, and solidarity with all God's children.

In light of the October 20, 2026, court proceedings in Vermont Superior Court, where seven local faith leaders pleaded not guilty to charges of unlawful trespass, we write to offer clarity, theological grounding, and our unwavering support. Among those arraigned were cherished pastors rooted in our shared life and ministry—including Rev. Jessica Derise (UCC), Rev. Elizabeth Gleich (UCC), and Rev. Dr. Becca Girrell, an ordained United Methodist minister who faithfully serves one of our federated UCC/UMC congregations. Following their nonviolent witness on September 4, 2026, at the ICE National Criminal Analysis and Targeting Center in Williston, these clergy members acted in full accordance with their deepest religious convictions.

We recognize that in the eyes of secular jurisprudence, civil disobedience is defined as an intentional violation of statutory law. Secular statutes contain no automatic occupational exemption or legal immunity for a clerical collar. However, as the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ, alongside our ecumenical partners, we affirm with clarity and conviction that **nonviolent civil disobedience, when exercised in response to systemic injustice and human suffering, is a faithful, legitimate, and integral component of the pastoral office.**

The Moral and Theological Foundation of Pastoral Witness

Our shared Christian faith is rooted in a tradition that frequently places God's command to love one's neighbor above the dictates of human institutions when those institutions cause harm to the vulnerable. When government policies subject immigrant families to fear, separation, and surveillance, and nearly 100 immigrants dying while in I.C.E. custody in 2026 alone, pastors are called not to passive compliance, but to active, prophetic witness.

Throughout Holy Scripture and Church history, pastoral duty has repeatedly demanded nonviolent non-cooperation with unjust authority:

- **The Biblical Mandate:** In the Book of Acts, when commanded by civil authorities to cease their public witness, the Apostles declared, *"We must obey God rather than human beings"* (Acts 5:29). From the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah who refused Pharaoh's decree to preserve innocent life (Exodus 1:17) to the prophets who spoke truth to power, sacred scripture affirms that ultimate allegiance belongs to God.
- **The Covenant of Hospitality:** Scripture commands us repeatedly to welcome the stranger, shelter the seeker, and defend the cause of the immigrant (Leviticus 19:34, Matthew 25:35). Pastoral care cannot be confined within church walls when neighbors are targeted at our gates.
- **Ecumenical Witness and Historical Precedent:** Our denominations have long understood civil disobedience as an authentic expression of pastoral leadership—from clergy defying runaway slave laws along the Underground Railroad, to faith leaders marching in Selma alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to sanctuary movements providing safety for victims of persecution. Serving across denominational lines in federated and united congregations, our pastors embody this shared heritage of bold, ecumenical witness.

Standing in Solidarity with the Arraigned Clergy

The faith leaders who knelt, prayed, held silence, and read the names of those lost in immigration enforcement actions inside the Williston facility did not act out of disrespect for law or community peace. Rather, they acted out of a profound reverence for the sacred dignity of every human life. By accepting arrest and facing the legal system openly, they embody the classic, nonviolent tradition of civil disobedience: putting their own bodies on the line to bear moral witness against policies that degrade human dignity.

While the legal system evaluates their actions strictly through the lens of property and trespass statutes, we measure their actions through the lens of the Gospel. In doing so, we affirm that their presence in Williston was not a departure from their pastoral duties, but a profound fulfillment of them.

Our Ongoing Call

We hold in prayer our judicial system, law enforcement personnel, the courageous clergy standing trial, and above all, the immigrant individuals and families living under the shadow of uncertainty. We invite all member congregations to hold these leaders in prayer, to engage in deep listening and reflection on the demands of justice, and to continue seeking ways to walk humbly, love mercy, and act justly in our world.

In Faith and Solidarity,
Rev. Dr. Lynn L. Bujnak, Conference Minister
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The Board of Directors of the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ