

**A suggested format
for the Constitution and Bylaws of a Local Church
in accord with the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ.**

The goal of coordinating the organization of the Local Church with the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ is to undergird covenantal partnerships, and to seek unity in following Christ as head of the Church. These suggestions are not intended in any way to interfere with the local church's freedom. Each local church retains the solemn obligation to govern, worship, and live out its faith, in the ways it discerns God to lead.

Constitution

FORM

The Constitution and Bylaws are composed of articles and sections. Sections may be listed as "Section 1" Section 2" and so forth or numbers may simply be used. The form of the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ lists sections whose numbering continues throughout the document, rather than re-starting after each Article heading. For example, Article VI contains sections 20-30, Article VII has sections 31-36, and so on.

Also note the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ include descriptive subheadings in some places underneath the Article headings. This may be useful for your documents in places as well.

The Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ can be reviewed on ucc.org under the "About Us" tab, or ordered from United Church of Christ Resources at 800-537-3394.

HEADING

The Constitution of the _____ Church (the Bylaws will have their own heading.) (While churches may choose to combine Constitution and Bylaws in a single document, the United Church of Christ document is in two distinct parts.)

Article I. Name

The name of this Church shall be (include here the formal or legal name of the church.)

Article II. Structure

List the entities which compose the church. For example: The _____ Church is composed of its members, whose organization includes officers, committees, boards, and other groupings as determined by the agreement of the members.

Article III. Covenantal Relationships

The language of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ, Article III, Section 6, (which follows) is appropriate for any part of the church to use, with adaptation to indicate that the local church takes on these promises.

6. Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each

expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways.

A suggested adaptation:

As a member of the United Church of Christ, _____ Church will relate to the various expressions of the church in a covenantal manner. The _____ Church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission, attending to its responsibilities in relation to all expressions of the church. Its decisions are made in consultation and collaboration with other parts of the structure, including its Association, Conference, and the General Synod. As a member of the Body of Christ, _____ Church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. _____ Church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, _____ Church joins the various expressions of the United Church of Christ to seek to walk together in all God's ways

The description of the Local Church as an expression of the United Church of Christ, in Article V, includes language to include in this section as well:

17 The Local Churches of the United Church of Christ have, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for that Church, its labors and its extension, even as the United Church of Christ has, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for the well-being and needs and aspirations of its Local Churches. In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the one and the many share in common Christian experience and responsibility.

19 Actions by, or decisions or advice emanating from, the General Synod, a Conference or an Association, should be held in the highest regard by every Local Church.

A suggested adaptation:

_____ Church has, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for the United Church of Christ, its labors and its extension, even as the United Church of Christ has, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for the well-being and needs and aspirations of its Local Churches. In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the _____ Church shares with the entire United Church of Christ in common Christian experience and responsibility.

Actions by, or decisions or advice emanating from, the General Synod, a Conference or an Association, will be held in the highest regard by _____ Church.

(You may wish to spell out how this regard will be evidenced; for example, by discussion and prayerful consideration, seeking to understand the intent, and using respectful language about areas of disagreement, and so forth.)

Article IV. Officers

Here, list the Officers of the church. Name how they are called and to whom they are accountable; for example, "They shall be responsible to and called by the election of the membership of the church." (Further details will be included in the Bylaws.)

Article V. Membership

State here that the church is comprised of its members, and describe briefly how persons become members. You might want to adapt the language of the United Church of Christ Constitution regarding Local Churches:

10. A Local Church is composed of persons who, believing in God as heavenly Father, and accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and depending on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are organized for Christian worship, for the furtherance of Christian fellowship, and for the ongoing work of Christian witness.

This might become:

_____ Church is composed of its members, who, believing in _____, have undertaken a period of preparation, are organized for/to _____ and share in the work of _____...

This language of the United Church of Christ Constitution:

11 In accordance with the custom and usage of a Local Church, persons become members by (a) baptism and either confirmation or profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; (b) reaffirmation or re-profession of faith; or (c) letter of transfer or certification from other Christian churches.

Could become: 'Persons become members of _____ Church by: (a) baptism and either confirmation or profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; (b) reaffirmation or re-profession of faith; or (c) letter of transfer or certification from other Christian churches. (Amend as needed,)

Finally, the words "a Local Church of the United Church of Christ" in this provision can be replaced by: _____ Church:

12 All persons who are or shall become members of a Local Church of the United Church of Christ are thereby members of the United Church of Christ

If your church recognizes other forms of membership (such as Associate members) describe those here and a brief description of how they vary from full, or regular, membership.

Article VI. The Ministry

To begin this Article as the United Church of Christ Constitution does, simply substitute the name of your church (_____ church) for "the United Church of Christ".

The United Church of Christ recognizes that God calls the whole Church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the Gospel in church and society. *The United Church of Christ* seeks to undergird the ministry of its members by nurturing faith, calling forth gifts, and equipping members for Christian service.

To continue with adapted wording

_____ Church recognizes that God calls certain individuals to forms of ministry in and on behalf of the church for which ecclesiastical authorization is required. The Call of an Ordained, Licensed or Commissioned Minister to _____ Church establishes a covenantal relationship with both the authorized minister and the United Church of Christ as represented by _____ Association (or Conference).

Continue by describing how the authorized and compensated ministers of the church (Pastor and others as need may be determined) will be called. State, for example, that in cases of pastoral vacancy a Search committee will be authorized to seek and present candidates to the congregation for approval.

You may then wish to add:

Likewise, if members of _____ Church are called to ministries by other bodies in cooperation with the United Church of Christ a covenantal relationship shall exist between _____ Church, the member, the other calling body, and the United Church of Christ as represented by the _____ Association (or Conference).

Conclude this section by describing how covenantal commitments with the Association will be honored in the calling of a Pastor. An example:

_____ Church will act in partnership with its Association and Conference as it seeks calls and installs pastoral and other leadership, and as it calls forth leadership from its own membership to lead in other settings of the United Church of Christ.

Article VII. Officers of the Church

Describe here the Officers of the church, requirements for holding office (for example, membership) and how they are elected. Follow with a separate section for each office with a brief description of the responsibilities of its ministries.

Article VIII. Organization and Governance

This section should open with a brief description of the organization. For example:

The ministry of _____ Church is organized into committees and boards which are elected and authorized by, and are responsible to, the Congregation. Committees and boards may organize and delegate to other groups as needed to complete their work, under their supervision.

In subsequent sections, describe in broad terms each of the committees and boards, or other governing or other bodies of the church structure. Delineate their area of responsibility, and note any key accountability they may have (or which may be carried out by other groups.). Here is an example:

The Board of Deacons is responsible for the worship and spiritual life of the congregation, and is represented with a seat on the Church Council, which oversees its ministries and allocates its financial resources.

Article IX. Property

According to the church's legal standing (whether it is incorporated or not) the first section should list the church's rights, or a designated board's rights (generally the trustees) regarding property, "real and personal". Your conference will be the best guide for appropriate wording in your state.

The second section will designate what will happen to the church's assets should the church be dissolved. Generally it is specified that the assets will transferred to the Conference or Association. (While this is not required, it is important to be aware of IRS regulations regarding non- profit status, which require a specific disavowal that assets will be distributed to officers or members.)

Article X. Church Meetings

This article will list the date (for example, "third Sunday in January") or simply the month of the annual meeting. If there are more frequent regularly scheduled meetings those will be included as well. It may specify that reports be given and made available in writing at the annual meeting. It should specify that notice will be given of any and all meetings of the congregation, at what minimum interval before the meeting notice will be given, and the means of notification. (For example, by an announcement at worship.)

There should be a section devoted to the way in which special meetings of the congregation may be called.

Article XI. Rules of Order

Specify the rules of order which will be the parliamentary authority for Church meetings.

Article XII. Amendments

Include two sections, one dealing with the Constitution, the other with the bylaws. Specify how they may be amended: who can propose amendments; to whom the proposal must be made; and how a vote is called. This may be, for example, by the 2/3 vote of the congregation at a duly called meeting. An easier process to amend the bylaws would simplify changes to some of the organizational structure, while maintaining the integrity of the more foundational document.

BYLAWS

FORM

The continuous numbering scheme of the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ continues between the Constitution and the Bylaws, except that some numbers are left unused. The final section of the Constitution is number 75, and the first section of the Bylaws is 100 (and thus sections may be added to the constitution without the necessity of renumbering every section in the bylaws)

Where applicable, the following categories are used to describe specific bodies within the organization:

Purpose and Mission

Governance and Leadership

If applicable, special groups organized within or through this group

The Preamble to the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ helps make plain the functions of bylaws, and a preamble to local church bylaws could do the same. Here is the version dealing with the entire United Church of Christ:

100 These Bylaws, consistent with the Constitution of the United Church of Christ, further define and/or regulate the General Synod and its relationships with the Covenanted, Affiliated, and Associated Ministries and Other Bodies which are related to the General Synod, and the Executive Council, and describe the free and voluntary relationships which the Local Churches, Associations, Conferences, and ordained, commissioned and licensed Ministers sustain with the General Synod and with one another. The pattern of relationships and procedures so described is recommended to Local Churches, Associations, Conferences, and ministers to enable them more effectively to accomplish their tasks and the work of the United Church of Christ.

A similar opening for the Bylaws of a local church might read:

These Bylaws, consistent with the Constitution of _____ Church, further define and/or regulate the officers, boards, committees and membership. They also describe its free and voluntary relationship with the _____ Association and the _____ Conference of the United Church of Christ, and with the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, its Executive Council, and the Covenanted, Affiliated and Associated Ministries.

In general, your bylaws will give any important requirements you wish to preserve about the ways your church leadership functions and how you conduct the business and fulfill the mission

of the church. These might include terms of office, means of selection, criteria for service, and so forth.

Article I. The Ministry

Sections under this Article will describe the role of the Pastor and other positions of ministerial leadership in this local church. Sections 116-125 of the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ will have close correlates, or may be stated directly. Suggestions follow:

- The _____ Committee of _____ Church will be formed to fill pastoral or other ministerial vacancies. This search committee will be formed by: (specify who names or elects search committee.) (see section 116)
- In filling a vacancy or securing pastoral services during the period of a vacancy, the _____ Committee will report the vacancy, and seek the counsel of the Conference or Association placement committee (check with the Association or Conference for the name of this committee or individual in your area.), through the Conference (or Association) minister, (see sections 117 and 120)
- The _____ Committee will request that the Conference (or Association) minister secure relevant information about any candidate whom it wishes to consider for the vacancy. (see sections 118 and 119)
- The _____ Committee will present a candidate it recommends to the _____ Church, which determines whether it wishes the call the candidate recommended. (See section 121.) Specify in this section additional information about this process, for example, the presentation of a sermon by the candidate on the day of the vote, or whatever other process will be followed by the congregation. You may wish to specify a minimum vote required for approval of the candidate.
- The terms of the call will be presented to the Association Committee on the Ministry, and the call format will be one agreed on by the _____ Association. The contents of the call will name the participation in the Pension fund. A copy of the call agreement will be given to the (council or committee of the local church) the Conference Minister (confirm with your conference or association) and the minister called. (See section 122.)
- When an Ordained Minister accepts the call to _____ Church, the Minister and _____ Church will join in requesting the Association to arrange for a service of installation or recognition. (Section 123)
- When a minister authorized by _____ Association, or _____ Church, decide to terminate their relationship, notice of the decision is sent to the Conference Minister and the Association. (Section 125)

The following section is recommended in light of the sections regarding Ordained Ministers from Other Denominations:

- If _____ Church selects a ministerial leader who does not have standing in the United Church of Christ, the minister will be required to seek Dual Standing from _____ Association.

This recommendation is made both in light of the covenant between the local church and the association, and in recognition of the importance of the ministerial oversight exercised by the denomination through the Association. Likewise the following stipulations are recommended:

- If serious issues or divisive conflicts arise between the members of _____ Church and its ministerial leadership, the _____ (Committee or board) will seek the assistance of the Association Committee on Ministry (check for appropriate committee name)(see section 156).
- Should the Association have reason to question the fitness for ministry of any of the leaders of _____ Church, every effort will be made to cooperate fully in the

investigation, to remain in covenant with all parties, and to provide appropriate leadership and nurture for the congregation during and after the fitness review. (See section 155.)

The Articles which follow, in the bylaws United Church of Christ, describe in detail the workings of the various bodies which comprise it (at levels other than the local church) such as general Synod, Covenanted, Affiliated and Associated Ministries, and so forth. The Bylaws of a local church will include here detailed information about its officers and its organizational bodies, and how each is elected and functions. Here is an example:

Article ____: The Council

1. The Council of _____ Church is its primary governing body, accountable directly to the membership.
2. The Council will have ten voting members, which will include: the Moderator of the Congregation (who shall also convene the Council); three at-large members elected by the congregation, one of whom will be a youth or young adult (less than 30); the Coordinators of Administrative Ministries, Outreach Ministries, Educational Ministries, and Congregational Ministries; and the Treasurer and Secretary of the Church.
3. The three at large members will be elected for three year terms and will serve no more than two consecutive terms. They will have been members of the congregation for at least one year before being nominated for election. The other members will serve as stipulated in the Bylaws pertaining to their positions (Moderator, Coordinator etc.: refer to appropriate Articles.)
4. Vacancies from among the at-large members may be filled by appointment by the Council until the next scheduled meeting of the Congregation.
5. The Pastor and the Minister of Education will serve as ex-officio members of the Council.
6. The Council will meet monthly as needed and no less than 7 times each year. A quorum will consist of 60% of its voting members (6).
7. The Council's work will include: reviewing, modifying and approving the budget of the church; setting annual mission direction and goals for the congregation; reviewing recommendations of the Personnel Committee and approving all Personnel actions; reviewing the work of all Committees through the Coordinator's report; approving new initiatives of Committees and Coordinators; and taking such action as it deems necessary to promote the mission of the Church.
8. The Council shall, from time to time, convene additional work groups to assist in attaining its goals. It will specify the purpose of these groups and oversee their work. Such groups whose plan of work extend beyond one year will require a congregational vote to approve their plan of work.
9. The Council shall report on its work to the Congregation at least annually.

This sample is meant to convey the type of information and level of specificity appropriate to the Bylaws. While your content will vary, it is best to specify the minimum levels of accountability and the circumstances in which work may vary, rather than trying to pin down each type of action the body or officer may encounter.

You may choose to include a separate Article for each major category. For example, you could list all of your officers under an Article titled "Officers". You might choose to have one article for all Committees, or if (as in the example above) there is an added subdivision, you might have separate Articles for "Administrative Committees", "Outreach Committees" and so forth. The way you choose to categorize under Articles will depend on your organizational structure.

From among the remainder of the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ, the following are some provisions which have relevance to local churches for consideration in your local church's bylaws, along with the appropriate committee or board stipulations. As you consider what to include in your Bylaws, it is important to keep before you not only the organizational issues, but the theological meaning of your choices. The United Church of Christ seeks to be broadly inclusive and representative in its organizational structure, with accountability resting as much as possible in the entire community – in your case, in the Congregation, along with its partners in authorizing ministry (the Association or Conference).

- You may want to specify categories from which committee members will be chosen, for example, to require that at least one member be a youth member. This could include representation by a mix of gender or other demographic characteristic of your congregation.
- You may want to specify by what means an individual's service on a committee or board may be terminated
- You may wish to specify that the Pastor's service may be terminated by a vote of the congregation (and what steps must be taken to seek reconciliation before such a vote is scheduled.)
- As much as possible officers and other leaders of the church should be nominated and elected, rather than appointed. In cases where appointment is a preferred option, appointments should be subject to review by the primary governing body.
- In order to include the covenantal commitments of your congregation, reference should be made to guidance from ministries at other levels of the church. The Association has been mentioned most here. You may also wish to specify, for example, that "The Council will be responsible for coordinating congregational review and response to General Synod proposals and actions". You might stipulate that "the Missions Committee will be responsible for keeping informed about the resources provided by Justice and Witness Ministries and incorporating them when appropriate". Similar provisions can be made about a variety of ministries throughout the association, conference, and national settings of the United Church of Christ.

The goal of coordinating the organization of the Local Church with the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ is to strengthen our covenantal partnerships. May we humbly seek to follow where Christ leads, and to do so as companions on the journey.