

United Church of Christ Manual on Local Church



June 2025

The Manual on Local Church is for all settings of the Church to use, to fully live into their covenantal responsibilities and privileges under the Constitution of the United Church of Christ.

This work was commissioned by the Thirty-Second General Synod and is resourced by the Faith Education, Innovation and Formation team of the National Ministries.



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1 Introduction to the Manual on Local Church

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

– 1 Corinthians 12:12 NRSVue

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

– UCC Statement of Faith, adapted by Robert V. Moss

AFTER THE DEVASTATION OF TWO WORLD WARS, a global movement for Christian unity emerged in the middle of the twentieth century. In the United States, multiple churches of Reformed Protestant heritage discerned a shared call to witness to the love of God in the world and to testify to the ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They came together in 1957 as the United Church of Christ. As the first two denominations united, the Evangelical and Reformed Church, and the Congregational Christian Churches, they sought to blend the Presbyterian polity and the Congregational polity into a polity of covenant. Subsequent denominational reflection, confession, and archival research expanded this historical narrative by recognizing the Afro-Christian Convention as the “Fifth Stream,” a distinct ecclesial and theological current within the United Church of Christ. This affirmed Black religious experience, ecclesial formation, and liberationist witness as central to the denomination's identity. The covenantal weaving of all these traditions as streams continues to shape who we are today.

Just as God's power and love are made known through the diversity of all of God's people across cultures, histories, and more, so the power



UCC STATEMENT OF FAITH
ROBERT V. MOSS
ADAPTATION



of God's love and presence in the ministry and witness of the United Church of Christ comes from the diversity of its Local Churches. Each in its own specific context, the Local Churches continue varied lineages and legacies of Christian faith and make them their own. What binds us is covenant: the mutual commitment we share to be the church in relationship with one another.

Our covenantal structures and practices make the United Church of Christ unique. Since its inception, the United Church of Christ has sought to clarify what we mean by "covenant," and how we live out covenant in community. Today, the Manual on Local Church is part of this ongoing work to discern and define our structure so that we can engage more fully in our faithful witness in the world.

In introducing the *Constitution* of the United Church of Christ, our forebears proclaimed:



UCC CONSTITUTION
AND BYLAWS

The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior. It acknowledges as kindred in Christ all who share in this confession. It looks to the Word of God in the scriptures, and to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, to prosper its creative and redemptive work in the world. It claims as its own the faith of the historic church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. It affirms the responsibility of the church in each generation to make this faith its own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God. In accordance with the teaching of our Lord and the practice prevailing among evangelical Christians, it recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion (*Preamble to the Constitution, Paragraph 2*).

In this generation, making the faith our own means reacknowledging the United Church of Christ's Local Churches as the essential heart of our denomination. The Manual on Local Church is a resource for Local Churches to embody faithful and vital witness and ministry by:

- **RECOGNIZING THEMSELVES** as part of the whole body of the United Church of Christ through covenant;
- **BUILDING AND CONTINUING** faithful and effective expressions of the Local Church through healthy governance;



- **AND PROCLAIMING AND ENGAGING** their identity and membership in the United Church of Christ through
- **OBTAINING AND MAINTAINING** Local Church standing in its Conference or Association.

The Manual on Local Church is also a resource for Conferences and Associations, equipping them to receive new Local Churches and provide ongoing support to their Local Churches, and maintain accountable relationships in their ongoing witness and ministries.

The Manual on Local Church is also a resource for the whole United Church of Christ, imparting a vision of faithfulness and vitality by offering Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches that build upon the specific and continuing witness and ministry of the United Church of Christ.

In short, the Manual on Local Church seeks to provide tools to fulfill the mission that the United Church of Christ has proclaimed in faith.

Diversity of thought, expression, and experience are intentionally woven into this manual's pages. The manual was researched and written by a working group representing the full diversity of the United Church of Christ denomination, as charged by General Synod 32. The members of the working group offered their wisdom across generations, theological and regional diversity, identity and authorized minister status, ability, ethnicity, and more.

Through study of United Church of Christ history and texts, surveys, focus groups, case studies, and conversations with key wisdom leaders in the denomination, the Manual on Local Church (MLC) Working Group synthesized learning with policy and filtered it through equity and accountability. Although staff from the National Setting, specifically from the Faith Education, Innovation and Formation team (Faith INFO) and Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization team (MESA), administrated this process, the Manual on Local Church is a grassroots document. It is the result of prayerful discernment by people deeply grounded in Local Churches across the United Church of Christ.



As the Local Churches of the United Church of Christ read, explore, and implement The Manual on Local Church, we pray that across all their diversity every Local Church will find itself reflected in these pages: that the faithfulness and vitality, the covenantal relationships, and the good governance described in these pages express what you cherish about the Local Church that is your home. We pray too that every Local Church will find inspiration in this manual to deepen its covenants, refine its mission, and grow ever more into God's calling. Connected in holy, loving, life-giving covenantal relationship, we can be the Body of Christ together, building a just world for all.

DEFINITION OF A LOCAL CHURCH

Remembering the stories of Jesus who gathered disciples to share in a way of life together and drawing upon the denomination's foundational documents, the Manual on Local Church defines a Local Church as a gathered community living in relationship to God, one another, and the world.

In the United Church of Christ, a Local Church is any community of people within the United Church of Christ, consistent with Article V of the *UCC Constitution*, that:

- **GATHERS** to explore faith, hope, and love through worship, learning, and service in person, virtually, or both;
- **FINDS** theological resonance in conversation with the UCC's *Statement of Faith* and seeks to be in conversation with every generation to make the faith its own;
- **DEMONSTRATES** an ongoing commitment to covenantal relationship with the UCC through the Congregational Code in the Manual on Local Church;
- **PRACTICES** ongoing spiritual growth and congregational health as described in the Marks for Faithful and Vital Local Churches in the Manual on Local Church;
- **ENGAGES** in discernment, seeks to be recognized as a Local Church by the Association (or Conference acting as an Association), is granted Congregational Standing with the denomination, and maintains Congregational Standing; and



UCC STATEMENT OF FAITH



- **FULFILLS** the responsibility of congregational autonomy by discerning God's call for the congregation, setting the congregation's missional priorities, organizing the gathered community, and attending to the corporate and legal responsibilities of being an organization.

DEFINITION OF LOCAL CHURCH AUTONOMY

Local Church autonomy in the context of covenantal relationship in the United Church of Christ is the non-transferrable responsibility of a Local Church to discern and respond to God's call for it, inclusive of its purpose, mission, and vision and the creative embodiment of these things (Article 5, paragraph 18 of the *UCC Constitution*).

DEFINITION OF COVENANT FOR THE MANUAL ON LOCAL CHURCH

Covenants between entities and settings in the United Church of Christ are God-initiated promises made to knit us together in relationship and practice through the Holy Spirit for the faithful witness of the gospel and the mutual flourishing of Local Churches and wider expressions of the United Church of Christ.



2 Congregational Code for Local Churches of the United Church of Christ

ACROSS ALL ITS DIVERSITY, the United Church of Christ finds its unity in our shared faith in Jesus Christ and in the covenant promises made by church members and by each setting of the church itself.¹ A covenant is not a law or regulation. It is a holy relationship: the courageous and vulnerable extension of oneself toward another for mutual benefit, support, and accountability. The earliest biblical covenants were initiated by God and made visible through specific occurrences and actions, such as the sign of the rainbow in Genesis 9:13. In the United Church of Christ, we believe the action of God's love initiates and empowers the promises we make to one another. Our covenants are living consensual promises that are renewed and practiced with faithfulness and love.

The Local Churches of the United Church of Christ live in an interrelated set of covenants. **Each Local Church is in covenant with God**, the One who calls us together to faith and community and inspires our shared spiritual journey through worship, learning, service, and justice-making. **Each Local Church makes covenants among its own members**, as they seek to build a healthy and thriving community that demonstrates respect and love for each person. **Each Local Church is in covenant with other expressions of the United Church of Christ**, recognizing that effective ministry does not happen in isolation.



UCC CONSTITUTION
AND BYLAWS

¹ Donald Freeman, "Autonomy in Covenant," *Prism*, Vol. 11 No. 2 (Fall 1996): 17–25; revised for Lancaster Theological Seminary Presentation, January 1998. https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/226/Autonomy-in-a-Covenantal-Polity-Freeman.pdf?1418423590.



The **Congregational Code** describes these three relationships, naming the specific commitments and shared understandings implied by our Local Church's covenantal promises. Each statement in the Code flows from scripture, the wider Christian tradition, our experience in the United Church of Christ, and both our theological lineages and the commitments made by General Synod. Each statement also describes what can be plainly witnessed already in our Local Churches as they live out these covenantal commitments. These covenants will take shape in varied ways across our diverse contexts; each Local Church will discern how each statement can be faithfully practiced in its own setting.

By naming mutual expectations, the Congregational Code describes the essence of what it is to be a Local Church. The Code is intended to be a faithful representation of what it means for a Local Church in the United Church of Christ to be in responsible, covenantal relationship for the purpose of giving and receiving support and accountability and growing toward faithfulness and vitality in the world.

Relying on the grace of God, we Covenant with God to:

- **LOVE GOD** with our whole being and to love our neighbors as ourselves.
- **AFFIRM AND PROCLAIM** that Jesus Christ is the sole head of the church.
- **CELEBRATE** that the church is an outpouring of the gifts of God through the Holy Spirit, and, although individual members and Local Churches contribute to it in their own contexts, the whole church belongs to God.
- **CONTINUE** to deepen our faith and embody our unique ministry in the world using the Bible, traditions, experiences, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and other resources that inspire and guide faithful discernment.
- **ADMINISTER** the sacraments of Baptism and Communion faithfully, recognizing the legacy of previous generations, the importance of our ecumenical commitments, and the calling of the Spirit in our own time.



- **DEMONSTRATE** our living relationship with the still-speaking God by faithfully engaging spiritual practices.
- **USE** with care and grace the theological symbols, images, and languages that best express our understandings of God, one another, and the world.
- **CARE** for God's creation by stewarding the resources of our planet for future generations.
- **NURTURE** the gifts of all members of the church and cultivate a culture where those gifts can uplift the entire body of Christ.
- **MODEL** the generous and just love of God for all people through our service and care for our local and global communities.

Relying on the grace of God, we Covenant with One Another to:

- **DISCERN** the nature of our call as a Local Church using multiple resources including the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches.
- **STEWARD** the time, talents, and financial resources of the Local Church responsibly, with an appropriate balance of transparency and confidentiality.
- **ATTEND** to the physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being of our clergy, lay leaders, and members by sharing responsibilities and communicating clear expectations.
- **HAVE** governance practices that are attentive to our local faith community and context, as well as state and federal laws.
- **ACCOMPANY** those in our communities whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by systemic injustice, violence, poverty, and abuse, while acknowledging our relationships to historic injustices.
- **FOSTER** honest and humble communication with one another, respecting the traditions and practices of diverse cultures and lineages.



- **STRIVE** for just and equitable behaviors, policies, and practices in our congregation so all persons are free from threats, harm, abuse, discrimination, and exclusion.
- **ACT** when harm of any kind is reported or suspected to have occurred in our church, addressing it with courage and clarity.
- **NAVIGATE** conflict within our congregation with care toward the health of the whole church.
- **ASSESS** our congregation's ministry regularly.

Relying on the grace of God, we Covenant with other expressions of the United Church of Christ to:

- **PARTICIPATE** in the covenantal life of the United Church of Christ, including with other Local Churches, the Association, Conference, General Synod, and national and global expressions of the church.
- **ENGAGE** in activities that strengthen the denomination's mission, vision, and purpose, including those that expand the tangible unity of all of Christ's followers.
- **MAINTAIN** Local Church Standing as set forth by the Association (or Conference acting as an Association), and be responsive to the guidance of the Association.
- **HONOR** the Search and Call processes of the United Church of Christ, including Conference practices, and strive to offer equitable compensation for all staff.
- **SUPPORT** the wider expressions of the United Church of Christ through denominational support (Our Church's Wider Mission), special mission offerings, and other pledges, dues, and gifts.
- **SEEK** the counsel of others, including Conference staff and/or the Association (or Conference acting as an Association), Committee on Ministry, should divisive tensions threaten our relationships within the congregation, pastoral leadership or wider expressions of the United Church of Christ.



- **MODEL** ecumenical and interfaith engagement with respect and cultural humility, offering clarity about our beliefs while respecting the differing beliefs of others.
- **CONSIDER PRAYERFULLY** the *Just World Covenants* (ucc.org/just_world_covenants), and if entering into them, engage them with integrity and ongoing reflection.
- **UTILIZE** established processes to dissolve our covenant with our Association (or Conference acting as an Association), should our Local Church choose to end our affiliation with the United Church of Christ.
- **STRIVE** to know, understand, and respect the diversity of perspectives within the United Church of Christ, affirming that all settings speak to the Local Church and not for it.

While the Congregational Code does not separate out covenantal promises between the Local Church and its Pastor, several covenantal statements apply to this relationship, including but not limited to:

- **ATTEND** to the physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being of our clergy, lay leaders, and members by sharing responsibilities and communicating clear expectations.
- **SUPPORT** those in our communities whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by systemic injustice, violence, poverty, and abuse, while acknowledging our relationships to historic injustices.
- **FOSTER** honest and humble communication with one another, respecting the traditions and practices of diverse cultures and lineages.
- **STRIVE** for just and equitable behaviors, policies, and practices in our congregation and work to prevent harm, abuse, discrimination, and exclusion.



3 Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches in the United Church of Christ

THE MARKS OF FAITHFUL AND VITAL LOCAL CHURCHES in the UCC strive to describe the combination of practices, attitudes, and attributes that foster vitality in faith communities in the United Church of Christ.

Vitality is the outward sign of inner spiritual and communal work within a Local Church. Research invites us to understand congregational vitality as the ways a community of faith connects to God, each other, and the world. Though the word “vitality” is sometimes used in conversations regarding congregational size or growth, congregational vitality transcends participant numbers. Local churches experiencing vitality may or may not be growing numerically, but they do demonstrate spiritual growth, healthy community, institutional well-being, and faith-inspired engagement in the wider community and world.

The Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches are a holistic discernment tool for a Local Church’s self-reflection and self-assessment. Because no one community will embody all the Marks, they can help a Local Church celebrate its areas of strength and identify areas for development. A Local Church may engage with the Marks during an annual comprehensive assessment of its ministry, a period of discernment about its well-being and future, a season of leadership transition, or at any time when it seeks to nurture its life together.

The Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches mirror the *Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers* in form. The forty-eight Local Church Marks are organized into eight categories:



UCC CONSTITUTION
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MARKS OF FAITHFUL AND
EFFECTIVE AUTHORIZED
MINISTERS



- **EXHIBITING** a Spiritual Foundation and Ongoing Spiritual Practice
- **ENGAGING** Sacred Stories and Traditions
- **SHAPING** Church Community
- **ORGANIZING** Community with Intention
- **BUILDING** Leadership Skills within Local Churches
- **CARING** for the Wider Community
- **WORKING** Together for Justice and Mercy, and
- **LIVING** Into United Church of Christ Identity.

Each section of the Marks contains both general and specific practices that foster vitality, and the sections may be considered in any order. Unlike a checklist of tasks to complete or goals to reach, the Local Church Marks invite ongoing and deepening engagement over time. There is no endpoint or “achievement” of the Local Church Marks—just as there is no endpoint or “achievement” in the life of faith. Changing circumstances of a Local Church’s life may inspire it to engage more intentionally with various Marks in various seasons. The list of Marks is not exhaustive or exclusive; Local Churches may identify additional Marks that foster vitality in their context by drawing on their shared stories, wisdom, and experiences.

1. EXHIBITING A SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION AND ONGOING SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

- **LOVING GOD**, following Jesus Christ and his teachings, being guided by the Holy Spirit, and living a life of discipleship.
- **PRAYING** actively and embracing a diversity of spiritual practices.
- **CREATING** space for the Holy Spirit to work through Christian practice and worship, including the sacraments.
- **PRACTICING** ongoing collective discernment of the Local Church’s mission and vision.



- **SHOWING** a commitment to lifelong spiritual development and faithful stewardship.
- **ENCOURAGING** opportunities for all to practice sabbath and spiritual renewal.

2. ENGAGING SACRED STORIES AND TRADITIONS

- **EXHIBITING** knowledge, understanding, and continuing study of Scriptures.
- **MAKING RELEVANT** the sacred stories and traditions of the Gospel and the Local Church community in worship, proclamation, and witness.
- **EMBRACING** risk-taking and a spirit of innovation as exemplified in the Gospels.
- **UNDERSTANDING** the history of the Christian Church and approaching the future of the Christian Church with curiosity and wonder.
- **CREATING** faith formation opportunities across generations and learning styles.
- **SHAPING** practices and liturgies so that all may experience love, belonging, and dignity.

3. SHAPING CHURCH COMMUNITY

- **CELEBRATING** that all people are made in the image of God and practicing an ongoing commitment to inclusion and accessibility.
- **RELATING** to one another with gentleness, kindness, and compassion, with sympathy, empathy, and healthy, life-affirming behaviors.
- **WELCOMING** the stranger into community and celebrating the transformation they bring to the Local Church.
- **DEVELOPING** healthy boundaries in relationships with one another and with pastoral leadership.



- **INSPIRING** a culture of generosity and faithful stewardship, including the financial support of the church.
- **CREATING** and tending to faithful approaches to conflict.

4. ORGANIZING COMMUNITY WITH INTENTION

- **ASSESSING** the congregation's ministry to celebrate areas of vitality and discern areas needing attention or strengthening.
- **STEWARDING** the resources of the Local Church wisely, using financial best practices and procedures for accountability, balancing needs for transparency and confidentiality.
- **MAINTAINING** transparent organizational policies that communicate roles, responsibilities, and expectations for staff and volunteers.
- **SUPPORTING** employees with just and generous compensation and benefits, in conversation with Conference compensation guidelines.
- **BALANCING** transparency and confidentiality appropriately in financial and policy decisions as well as employment related decisions.
- **IMPLEMENTING** safe conduct and abuse prevention practices and policies to foster a healthy environment for all people, particularly vulnerable individuals and children.

5. BUILDING LEADERSHIP SKILLS WITHIN LOCAL CHURCHES

- **EMPOWERING** the church to be faithful to God's call, reflective of Christ's mission, and open to the Holy Spirit.
- **PREPARING** the future of God's church by fostering openness to change among leadership and creating responsive governance structures.
- **SUPPORTING** and deepening the inextricable connection of faith and action.



- **NURTURING** gifts for ministry among lay people and equipping new generations of faith leaders.
- **WORKING** collaboratively with continuing commitment to intercultural awareness and sensitivity.
- **ENSURING** accountability, transparency, and responsibility through written policies, just practices, and regular assessment of ministry.

6. CARING FOR THE WIDER COMMUNITY

- **PROVIDING** hope and healing for one another and to a hurting world.
- **RESPONDING** to the emotional, physical, and spiritual needs of individuals and the community.
- **NURTURING** care and compassion for God's creation and those impacted by environmental harms.
- **PRACTICING** humility and respect with all people and groups who have been harmed by the church or who are un/under-represented in the church.
- **SEEKING** to understand the lived experiences of the wider community, particularly those whose experiences differ from those in the Local Church in identity, ability, age, gender, race, and/or religion.
- **PARTNERING** with wider community groups by collaborating and being responsive to their directly expressed needs.

7. WORKING TOGETHER FOR JUSTICE AND MERCY

- **PRACTICING** the extravagant hospitality of Jesus in worship and community.
- **DRAWING** on the liberating activity of God throughout Scripture to confront injustice and oppression locally and globally.
- **UNDERSTANDING** community history and cultural context in order to be present to the needs of the community.



- **BUILDING** relationships of mutual trust and interdependence, in order to better care for and be cared for by one another, always honoring the humanity of those with whom we partner.
- **DISMANTLING** physical and cultural barriers that hinder accessibility or inhibit connection or relationship with the Local Church and community.
- **IDENTIFYING** and working to overcome explicit and implicit biases in the life of the church, including within the Local Church. [Implicit biases are negative associations that people unknowingly hold. They are expressed automatically, without conscious awareness.]

8. LIVING INTO UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST IDENTITY

- **EXHIBITING** a commitment to the core values of the United Church of Christ: continuing testament, extravagant welcome, and changing lives.
- **WITNESSING** to the United Church of Christ value of inclusivity through loving God and neighbor.
- **CELEBRATING** the richness and diversity of UCC history and theology and practicing UCC covenantal polity as a Local Church.
- **ENGAGING** with the various settings of the United Church of Christ, including other Local Churches, as well as the Association, Conference, General Synod, and global ministry partners.
- **DEMONSTRATING** an appreciation for and participation in the ecumenical and interfaith partnerships of the UCC and participating in local partnerships.
- **LIVING** in covenantal relationship by practicing the UCC Congregational Code.



4 Local Church Governance

LISTENING TO GOD'S UNIQUE CALL in each place and context, each Local Church in the United Church of Christ will organize itself for ministry. Across the diversity of the United Church of Christ, there are common structural and organizational practices of Local Churches that promote health, reduce the risk of harm, and help foster congregational vitality. Together, these structures and policies are called **governance**. Good governance helps each Local Church live into its mission.



UCC CONSTITUTION
AND BYLAWS

While the needs of each context will vary, the governance structures of a Local Church will typically include:

- **CLARITY** about its structure through legal status (such as incorporation) and a Constitution and/or Bylaws
- **POLICIES** that equip the Local Church for faithful ministry and attend to the practical and legal considerations for a local church
- **PROCEDURES** for admitting members and shared understanding of members' rights and responsibilities; and
- **FAITHFUL PROCESSES** for making decisions, nurturing healthy relationships, working through conflict and disagreement, and developing future leaders.

Given the variety of contexts and expressions within the United Church of Christ, this manual does not prescribe specific policies to be adopted in a uniform way in every Local Church. Instead, it seeks to name fruitful practices, to raise important questions, and to uncover common ground across the diverse Local Churches of the United Church of Christ. In covenant with one another in every



setting, we can affirm practices of Local Church governance that build up the body of Christ across the whole church.

LEGAL STATUS FOR LOCAL CHURCHES: INCORPORATION, NONPROFIT STATUS, AND TAX EXEMPTION

In the United States, each state's laws have processes for registering organizations so that they become legal entities. The process most commonly used by Local Churches is called **incorporation**.

Many United Church of Christ churches are incorporated under state law. If a Local Church is not yet incorporated, the leadership of the Local Church should discuss the advantages and disadvantages of incorporation with a qualified attorney who has experience with nonprofit organizations.

The options for structure as a corporation will vary under the law from state to state. The option most appropriate to United Church of Christ polity is typically a **membership corporation**, with certain powers reserved to the members of the Local Church acting as a whole. While day-to-day governance of the church may be the responsibility of its **governing board**, the members together should have sole authority for important decisions in the life of the church, including but not limited to:

- **APPROVING** the church's annual budget
- **CALLING** a pastor
- **ELECTING** officers
- **APPROVING** amendments to the church's governing documents
- **APPROVING** resolutions of the church to be sent to the Conference Annual Meeting or to the General Synod
- **APPROVING** the purchase or sale of property
- **APPROVING** affiliation or disaffiliation with the denomination, and
- **APPROVING** the decision to dissolve the corporation and distribute its assets.



To incorporate, a Local Church files a document called the **corporate charter** or **articles of incorporation** with the state, stating its name, location, and basic details of its structure. This incorporating document is distinct from the Local Church's Constitution and Bylaws, which provide more information about its governance practices. The document should be prepared with the assistance of an attorney. The corporate charter or articles limit the powers of a church corporation and impose certain obligations on the church corporation. Prior to amending its Constitution or Bylaws, a Local Church should review its corporate charter or articles of incorporation to ensure that the document remains reflective of the way the Local Church has chosen to structure itself to support the ministry and mission to which it is called. Otherwise, it may need to amend its charter or articles prior to amending its Constitution or Bylaws.

Incorporation as a nonprofit corporation under a state statute may confer tax advantages under state law, and may also come with obligations to register, and/or report to, the state attorney general's office. Most states exempt churches from annual reports to the attorney general's office, but some states require a church to apply for such an exemption. A Local Church should confer with an attorney licensed to practice in their state to learn more about their rights and responsibilities under state law.

Nonprofit corporate status and tax-exempt status are distinct. Churches are automatically recognized as 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations under federal law and are not required to file Form 1023 with the IRS to obtain recognition of their tax-exempt status. The United Church of Christ, as a denomination, maintains a federal group tax exemption with the IRS. Local Churches granted standing in an Association (or Conference acting as an Association) of the United Church of Christ prior to January 20, 2026, are included in the group exemption. Local Churches granted standing on or after January 20, 2026, must apply for membership. An application can be found on the National Ministries website under Tax Exemption Resources. An organizational purpose statement as specified on the application must be included in the church's governing document. Local Churches generally do not appear in the IRS's exempt organizations database because religious denominations holding group exemptions are not



required to update the membership of the group exemption with the IRS. A letter indicating proof of group exemption membership is available for download from the National Ministries website under Tax Exemption Resources for group exemption members. The letter can only be created for the church name and address as it appears in the Yearbook (and the UCC Database and Directories) to ensure the Conference has the most current information for the church.

CONSTITUTIONS AND/OR BYLAWS FOR LOCAL CHURCHES

A Local Church's Constitution and/or Bylaws is a legal document that sets forth how the Local Church is organized. Typically, the **Constitution** outlines the basic principles and structure of the Local Church, while the **Bylaws** offer additional detail. Sometimes these are combined into a single document.

The Constitution and/or Bylaws is a legal contract between the church and its members, and the church and the state in which it is incorporated (if it is incorporated), and therefore must be followed. Ignoring or disregarding the Constitution and/or Bylaws places the church at financial, legal, and reputational risk.

When writing, reviewing, or editing the Constitution and/or Bylaws, a Local Church should:

- **SEEK OUTSIDE EXPERTISE.** Because these are legal matters and may have legal implications, a Local Church should get assistance before drafting or amending the Constitution and/or Bylaws from an expert with experience specific to the Local Church's state, such as an attorney. It is best to consult with someone who is not a member of the church to avoid any conflicts of interest that may arise.
- **STICK TO THE BASICS.** The Constitution and/or Bylaws should deal with only the broadest level of governing issues, providing an outline for organization without extra detail. Remember, these are legal documents: In general, a state will require the Constitution and/or Bylaws to address and comply with state law on some or all of the following issues:
 - ◆ **Organizational purpose:** for churches granted standing



on or after January 20, 2026 that want to apply for membership in the UCC's group tax exemption, a specific purpose statement is required. The application is available on the National Ministries website under Tax Exemption Resources.

- ◆ **Governing board structure**
- ◆ **Officer positions** and descriptions of their duties
- ◆ **Election of officers**, terms of office, how vacancies will be filled, and who is eligible to seek office
- ◆ **Assigning authority** for executing contracts with third parties
- ◆ **Notice and frequency** of meetings of governing board
- ◆ **Notice and frequency** of meetings of the members
- ◆ **Conditions for membership**, voting rights of members, and dismissal of members
- ◆ **Gift** of corporate assets upon dissolution
- ◆ **Non-inurement** of corporate assets to individual benefit
- ◆ **Cumulative voting**, voting by proxy, and remote participation in meetings
- ◆ **Conflicts of interest**
- ◆ **Indemnification.**

It is generally not necessary to enumerate specific committees other than the Governing Board in the Local Church Constitution and/or Bylaws.

- **SPECIFY HOW THE LOCAL CHURCH CALLS AND DISMISSES A MINISTER.** The Constitution and/or Bylaws should also clarify the expectation that any called or employed minister holds a form of ministerial standing in the United Church of Christ, as defined by the *Manual on Ministry* (ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ManualonMinistry-2018.pdf), or will take the necessary steps to gain this standing within six months of being called or hired. Alternatively, a Local Church



might simply choose to specify that the church follows their Association's or Conference's recommended practices for search and call, as a reflection of covenant with the wider church and evolving practices. Evolving practices include lay leadership of Local Churches. While Lay Ministerial Standing is defined in the Manual on Ministry, the intentional decision to be a lay-led church should happen in conversation and good covenantal relationships with the Association or Conference.

- **SET A REASONABLE QUORUM FOR MEETINGS OF THE LOCAL CHURCH.** The number of members present that is required for the Local Church to be able to conduct business in a meeting is called the quorum. To best prepare for any changes to the church's membership size in the future, the quorum for annual and special meetings of the Local Church should be a set percentage of the Local Church's average worship attendance (as reported by the Local Church to the United Church of Christ Database and Directories the prior year), rather than a set number of people. Be sure the quorum complies with any state law requirements.
- **INCLUDE AN INTENTIONAL PLAN FOR THE DISTRIBUTION OF ASSETS UPON DISSOLUTION OF THE LOCAL CHURCH.** Though difficult to talk about, it is a gift to future generations (and often a state requirement of the Constitution and/or Bylaws) to include a provision about how assets will be handled if, and when, the Local Church closes. The Local Church is limited by state and federal law regarding how and to what type of organizations' assets can be dispersed. Church assets cannot be disbursed to individuals. A Local Church can consult with Conference staff for appropriate language to ensure that distribution/dissolution provisions are consistent in the articles and Bylaws.
- **MAKE PROVISION FOR REVISIONS.** A Local Church must be able to amend the Constitution and/or Bylaws when it no longer helps the church live into its sense of call. It is recommended practice that a vote reflective of a supermajority of the church membership be required for revision to the Constitution and/or Bylaws. States often have



laws on what is required. Be sure to check your state's laws on any required vote.

Once the Constitution and/or Bylaws has been adopted, the Local Church's work is not yet done. The document must remain part of the Local Church's common life, as in these ways:

- **EQUIP LOCAL CHURCH LEADERS.** Officers and governing board members (council members, consistory members, etc.) have a fiduciary duty to follow and enforce the church's Constitution and/or Bylaws. Be sure new board members receive a copy. Leaders should consult it regularly. Copies should be readily accessible by all members of the Local Church.
- **REVIEW THE CONSTITUTION AND/OR BYLAWS.** Because following the Constitution and/or Bylaws is a legal requirement, if it is not working for the church, it must be amended. An annual review of the Constitution and/or Bylaws is recommended but reviews at least every 3-5 years allows the church to discern changes that will be needed in the future, and to plan a time for revision prior to a meeting of the Local Church members.
- **KEEP TRACK OF THE CONSTITUTION AND/OR BYLAWS.** If a Local Church cannot find its Constitution and/or Bylaws, it should consult an attorney. A new Constitution and/or Bylaws may need to be drafted and approved by the Local Church.

POLICIES FOR LOCAL CHURCHES

While a Constitution and/or Bylaws speaks to the broad organization of a Local Church, policies are the Local Church's operational guidelines. Policies protect and guide leaders, staff, and members as they fulfill the mission of the Local Church. Policies and accompanying procedures are a reference tool for action, decision-making, and consistency regarding shared values and expectations.

When adopting a policy, a Local Church should carefully consider how the policy will be implemented, monitored, and enforced. The Local Church should ensure that it has the capacity to implement



all policies that it adopts. It is rarely satisfactory or appropriate for a Local Church to adopt a template policy without some form of modification or contextualization. The resources provided are for consideration only; each Local Church should seek the appropriate legal advice in drafting and adopting policies to ensure compliance with best practices and the law in its state.

When policies are being created and implemented, the Local Church should keep in mind its commitments to justice and equity. History reveals that far too often, consciously or unconsciously, groups have used policies to exclude and discriminate against marginalized groups. Examining policies with an equity lens allows for good governance without sacrificing justice.

Local Church leaders should review all policies regularly to ensure that they reflect current practices, still serve the needs of the Local Church, and continue to support the Local Church's values, mission, and ministry.

In general, with the recognition that this list is not exhaustive, it is recommended that each Local Church have a written policy reflecting a shared understanding and practices regarding the following:

- **ABUSE PREVENTION.** The Local Church's members, friends, clergy, employees, and program participants must be able to worship, learn, and work together in an atmosphere free from all forms of discrimination, harassment, exploitation, or intimidation. This policy outlines practices that prevent or respond to abuse of many kinds. It is of particular importance that this policy includes practices to protect vulnerable members of the community, e.g., children, older adults, and people with disabilities. Women clergy also report experiencing sexual harassment at an alarming rate.
- **BUILDING USE AND RENTAL AGREEMENTS.** Inviting others in the community to use the church's property can further the church's ministry and outreach. By setting a policy establishing clear expectations and responsibilities for community use, a church can reduce the risk of liability for the actions of outside users.
- **CONFLICT OF INTEREST.** Officers, governing body members, and key employees should not participate in making decisions



for the church when they have a personal or business interest in those decisions. This policy establishes guidelines for determining when, due to a conflict of interest, a person should not be involved in church decision-making.

- **COPYRIGHT AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY.** Federal and state laws describe the ownership and use of writings and intellectual work products: In many cases it is necessary to secure the permission of the creator of the work to use it. While the U.S. Copyright Act does allow some music to be performed by churches during worship services without a license, that exception is limited. As a matter of justice for the creators of material, it is important to obtain permission from content creators to use their materials in worship and other places, to properly attribute use, and to pay licensing fees where necessary. This includes the use of hymns, prayers, or poetry used by others. There are additional copyright concerns if a worship service is recorded or live-streamed.
- **CYBERSECURITY.** To safeguard data stored in computer systems, a Local Church should develop and codify practices regarding data access, back-up storage, password and authenticator use, and prevention of viruses and identity theft.
- **EMPLOYMENT POLICIES.** Strong and clear employment policies and practices are necessary for good stewardship of the church's assets and fair and just treatment of employees. This is true even if the church employs a small number of employees. The Insurance Board and other insurance companies may provide a sample employee handbook that will help get a church started, but churches are often subject to state and local employment laws, so it is important to have a local attorney review the church's employment handbook. Churches can also refer to Conference salary guidelines for ministers and General Synod resolutions on compensation for lay employees.
- **FINANCIAL POLICY.** Managing money securely and faithfully is a key requirement of good stewardship. Best practices in financial controls should inform the church's financial policy. This policy should reflect IRS regulations and any



state laws or regulations to which the church is subject.

- **GIFT ACCEPTANCE POLICY.** Any gifts the church accepts should further the mission and ministry of the church and not create burdens that the church will have difficulty carrying. This policy sets forth the circumstances under which the church will refuse a gift that does not further its mission or which is too expensive to administer.
- **INVESTMENT POLICY.** This policy describes the ways that the Local Church's money, including any restricted funds, can be invested and how the principal and interest can be accessed. A church's endowment may be subject to the state's Uniform Prudential Management of Institutional Funds Act, which describes certain responsibilities of institutions in honoring donor intent and prudently investing funds.
- **PRIVACY AND CONSENT.** Local Churches should develop policies to protect personal information and images of their members and guests. For example, Local Churches should exercise care that all people included in images published in print and electronic media have consented to their use.
- **RECORD RETENTION.** Preservation of the appropriate records is essential to good governance and in some cases, such as employment and financial data, may be required by law. This policy will set forth expectations for church leaders and staff as to how records of the church will be maintained and for what period of time.
- **SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY.** The Local Church should establish expectations for how church leaders and staff will use social media and other technology to further the church's ministry and set limits on the use of church accounts for personal use or for uses inconsistent with the church's status as a tax-exempt organization under IRC 501(c)(3).

MEMBERSHIP IN LOCAL CHURCHES

Members of a Local Church of the United Church of Christ are:



MEMBERS OF THE BODY. In popular culture, the word “membership” is used to describe a wide variety of affiliations. A person might be a member of a gym or a warehouse store. These affiliations are typically transactional: a member pays a fee and then is entitled to certain benefits. Or, a person might be a member of a fraternity, or of the local school board. In these cases, membership implies an exclusive status that comes with both privileges and responsibilities.

However, in the church, membership has a deeper meaning. The Apostle Paul writes:

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

– Romans 12:4-5

If we understand membership in a Local Church through the metaphor of the members of Christ’s body, we recognize the interdependence of all members: no one is dispensable; no one gives without receiving. We recognize that our membership has a deeper purpose beyond our own benefit, status, or role: that together we can be Christ’s presence in the world in a way that none of us could ever embody alone.

DISCIPLES. Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and its members are accepting his invitation, “Follow me.” By joining a Local Church, members commit themselves to lives of discipleship through worship, prayer, service, evangelism, justice-seeking, fellowship, learning, and generosity. Members participate actively in the life and work of the Local Church, each according to their own abilities and gifts.

COVENANT PARTNERS. “Covenant—the commitment of God to God’s people, of the people to God, of the people to one another as the Body of Christ—is foundational to UCC identity and is at the heart of our governance (*Manual on Ministry*, page 6).” These holy committed relationships connect the members of our Local Churches. The members of a Local Church may not have identical beliefs; they may represent varied races, cultures, and backgrounds;



they may disagree on politics or theology. Across all these differences, the idea of covenant holds the Local Church together. In joining a Local Church, a member claims this particular expression of Christ's body as their own spiritual community. Together, church members covenant to follow Christ together, to labor together in service to neighbor, to accompany one another in sorrow and rejoicing, and to work through conflicts with respect and love: to walk together in all God's ways, as God is revealed in their midst.

STEWARDS. Members are entrusted with responsibility for governing and sustaining their Local Church. Members share in discerning the Local Church's future, being responsible stewards of its resources, and helping to choose its leaders. Members of Local Churches are also members of the whole United Church of Christ and may represent their Local Church in an Association, a Conference, and the National Setting.

While various Local Churches may place different emphasis on each of these understandings of membership, some aspect of each is typically present.

Some Local Churches may use alternative names for members (e.g., "Covenant Keepers," "Covenant Partners," etc.); in this manual, the word "members" is used to describe the people who have agreed to be a church together.

BECOMING A MEMBER

The sacrament of baptism, historically, is the beginning of a person's Christian journey; among its many meanings, baptism represents a person's entry into the universal Christian church. Membership, which has typically followed baptism, represents a person's commitment to one particular expression of the church.

The UCC's Constitution and Bylaws assume that all church members are baptized Christians, and the order for reception of members in the UCC Book of Worship takes the form of reaffirmation of baptism, assuming that the person who is joining a Local Church is already baptized or will be baptized as part of the rite. However, as Local Church practice remains wide and varied, in some cases a Local Church may discern that baptism is not a requirement for membership.



Local Churches in the United Church of Christ offer multiple pathways to membership. Each requires the making of an intentional and mutual covenant between an individual and a Local Church:

CONFIRMATION. In many United Church of Christ Local Churches, an affirmation of baptism in adolescence—confirmation—marks the transition into membership for young people raised in the church. After a period of study and mentorship, youth (typically aged 12–16) “give public assent to the baptismal promises”² made on their behalf as infants and take on the responsibilities and privileges of Local Church membership through a rite during the Local Church’s worship service.

PROFESSION OF FAITH. Adults who have not previously been a member of a Christian church may become a member of a Local Church by profession of faith. It is appropriate for these individuals to participate in a period of study and mentorship (historically known as a “catechumenate”) prior to joining the Local Church. Most typically, the candidate is baptized and joins the Local Church in a single public ritual.

REAFFIRMATION OF FAITH. Individuals who have been baptized, and have been at one time a member of a Christian church, but are not currently members of any church, may become a member of a Local Church by reaffirmation of faith. The Local Church may offer a period of preparation prior to a rite of welcome during the worship service.³

TRANSFER. Individuals who are members of another Christian church, within or outside the United Church of Christ, may transfer their membership to a Local Church. It is courteous to request a letter of transfer from the previous Local Church so that the church may remove them from their rolls. In practice, there may be circumstances where such correspondence is not feasible, and it need not stand in the way of welcoming new members. The Local Church may offer a period of preparation prior to a rite of welcome during the worship service.

² UCC Book of Worship, 145. For questions a Local Church might ask while planning Confirmation processes, see the section 3 Resource, “When Youth Become Members.”

³ The UCC Book of Worship contains a rite for the reaffirmation of baptism.



Where a Local Church has access, expertise, and interest in using technology, the Local Churches may choose to welcome members joining through any of these pathways who participate in the life of the Local Church exclusively through online means.

Many Local Churches specify that all candidates for membership, joining through any of these pathways, be affirmed by the leadership body (Council, Deacons, Consistory) prior to joining the church. This process is not intended to determine if candidates are “good enough” to join, nor is it a perfunctory clerical step. Instead, it is an opportunity to begin building covenantal relationships with new members, discovering their gifts, their needs, and their interests to promote mutual flourishing. In rare cases, the leadership body may decide not to approve an individual’s request to become a member; for example, when a person would not be able to affirm the Local Church’s relational covenant.

Whether joining through confirmation, profession of faith, reaffirmation of faith, or transfer, it is appropriate to recognize new members through a rite in the worship service.

AFFILIATION

In some cases, a person may seek a formal way to affiliate with a Local Church without making the promises of membership. A few examples might include:

- **A PERSON FROM ANOTHER FAITH TRADITION** who wants to participate in the Local Church where their spouse is a member, but who cannot in good conscience make the Christian faith commitments of membership.
- **A PERSON WHO PARTICIPATES** for part of the year in one Local Church (as a college student, seasonal resident, etc.), while holding membership in another.
- **A PERSON WHO PARTICIPATES** in the online ministries of one Local Church while participating in the onsite ministries of another.

Some Local Churches have created a category of affiliation suitable for these people. (Frequently, this category is called “Associate Members”



or “Friends.”) Local Churches that have such a category should create policies outlining the ways these people may participate in the life of the Local Church, making clear whether they are permitted to vote in congregational elections, hold elected offices, serve on boards and committees, etc. It is appropriate to welcome these people through a rite of welcome in the worship service.

MULTIPLE MEMBERSHIP

It is typically appropriate for a person to hold membership in only one Local Church. Membership implies commitment and participation, and it may often prove impossible to divide attention effectively among multiple Local Churches. Additionally, as the National Setting of the United Church of Christ collects data on membership, multiple membership can cause challenges to accurate record-keeping.

However, in rare cases, a layperson may be truly engaged in and able to make covenant promises to multiple Local Churches. In such cases, and with the agreement of leadership from each Local Church, a layperson may hold membership in more than one Local Church.

Multiple Local Church memberships may complicate holding elected positions in the denomination such as serving as a General Synod Delegate. For this reason, the Association and Conference should also be made aware of laypersons with multiple Local Church memberships.

In cases where a layperson is considering entering into multiple membership with a Local Church of the United Church of Christ and a congregation of a different denomination, it is especially important to be fully transparent with leadership from both churches to determine whether such membership is permissible in their tradition.

Multiple membership is not appropriate for Members in Discernment nor for Authorized Ministers.

LIFE AS A MEMBER

Membership requires more than good intentions: it is an ongoing relationship of interaction, and participation in the life of a Local



Church. To help current and potential members understand this relationship, it is helpful for Local Churches to outline their expectations for membership:

- **A CHURCH COVENANT** might outline the role and responsibilities of church membership, including expectations for prayer, participation, and stewardship.
- **A RELATIONAL COVENANT** (or behavioral covenant) (sneucc.org/files/websites/sne/Behavioral-Covenant-Rendle-BAT.pdf) is a document that describes the ways church members will relate to one another, such as demonstrating mutual respect, communicating effectively, committing to anti-racist practices, accessibility and inclusion, and working through conflict in mature and loving ways. Relational covenants can be an important tool in addressing complaints of inappropriate or offensive conduct in a just manner.

The **Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches** is a tool Local Churches can use for self-reflection on their Local Church's vitality. While embodying the Marks is a collective effort that no individual member can pursue entirely on their own, the Marks are also helpful for members' own self-reflection as they consider ways they can use their gifts for the flourishing of their faith community.

Local Churches may offer members frequent opportunities to renew their commitment to membership. This may take place in a rite of reaffirmation of baptism, or in an annual re-covenanting ceremony.

It is important for Local Churches to maintain an accurate list of members (often known as a **membership roll**). Having an accurate count of members is critical to the National Setting's data collection ministries; maintaining records of members' names is a gift to future historians. Local Churches should review their membership roll in regular intervals (a minimum of every four years is recommended) to ensure accuracy and to identify any members who may have become inactive. A review of the membership roll can also be a helpful tool in times of congregational transition, such as preparing a Local Church Profile for a pastoral call process, or in periodic evaluation and planning.



WHEN MEMBERSHIP ENDS

Membership is a mutual covenant: both the Local Church and the member must consent to the individual's membership in the Local Church. Either the Local Church or the member may dissolve this covenant if circumstances warrant, through one of the following means:

- **VOLUNTARY WITHDRAWAL.** Just as individuals become members by their own choice, individuals can voluntarily tender their resignation from a Local Church by advising the Local Church's leadership of their withdrawal of membership. An individual can do this by requesting a letter of transfer to another Local Church, by writing to request removal from the membership roll, or by another step that would clearly reflect their change in status. The Local Church is obligated to respect this decision and should provide a letter to the individual confirming their choice to withdraw and affirming that their name has been removed from the roll. In some cases, it may be appropriate to mark this transition through a rite of farewell in the worship service.
- **WITHDRAWAL DUE TO INACTIVITY.** Members may also be removed from membership after prolonged inactivity in the Local Church. In its written policies, the Local Church should define what "inactivity" means: what kind of participation is expected of members, and how frequent this participation should be.

Each Local Church should periodically review its membership roll to identify inactive members. The church should attempt to contact these members to determine their interest in remaining on the membership roll. If inactive members are uninterested in continuing in membership, or if they are unable to be contacted within a specified amount of time, their names should be removed from membership. This timing should be spelled out in the Local Church's By-laws, constitution, or in other written policies of the church.

- **REMOVAL.** Local Church leadership must address behavior on the part of a member that is incompatible with healthy congregational life. Behavior by a Local Church member



that creates a threat to the safety or wellbeing of another member, of the Local Church, or of the wider community must receive an expedient and appropriate response.

Procedures for responding to problematic behavior should be included in the Local Church's Constitution and/or Bylaws, or in other written policies. The steps for addressing concerns outlined in Matthew 18:15–17 may provide an initial framework. Local Church leadership may develop an individualized behavior plan with a member setting conditions for continued participation in the Local Church.

When problematic behavior cannot be resolved in this way, or when egregious behavior that requires immediate action occurs, a Local Church may need to terminate an individual's membership in the Local Church. The former member should receive clear and prompt communication notifying them of the Local Church's decision to terminate their membership and the implications of that decision.

LEADERSHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

All members of a Local Church are called to participate in the Local Church's mission and ministry. From among the body, some members are called to positions of lay leadership: some as officers; some in roles of spiritual or financial authority such as elders, deacons, or trustees; some as chairs of committees or working groups; some in other positions of responsibility and authority. Some positions of leadership will be elected by the membership of the Local Church, others will be appointed, and others will emerge as circumstances arise.

Local Church leaders may draw on understandings of leadership from other endeavors (such as business, community organizations, or government), but they must also recognize that Christian leadership has a unique character. Because Jesus Christ is the one Head of the Church, all Christian leaders are also followers. As we lead with Christ as our leader, we are called to see the image of God in all people. We lead collaboratively and relationally, recognizing the gifts that each person brings. We heed the call of the Holy Spirit to be part of God's liberating love that fosters wholeness, justice, and peace.



DECISION-MAKING IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

As communities of faith, Local Churches seek to discern the will of God for their ministry and mission. Decision-making processes are a means for doing discernment collectively, ensuring all perspectives can be considered. These processes help a Local Church move forward in a way that honors its community coherence and its shared discipleship.

There are many kinds of decisions made in a Local Church:

- **STRATEGIC DECISIONS** that guide a Local Church's calling, mission, and leadership over the long term, such as:
 - ◆ Discerning the Local Church's mission and vision
 - ◆ Designing a governance structure
 - ◆ Calling pastoral leaders
 - ◆ Setting expectations for Local Church members
 - ◆ Crafting policies for the use or investment of assets.
- **TACTICAL DECISIONS** that provide programmatic direction for those engaged in the Local Church's ministry, such as:
 - ◆ Selecting or creating programs that support the Local Church's mission
 - ◆ Planning how ministries will be carried out
 - ◆ Developing processes for administration
 - ◆ Ensuring practices of accountability.
- **OPERATIONAL DECISIONS** that Local Church leaders make on a daily basis as they carry out the Local Church's ministry, such as:
 - ◆ Managing details of a planned program
 - ◆ Spending funds within an agreed-upon budget
 - ◆ Determining how to implement a policy.

These different types of decisions require different methods for decision-making. Having a clear understanding of how a Local Church



makes different types of decisions creates a sense of transparency and collaboration among its members.

The decision-making processes that a Local Church might use include:

- **PARLIAMENTARY RULES OF ORDER.** This method, also used by many secular organizations, provides a process for raising subjects that require decisions, debating options, and choosing a way forward through majority vote. A Local Church may adopt an existing set of parliamentary rules (such as Robert's Rules of Order), or it may establish its own standing rules as a Local Church policy. Ideally, parliamentary rules offer a procedure that offers accessibility and accountability to all participants, allowing for minority voices to be heard. However, those who are unfamiliar with the rules may find themselves without voice in the decision-making process. Offering educational opportunities to familiarize members with the rules can help bridge this gap.
- **CONSENSUS.** This method provides a process for identifying the common mind of the group: a way forward that all can support. Reaching a decision by consensus takes account of the insights of each member. The process ensures issues are fully aired and all members feel they have been adequately heard. Some may feel the chosen solution is not necessarily their first option, but all can support it as the group's decision. True consensus is not the same as unanimity: Real consensus arises out of real community, and often involves productive tension as people express their insights with passion and integrity, and yet with respect for really hearing others' points of view. To be effective, consensus-building requires a leader who elicits the voice of all concerned, is able to identify points of agreement along the way, and who looks to find what can be agreed to by the whole.
- **DELEGATION.** In this method, a large group refers a decision to a group or individual who is empowered to make final decisions and act on behalf of the larger group. Delegation is especially helpful when considering smaller details or when implementing a plan that has been embraced by the larger



group. In many Local Churches, the membership delegates key decisions to the governing board. This board may itself delegate decisions to committees or working groups. Effective communication and established trust are necessary to ensure that delegated decisions are embraced by the larger body.

Each of these methods can be appropriate in the life of a Local Church. Regardless of the method used, all forms of decision-making in the church depend upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, discerned in attentive listening to God's Word and to one another.

ENGAGING CONFLICT IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Conflict and disagreements are a part of living in a community. Even though discord can feel uncomfortable, it can also be a sign of vitality, inviting a community to hear diverse voices, to grow, and to change. Each Local Church should have practices and structures in place to address conflict as it occurs, helping its members rely on their faith to help them respond with maturity, building healthy relationships, and seeking a fresh way forward. These practices might be included in a Local Church's policies or its Relational Covenant.

When the Local Church experiences conflict that is challenging for the congregation to navigate on its own, wider church settings can offer assistance; see Section 5 on Local Church Standing, Support, and Accountability for more detail.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

As a popular adage says, "God does not call the equipped, but God equips the called." A Local Church can be part of God's work by equipping its members with the skills needed for leadership. Developing new leaders is a gift the Local Church can offer not only to its own future ministry but also to other settings of the United Church of Christ, as our Associations, Conferences, and National Setting also benefit from excellent leadership.

Leadership development in Local Churches might take shape in these ways:

- **DISCOVER THE GIFTS EACH MEMBER CAN BRING.** Use tools such as a spiritual gift inventory, a survey of skills



and interests, and one-to-one meetings to reveal the ways that each member of the Local Church can contribute to its mission and ministry.

- **EXTEND INVITATIONS INTO LEADERSHIP.** Some members may need encouragement to feel welcome or confident serving in positions of leadership. When gifts for leadership are evident, make room for these new voices by intentionally offering leadership opportunities. In extending invitations to lead, a Local Church should remember that gifts for leadership are present in people of all ages, genders, races, backgrounds, and abilities.
- **OFFER OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN.** Provide educational options such as workshops and book studies that help leaders grow familiar with Local Church governance and ministries. Take advantage of opportunities offered by the Association, Conference, or National Setting. Look for resources available from seminaries, regional theological education programs, and other church organizations.
- **ENCOURAGE MENTORSHIP AND ECUMENICAL PARTNERSHIP.** Experienced leaders can help new leaders find confidence in ministry. (Remember that a mentor can be a person of any age or background.) Ecumenical neighbors can offer fresh perspectives on governance; a Local Church might visit a neighbor's governing board meeting and invite guests to comment on its own.

ASSESSING AND IMPROVING GOVERNANCE

The work of governance is never done. Changes in the demographics of the membership, changes in pastoral leadership, changes in the Local Church's context, and discernment of new calls to ministry and mission all require consideration of how the governance structure may need to change to best support the mission and ministry of the Local Church. On a regular basis, the Local Church should review its bylaws, leadership structures, and policies to ensure they are allowing the Local Church to fulfill its mission.



5 Local Church Standing, Support, and Accountability

IN THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, each Local Church lives in covenantal relationship to its Association. In some areas, the responsibilities assigned to Associations in the United Church of Christ Constitution and Bylaws are performed by a Conference acting as an Association. **All references to Associations in this section also apply to Conferences acting as Associations.** This section of the **Manual on Local Church** explores how this covenant takes shape:

- **THE ASSOCIATION CONFERS STANDING** on Local Churches, accepting them as members of the United Church of Christ. The Association sets standing requirements for Local Churches, including faithfulness to the Congregational Code for Local Churches.
- **THE ASSOCIATION PROVIDES SUPPORT** to Local Churches, assisting with assessment, search and call, and conflict resolution.
- **THE ASSOCIATION ENSURES ACCOUNTABILITY** for Local Churches, staying abreast of each Local Church's ministries and offering processes for review and repair when standing requirements have not been met or when covenantal ties are strained.

In every season of a Local Church's life—whether joining the United Church of Christ for the first time, celebrating faithful ministry, seeking a new pastor, managing conflict, or even discerning an end to its relationship with the United Church of Christ—the covenant between the Local Church and its Association offers tools and relationships to strengthen its discipleship.



STANDING

Local Church standing is the ecclesiastical relationship of a Local Church with its Association, defining a Local Church's membership in the United Church of Christ. An Association "determines, confers, and certifies to the standing of the Local Churches of the United Church of Christ within its area" (*UCC Constitution*, Article IX, Paragraph 46). Local Churches are encouraged to review and reaffirm their covenantal relationships with the wider church at regular intervals. A sample ritual of re-covenanting is included in the Resource section of the Manual on Local Church.

Associations create Local Church standing requirements, which are intended to promote covenantal ties between Local Churches and other expressions of the United Church of Christ. It is recommended that the Association work with the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches and the Congregational Code for Local Churches to determine requirements for Local Church Standing, to educate Local Churches on these requirements, to create equitable pathways for Local Churches to meet those requirements, and to develop faithful processes of support and accountability to ensure that these standing requirements are being met. An Association may delegate this work to a Committee on Ministry, a Committee on Church and Ministry, a Local Church oversight team, or some other designated body.

Associations function best when all member churches strive for vitality, mutual support, accountability, honesty, and equity. Mutuality is always important, but particularly so when member churches represent a variety of different historical, cultural, racial, theological, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Gathered bodies formed around policies and precedence are particularly susceptible to allowing dominant cultural rule, both implicitly and explicitly, through codes, canons, and expectations. As a body formed upon Jesus' words that we are called to love one another as ourselves, Associations must be attentive, ensuring that white supremacy, patriarchy, and Eurocentrism (among other dominant systems) do not presume to set the tone, tenor, and vision for what is permissible, acceptable, aspirational, and holy, both in Local Churches and within the work and mission of the Association.



WELCOMING NEW OR AFFILIATING FAITH COMMUNITIES

A new church start, ministry setting, or existing congregation that desires to be a Local Church of the United Church of Christ will participate in the Local Church Standing Discernment process within an Association. The Local Church Standing Discernment process engages all discernment partners in reflection, conversation, and assessment to discern the readiness of a particular faith community for relationship, affiliation, support, and accountability alongside other Local Churches in the United Church of Christ.

The process unfolds in the following sequence:

- **EXPLORATION AND DISCERNMENT** within the faith community
- **INITIAL MEETING** of the faith community with the Association (or a designated body with the Association, such as a Committee on Ministry)
- **DEVELOPMENT** of a Preparation and Formation Plan
- **CREATION AND REVIEW** of foundational documents (such as Articles of Incorporation, Constitution and/or Bylaws, and key policies)
- **DEVELOPMENT** of a Local Church Profile
- **FINAL REVIEW** and Association vote on Local Church Standing
- **LITURGICAL CELEBRATIONS** at Conference Annual Meeting and General Synod.

RELEASE OF LOCAL CHURCH STANDING AND VOLUNTARY DISAFFILIATION WITH THE UCC

There are many reasons why a Local Church may seek to leave the United Church of Christ. In some cases, a Local Church may no longer have the capacity or resources to continue as a Local Church and may choose to make the most faithful decision of entering a process of Legacy. A Legacy process involves celebrating what has been done and passing on wisdom and resources to the next generation of Local Churches.



In other situations, a Local Church may determine that continued affiliation with the United Church of Christ is not in the best interest of the Local Church or its members. This may be because there is a fundamental disagreement with the polity of the denomination that cannot be overcome, when there has been irreparable damage or harm in the relationship between the Local Church and other expressions of the United Church of Christ, or for other reasons the Local Church may discern. Before pursuing disaffiliation, every effort should be made to attempt to repair damaged relationships and to cultivate a relationship of care and trust.

ECUMENICAL RELATIONSHIPS AND STANDING

The United Church of Christ, living out its identity as a United and Uniting denomination, finds congregational expression in various partnerships with churches of different denominational traditions. Many such partnerships are found with churches from our full communion partners, which are:

- **The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**
- **The United Church of Canada**
- **The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**
- **The Presbyterian Church (USA)**
- **The Reformed Church in America.**

In addition to these partnerships, the UCC has formal agreements with the Alliance of Baptists, Congregational Christian Churches of American Samoa (CCCAS), and The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries (TFAM). Additionally, the UCC has a church partnership agreement (*Kirchengemeinschaft*) with the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD).

These various partnership agreements bring with them different expressions of mutual recognition of ministry, as well as other potential areas for church cooperation.

Other ecumenical partnerships include relationships with denominations with whom the United Church of Christ shares no formal agreements, but where a local partnership has proven to be fruitful.



YOKED CONGREGATIONS

In some cases, congregations within the UCC have “yoked” with congregations of a different denomination, resulting in the sharing of clergy who serve the two churches and with oversight by both denominations. Such arrangements require significant, intentional organization to ensure the needs of the separate congregations will be met. At the same time, attention must be paid to ensure that fair and realistic expectations are placed upon the minister(s) serving the congregations. In such cases, the congregations remain separate, autonomous institutions, who each maintain good standing with their respective denominations. Given that there may be differing systems for the selection or appointment of clergy, thoughtful attention is given to how clergy will be selected to serve the congregations.

MERGED CONGREGATIONS

In other cases, congregations within the UCC have merged with congregations of a different denomination. This process results in a new congregation that may have standing in two or more denominations. In these cases, the congregation has the responsibility to maintain covenantal relations with each denomination to which it belongs and must fulfill the requirements to maintain good standing in those denominations.

The congregation may also choose to relinquish its standing in one of the two denominations, choosing to maintain standing with only one denomination. Should the congregation choose to maintain standing only with the UCC, it will be responsible to maintain full covenantal relations with the UCC through its Association and/or Conference. However, even in such a circumstance, it is likely that the history/ethos of the relinquished denomination will remain present in the congregation and may continue to play a role in its ongoing life.

DUAL AFFILIATION

At times, the Spirit leads a congregation from another ecumenical body to seek dual affiliation with the UCC. In these cases, the congregation will maintain full standing with its original denomination, while also meeting the covenantal expectations for standing in the UCC through the Association and/or Conference.



SUPPORT

Associations and Conferences offer tangible support to Local Churches in a variety of ways, such as providing tools for healthy and vital ministry and serving as conversation partners for ongoing discernment in Local Churches. Association and Conference staff may also be able to help the Local Church discern how to most faithfully live into the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches in their context, as well as to connect Local Churches with specialists to analyze and evaluate various legal and fiduciary policies.

An Association's ministry of support also includes these processes:

LOCAL CHURCH SELF-ASSESSMENT

- **A FOUNDATIONAL STANDING REQUIREMENT** is for a Local Church to engage in ongoing assessment of its ministry. A regular review and assessment of a congregation's full ministry fosters transparency, encourages growth, and nurtures resilience. Revisiting the Marks for Faithful and Vital Local Churches as well as the expectations of the Congregational Code for Local Churches are suggested as the foundation of self-assessment. Each Local Church is encouraged to have a supportive, repeatable self-assessment process that documents shared learnings and goals within the congregation.
- **ASSOCIATION AND CONFERENCE STAFF** also have access to various congregational assessments that are adaptable to many contexts, and Local Churches are encouraged to reach out to Conference staff, the Committee on Ministry, or another designated Local Church support body for information and resources. Ideally, a Local Church communicates the learnings of its self-assessment with its Association and/or Conference; the Local Church may also discern that it would benefit from additional perspectives and may request a form of wider church support for its ministry as the result of a self-assessment.

SEARCH AND CALL SUPPORT

When a Local Church experiences a pastoral transition, church leadership is strongly encouraged to reach out to Conference staff for



guidance through the search and call process. The National Setting of the United Church of Christ provides three primary tools for the process of Search and Call, used with the support of the Conference:

- **A LOCAL CHURCH PROFILE TEMPLATE** to help congregations claim and convey their vision, calling, and diverse gifts for the discernment of candidates
- **THE UCC MINISTRY OPPORTUNITIES WEBSITE** to publicly list positions, and
- **VALIDATED UCC MINISTERIAL PROFILES** to share candidates' skills and ministry potential with Search Committees.

Access to the Local Church Profile portal is mediated with the assistance of Conference staff. The Short-Form Profile is intended for churches that are either seeking to call someone for a short-term vacancy of less than six months, an interim pastor, or a part-time settled pastor working half-time or less. Once the Local Church completes the Local Church Profile, Conference staff validates the Profile and creates a post on the UCC Ministry Opportunities website. That posting remains until the position has been filled or the Local Church asks for the posting to be withdrawn because more time is needed for continued discernment. All pastoral vacancies in the United Church of Christ must be published on the UCC Ministry Opportunities website.

A Local Church can expect to receive ministerial profiles from any and all United Church of Christ ministerial candidates who desire to be considered for that position. Similarly, an authorized minister in good standing in the United Church of Christ has the right to have their ministerial profile be sent to any Local Church position for which they would like to be considered.

It is expected that any minister serving in a Local Church of the United Church of Christ holds a form of ministerial standing in the United Church of Christ or will take the necessary steps to gain this standing within six months of being called or hired. This standing may include:

- **ORDAINED MINISTERIAL STANDING**
- **ORDAINED MINISTERIAL PARTNER STANDING** (for ministers ordained in the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ] or the United Church of Canada)



- **DUAL STANDING** (for ministers ordained in other traditions),
or
- **LAY MINISTERIAL STANDING** (temporary ministerial
authorization for lay ministers engaged in pastoral ministry).

SITUATIONAL AND LOCAL CHURCH SUPPORT CONSULTATIONS

Conflict and disagreements are a part of living in a community. Even though discord can feel uncomfortable, it can also be a sign of vitality, inviting a community to hear diverse voices, to grow, and to change. Each Local Church should have practices and structures in place to address conflict as it occurs, relying on faith to help all partners respond with maturity, build healthy relationships, and seek a fresh way forward. These practices might be included in a Local Church's policies or its Relational Covenant. A Local Church may also request support from the Conference to find a trained mediator to facilitate a conflict resolution or restorative justice process. This will enable the Local Church to build capacity to resolve conflicts themselves in healthy and faithful ways.

When there is conflict within the Local Church that is beyond the ability of the congregation to navigate, it is appropriate for Local Church leadership or pastoral leadership to request a Situational or a Local Church Support Consultation from the Association and/or Conference.

When conflict involves an authorized minister but does not suggest or warrant a Ministerial Fitness Review, the Association's Committee on Ministry can offer a **Situational Support Consultation**. Members of the Committee on Ministry will meet with the parties involved seeking mutually agreeable options for resolving the situation.

In other experiences of conflict, a Local Church can request a **Local Church Support Consultation** from the Association and/or Conference. A Local Church Support Consultation is a series of facilitated conversations that seek to examine the issues that are contributing to the conflict, identify those involved in these issues, and discern faithful and just resolutions to the conflict.



ACCOUNTABILITY

Participation in covenantal relationship requires mutual accountability. Local Churches demonstrate accountability through their commitment to the faithful and ethical behavior outlined in Congregational Code. These processes foster accountability among Local Churches, their Associations, and the wider United Church of Christ.

ANNUAL REPORT FORM

Each year, the National Setting requests information from each Local Church about its participation, membership, staffing, budget, and giving in a Request for Annual Church Data. This information is vital for the United Church of Christ because it offers a critical lens into the trends of the denomination over time, ensures that the denomination shares accurate data with its members and partners, and enables Conferences to appropriately resource Local Churches and authorized ministers.

Timely completion of this annual report by a representative of the Local Church is encouraged and expected. If a Local Church has difficulty completing this report for any reason, a Local Church representative is encouraged to reach out to Association and/or Conference staff for assistance and guidance in completing these forms.

LOCAL CHURCH STANDING REVIEW PROCESS

There are times in any church's life when conflict, practices, or behaviors disrupt the ministry of the congregation. In many cases, challenges within congregational life can be resolved internally or through the use of a Local Church Support Consultation as described above. However, when chronic conflicts, practices, or behaviors of a Local Church violate the ethical expectations as outlined by the Congregational Code for Local Churches or inhibit an ongoing covenantal relationship with its Association, a Local Church Standing Review may be appropriate.

This review process, conducted by an Association-appointed Oversight Team, seeks to address significant concerns about a Local Church's conduct with respect to its members, its pastoral leadership, and/or other expressions of the church. The process is designed to



determine the merit of the concern(s) raised, to create space for all relevant parties to share their perspective about the concern(s), and to find a pathway for the Local Church toward health and alignment with the Congregational Code for Local Churches.

RECORD KEEPING

Once a Local Church Profile exists, the Conference is responsible for communicating any changes regarding the Local Church's scheduling to the National Setting. As such, it is recommended the Conference carefully archive at least:

- **FOUNDING DOCUMENTS**, including the Local Church's Constitution and Bylaws
- **DOCUMENTS RECOGNIZING THE AFFILIATION** of a Local Church into the United Church of Christ
- **DOCUMENTS RECOGNIZING A LOCAL CHURCH'S STANDING** in an Association
- **DOCUMENTS RESULTING** from a Local Church Support Consultation
- **DOCUMENTS RESULTING** from a Standing Review Process

In addition, the Conference may wish to keep for its own sake:

- **DOCUMENTS RELATED** to the purchase, significant renovation or repair, rental, or sale of a Local Church building
- **DOCUMENTATION OF GROUPS** beyond the Local Church that use the Local Church building
- **ADDITIONAL LOCAL CHURCH RECORDS** the Conference archives for the sake of its ongoing ministry and witness.

PROCESSES FOR LOCAL CHURCH STANDING, SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

LOCAL CHURCH AFFILIATION PROCESS

This is a guide from which each Association or Conference acting as an Association can create a process that best serves their context and Local Churches.



For those exploring a sense of call to be a Local Church within the United Church of Christ, the first place to engage that call and listen for feedback is within the faith community. This early **discernment process** within a faith community centers on its mission, vision, purpose, and identity, and puts those commitments in conversation with what it means to be a Local Church in the United Church of Christ. Leaders of the faith community are encouraged to be in contact with the staff and/or representatives of the Conference and Association in which they are geographically located for support and resources as they engage in this internal discernment.

A faith community's discernment should consider the following documents:

- UCC *Statement of Faith*
- Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches
- Congregational Code for Local Churches
- UCC *Constitution and Bylaws*
- UCC *Manual on Ministry* (2018).

If a faith community is considering affiliation with the United Church of Christ as well as another denomination, there are special considerations of decision-making.

Following a time of discernment, a faith community's leadership or governing body makes a **Yes** or **No** decision to request a meeting with the Association for its consideration to formally enter Local Church Standing Discernment process.

1. INITIAL MEETING WITH THE ASSOCIATION/CONFERENCE

This work is to be done by the Association/Conference acting as an Association, or the designated body within the Association/Conference, such as a Committee on Ministry. Because there may be varied practices, documents will refer to the "Designated Body."

Upon receipt of the letter of intent from the faith community, the Designated Body within the Association/Conference schedules an initial meeting with the faith community partners. Any representatives from the faith community that have been a part of



UCC STATEMENT OF FAITH



UCC CONSTITUTION
AND BYLAWS



UCC MANUAL ON
MINISTRY



the discernment process are encouraged to attend and contribute to the meeting. Additional documentation may be required by the Designated Body before an initial meeting. Such documentation may include:

- **Statement** of the faith community's historical and spiritual journey
- **Reflection** on the faith community's understanding of their call to be in covenant with the United Church of Christ
- **The faith community's** mission, vision, purpose, and values
- **Description** of the faith community's life of faith
- **Description** of how the community of faith is organized, including documentation of institutional formation (Constitution, Bylaws, etc.)
- **Reflection** on the resonance of the United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith with the faith community
- **Other requirements** as established by a Designated Body for all of its applicants to the Congregational Standing process.

As appropriate, a cultural consultant may be invited to this and future meetings with the faith community. A cultural consultant is particularly recommended to help observe clear differences in cultural norms when those cultural norms are not already a majority in the Association's leadership. Conference staff can recommend trained cultural consultants or other conversation partners.

The purpose of this initial meeting is to:

- **Offer** hospitality to the faith community
- **Listen** prayerfully to the movement of the Spirit
- **Engage** in conversation about the faith community's spiritual journey and call
- **Outline** expectations of the process, and
- **Clarify** any questions from the faith community and/or the Designated Body.



Following the meeting, the Designated Body votes whether to accept the faith community into the Local Church Standing Discernment process for further exploration of a potential covenant with the UCC. The Designated Body communicates this decision in a timely manner to the faith community.

- **YES.** If the Designated Body's decision is Yes to receive the Local Church as a Church in Discernment at this point, the Designated Body will communicate to the Conference that there is a Local Church in Discernment, and the Conference will notify the National Setting.
- **NO, BUT ...** If the Designated Body's decision is No, but ..., then, the Designated Body articulates the conditions necessary for the faith community to meet before reconsidering their application.
- **NO.** If the Designated Body's decision is No, the discernment process toward Local Church Standing ends here.

The Designated Body assigns an Authorized Minister with United Church of Christ Ministerial Standing in the Association/Conference as a Local Church Discernment Advisor. The Advisor serves as a liaison between the Designated Body and the faith community's leadership team to help the faith community prepare for the next steps of the Local Church Standing Discernment process and to assist in networking them to the appropriate resources in the Association, Conference, and National Setting of the United Church of Christ. The Advisor is present to accompany, support, and answer questions about United Church of Christ culture and polity.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF A FORMATION PLAN

A preparation and formation plan is developed for the Local Church in Discernment by the Designated Body based on the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches and in relation to the Designated Body's assessment of the faith community's letter of request and any requested supplemental materials. While the Association/Conference should standardize any requirements of the Local Church Standing Discernment process (including the review of foundational documents and the completion of a Local Church Profile), formation



plans are individualized to each discerning faith community. These plans may take multiple paths based on the nature of the faith community, available options for supporting a faith community in their development, and needs of the United Church of Christ.

Elements of preparation and formation plans may include some or all of the following:

- **Completion** of a study in United Church of Christ history, polity, and theology as a faith community
- **Demonstration** of specified outcomes in the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches
- **Implementation** of practices described by the Congregational Code for Local Churches
- **Engagement** with the wider church, such as participation in Association annual meetings, Conference committees, General Synod, etc.

With the establishment of a formation plan, the faith community continues its work of discernment and formation internally. The pace and progression are set by the faith community and supported by the Local Church Standing Advisor.

3. FOUNDATIONAL DOCUMENTS CREATED, REVIEWED, AND/OR REVISED

A Local Church in Discernment may need support in creating, reviewing, or revising their foundational documents before consideration for Local Church Standing. Laws vary by state, so consulting a lawyer who is familiar with state laws applicable to churches is highly recommended to advise a Local Church in Discernment of what needs to be included in these documents. All are encouraged to consult the Governance section of the Manual on Local Church to support this step of the process.

If a Local Church in Discernment is considering affiliating with the United Church of Christ alongside another denomination(s), it will benefit from an intentional time to examine its Constitution and Bylaws, governance structures, and formal documentation regarding legal recognition to determine what areas of revision are appropriate



or necessary to reflect multiple affiliations. Consultation with the Conference Minister as well as the judicatory minister from the other denomination(s) is vital during this step so that the bylaws speak to areas of community life where politics of multiple denominations may conflict.

A Local Church in Discernment is encouraged to share their foundational documents with the Designated Body for feedback and conversation.

4. ONGOING PREPARATION, FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE LOCAL CHURCH PROFILE

Following the finalization of its foundational documents, a Local Church in Discernment begins to build a Local Church Profile. Training and consultation are available from the Association and/or Conference staff. The faith community will discern and complete the following three sections of the Local Church Profile:

- **Who** we are now
- **Who** is our neighbor
- **Who** is God calling us to become.

Responding to these three sections is a task intended to help introduce a Local Church in Discernment to denominational tools used for Search and Call, as well as to serve as a platform for the Local Church in Discernment to articulate its sense of call, identity, and theological foundation to the Designated Body.

Though vital at the time a church is engaged with searching for a new pastor, it is recommended that these three sections of the Local Church Profile are revisited and updated by a Local Church every three-to-five years, regardless of whether a church engages in search and call, as an act of ongoing discernment within the Local Church.

5. PERIODIC DISCERNMENT REVIEWS

Local Churches in Discernment meet periodically with their Designated Body, to listen together to God's call for their respective ministries and shared relationship, to review progress of the formation plan, to adjust the plan if needed, and to determine next steps in the discernment process. A Periodic Discernment



Review is recommended every six months but should occur at least annually. A Periodic Discernment Review is an opportunity for both discernment and assessment. Partners in the discernment process—such as representatives from the faith community, Local Church Standing Advisors, and others—may be encouraged to contribute to this review.

Following the periodic review, the Designated Body prayerfully makes one of the following decisions:

- **YES.** The Designated Body affirms the faith community's continuation as a Local Church in Discernment.
- **NO, BUT ...** The Designated Body terminates the faith community's continuation as a Local Church in Discernment due to lack of progress and/or substantial need for growth, with constructive feedback offered to support the community of faith.
- **NO.** The Designated Body determines that the faith community is not called to or suited for ministry as a Local Church in covenant with the United Church of Christ. The Local Church in Discernment process ends here.

All decisions that result from the Periodic Discernment Review should be communicated in writing and added to the faith community's Association and/or Conference file. If the Local Church Standing Discernment process is terminated, the results are to be reported to the Conference, and the Conference will communicate that with the National Setting.

6. FINAL REVIEW

Once the Designated Body assesses that the Local Church in Discernment has completed its formation plan, the faith community's foundational documents are in order, and the practices of the faith community have been demonstrated as consistent with the expectations of a Local Church in the United Church of Christ, the faith community submits a copy of its foundational documents and Local Church Profile in preparation for a Final Review.



In an atmosphere of prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit, the Designated Body holds the Final Review and discusses with the Local Church in Discernment its sense of call and journey of preparation, reflecting together on the Local Church Profile alongside the Marks for Faithful and Vital Local Churches. Following the Final Review, the Designated Body decides if it is time to move from discernment to recommendation of Local Church Standing.

Options for this decision are:

- **YES.** The Designated Body recommends the faith community be granted Local Church Standing in the United Church of Christ. This recommendation is communicated to members and Local Churches of the Association or Conference acting as an Association, along with the scheduled date for the meeting of the Association or Conference acting as an Association to vote on Local Church Standing.
- **NO.** The Designated Body does not recommend the faith community be granted Local Church Standing in the United Church of Christ and concludes that its process of discernment is complete with this decision. Local Church Standing Discernment is terminated.

All decisions are communicated to the Local Church in Discernment and to the Conference in writing. The Conference communicates this decision to the National Setting.

7. ASSOCIATION/CONFERENCE VOTE ON LOCAL CHURCH STANDING

Local Church Standing must be conferred by the Association or Conference acting as an Association by vote at a regular meeting or a special meeting called for that purpose. At the time a meeting is set, the Local Church Profile is shared with Association/Conference meeting delegates. That will serve as the basis for conversation and discernment prior to a vote to confer Local Church Standing.

Following the vote, the Association/Conference communicates its decision with the Conference. The Conference informs the National Setting.

When an Association/Conference's vote is affirmative, celebration is encouraged! The Association/Conference may consider liturgies of



welcome for the new Local Church and appropriate gifts of welcome for the context.

When an Association/Conference's vote is not to grant standing, the Association or Conference acting as an Association has a duty to communicate this decision to the faith community, along with any reasons behind the decision. Local Church in Discernment designation is terminated at this time. An Association or Conference acting as an Association can communicate what needs to be accomplished by the faith community in order to reapply in the future.

8. LITURGICAL CELEBRATIONS

Following the affirmative vote of an Association or Conference acting as an Association to receive a new Local Church and the celebration within the Association or Conference acting as an Association, it is important for other settings of the church to offer its congratulations and best wishes for the Local Church. At the Conference annual meeting following the reception of a new Local Church, a liturgy and celebration of welcome should take place. Likewise, the Conference should communicate with the National Setting for the new Local Church to be included in a celebration at the next General Synod of the United Church of Christ.

LOCAL CHURCH DISAFFILIATION PROCESS

This is a guide from which each Association or Conference acting as an Association can create a process that best serves their context and Local Churches.

Disaffiliation is to be undertaken seriously and with deep discernment over time. All partners in the covenant, from members of the Local Church, representatives of the Association or Conference acting as an Association where the Local Church holds standing, and representatives from other denominational bodies if the church is multiply affiliated, must be given opportunities to participate in conversation and discernment around these matters to ensure the Local Church is making a faithful, informed decision.

SEASON OF DISCERNMENT

When a Local Church begins to consider disaffiliation, it begins with a period of intentional discernment related to its continued



affiliation with the United Church of Christ. Through prayer and honest conversation, the Local Church engages with other ministerial partners to earnestly seek God's will for the Local Church. Such conversations include Local Church elected leadership, members of the Local Church, Association and/or Conference staff, other key stakeholders, and representatives from other denominational bodies if the Local Church is multiply affiliated.

A faith community's discernment should consider the following documents:

- ◆ **United Church of Christ Statement of Faith**
- ◆ **Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches**
- ◆ **Congregational Code for Local Churches**
- ◆ **United Church of Christ Constitution and Bylaws**
- ◆ **United Church of Christ Manual on Ministry (2018).**

Additionally, there are specific questions for the Local Church to address. Those include, but are not limited to:

- **ARE THERE CURRENT CONFLICTS** with the Association, Conference, or other settings of the United Church of Christ?
- **WHAT HAVE WE DONE** to address these conflicts? What has been the result?
- **DO WE SEE PATHWAYS** toward continuing a relationship with the United Church of Christ?
- **WHAT WILL CHANGE** if we disaffiliate with the United Church of Christ?
- **WHAT IMPACT** will disaffiliation have on the ministerial standing of our pastor(s)?
- **HAVE WE CONSIDERED** the changes necessary to insurance, search and call, tax-exemption, and other legal and economic obligations we carry as a Local Church if we disaffiliate with the United Church of Christ ?



CONVERSATION WITH ECUMENICAL PARTNERS

When a Local Church is affiliated with more than one denomination, judicatory representatives from any and all denominations are invited into conversation about the implications of a Local Church disaffiliation from the United Church of Christ. These conversations should engage the same kinds of questions, but may also include the following:

- **HOW WILL** our ecumenical witness be impacted by disaffiliation?
- **WHAT IMPACTS** will this have on our shared ministries?

It is the responsibility of the Conference staff to communicate with appropriate regional judicatory leaders once it learns that a Local Church is considering disaffiliation from the United Church of Christ.

LOCAL CHURCH VOTE TO DISAFFILIATE

When a Local Church has faithfully discerned that it wishes to disaffiliate from the United Church of Christ, a congregational meeting is called in alignment with the Local Church Constitution and/or Bylaws. Information regarding the circumstances that have led to this vote, including the discernment process undertaken by the Local Church, are shared at this meeting. Representatives of the Association and/or Conference may be invited to share their perspective on the relationship between the Local Church and wider expressions of the United Church of Christ.

The Local Church then votes on disaffiliation from the United Church of Christ in accordance with its Constitution and/or Bylaws.

FOLLOW-UP

Following a vote to disaffiliate from the United Church of Christ, Local Church leaders promptly send a letter on church letterhead to the Association or Conference acting as an Association informing them of the date of this decision, the reasons for it, the final vote, and any additional information the Local Church wishes to share. This letter is signed by the moderator, consistory president, or head of



the governing board and by ministerial leadership. The Local Church also notifies its insurance provider that it is no longer affiliated with the United Church of Christ.

If appropriate, the Local Church and representatives from the Association and/or Conference may choose to participate in a ritual of release. Such a ritual names the gifts that have been brought through the mutual ministry of the Local Church and the United Church of Christ, seeks and offers forgiveness for failures, and releases each other to God's care in the future.

If the pastoral leadership of the Local Church holds Ordained Ministerial Standing or Lay Ministerial Standing in the United Church of Christ, they will need to transfer their membership to a different Local Church of the United Church of Christ to maintain standing. If the pastoral leadership holds Dual Standing or Ordained Ministerial Partner Standing originating outside of the UCC, that standing will be terminated upon the vote to disaffiliate from the United Church of Christ.

ASSOCIATION/CONFERENCE VOTE ACKNOWLEDGING DISAFFILIATION

The disaffiliation of a Local Church must be acknowledged by the Association or Conference acting as an Association by vote at a regular meeting or a special meeting called for that purpose. At the time a meeting is set, the Local Church's decision is shared with meeting delegates. That will serve as the basis for a vote of acknowledgment to be recorded in the minutes. If it is possible to offer a prayer of blessing with representatives of the congregation, it is suggested that this be done at the time of the vote. If it is not possible to pray together, the Association/Conference is encouraged to lift the Local Church in prayer in its absence and to commend it to God's continuing care.

This information is promptly communicated with the Conference, which updates the UCC Database and Directories to reflect the disaffiliation of the Local Church.



RE-AFFILIATION

Should a Local Church later discern that they wish to re-covenant with the United Church of Christ, they always have that opportunity through the process of affiliation as articulated in the Manual on Local Church.

SITUATIONAL OR LOCAL CHURCH SUPPORT CONSULTATION

This is a guide from which each Association or Conference acting as an Association can create a process that best serves their context and Local Churches.

The Association or Conference acting as an Association designates and trains representatives to facilitate these conversations. Those facilitators may be members of a Committee on Ministry or other appropriate Designated Body, or they may be a part of a specially-created body within the Association/Conference tasked with the implementation of Local Church Support Consultations.

A Local Church Support Consultation meeting includes the representatives from the Association/Conference meeting with individuals and/or small groups involving clergy and/or elected lay leaders of a Local Church, and may include others involved in the conflict. Some grounding values and practices are named to frame the time together, and participants are asked to abide by those norms during the meeting. During this meeting, three questions are suggested:

- **WHO IS IN THE ROOM**, and what are their roles in the Local Church and the matter at hand?
- **WHAT IS THEIR UNDERSTANDING** of the issue or conflict that has given rise to this Local Church Support Consultation?
- **WHAT WOULD** a just and faithful resolution to this matter look like to this individual?

All those who have relevant information related to the issue or conflict are invited into this process. Trained Association/Conference members facilitate these conversations, take significant notes, and share those notes with interviewees for their review and edits. If appropriate, subsequent meetings may be appropriate to ensure



that all perspectives are shared. Following all of the interviews, the representatives from the Association/Conference compile a report that includes all the interview summaries, an assessment of the conflict, and recommendations for next steps. The representatives then meet with Local Church elected and pastoral leadership to share and interpret their report.

The outcome of a Local Church Support Consultation may be:

- **ONGOING SUPPORT** from the Designated Body of the Association or Conference acting as an Association
- **THE LOCAL CHURCH ESTABLISHING** a relationship with a coach or consultant to help the Local Church address a specific matter, and/or
- **CLEAR PROGRAMMATIC SUGGESTIONS** for decision-making going forward.

While a Local Church Support Consultation may raise issues that take a long time to fully address, it is appropriate for Association/Conference representatives and representatives from the Local Church to work together to craft a plan to address the concerns raised, with checkpoints along the way to celebrate progress, to offer course-correction when needed, and to celebrate the just and faithful resolution of the matter at hand.

If information emerges that raises a concern about the ethical behavior of the Local Church, a Local Church Support Consultation may need to transition to a **Local Church Standing Review Process**. Should the Local Church Support Consultation uncover questions or concerns about ethical behavior on the part of an authorized minister, that must be referred to the Committee on Ministry for a potential Fitness Review on the part of the minister.

Information about the Local Church Support Consultation is documented in Association/Conference files and reported to the Conference.

LOCAL CHURCH STANDING REVIEW PROCESS

This is a guide from which each Association or Conference acting as an Association can create a process that best serves their context and Local Churches.



There are times in any church's life when conflict, practices, or behaviors disrupt the ministry of the congregation. In many cases, challenges within a congregation's life can be resolved internally or through a Situational or Local Church Support Consultation. However, when chronic conflicts, practices, or behaviors of a Local Church violate the ethical expectations as outlined by the Congregational Code for Local Churches or inhibit ongoing covenantal relationship with its Association, a Local Church Standing Review may be appropriate.

This review process, conducted by an Oversight Team trained and appointed by an Association seeks to faithfully address significant concerns about a Local Church's conduct with respect to its members, its pastoral leadership, and/or other expressions of the Local Church's covenantal partners. The process is designed to determine the merit of the concern(s) raised, to create space for all relevant parties to share their perspective about the concern(s), and to find a pathway for the Local Church toward health and alignment with the Congregational Code for Local Churches.

The Local Church Standing Review is an ecclesiastical process concerned with discerning and facilitating the covenantal relationship between the Local Church and other covenantal partners. It may be determined that some situations are the result of unethical or illegal behavior or patterns within the Local Church and require additional accountability, such as in the case of employment concerns and financial misconduct.

The goal of a Local Church Standing Review is for increased congregational health and vitality, along with a deeper connection with the United Church of Christ in its various expressions. For this reason, a Local Church is strongly encouraged to participate fully in any Local Church Standing Review process. Every effort should be made for the Oversight Team to communicate with Local Church leaders to hear their concerns, to seek to create pathways towards a supportive and accountable covenantal relationship, and to seek reconciliation. Steps include:

1. A CONCERN IS RAISED.

Concerns may arise from several places, including but not limited to:



- Congregational leadership
- Pastoral leadership
 - ◆ A member of a congregation
 - ◆ A member of the Association
 - ◆ A Conference leader.

The concern must clearly articulate the part(s) of the Congregational Code for Local Churches that are implicated in the actions of the congregation and must be submitted in writing to the Conference Minister.

2. AN OVERSIGHT TEAM IS ACTIVATED.

The Conference Minister gives the written concern to an appointed Oversight Team, which bears responsibility for investigating the concern and determining appropriate pathways forward. The Oversight Team may be the Committee on Ministry (or a subcommittee of the Committee on Ministry), the Association Board of Directors, or another appointed group.

The Oversight Team gathers to read the letter of concern. Using the Congregational Code and the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches, the Oversight Team determines if these concerns warrant a Local Church Standing Review, or if some other process is appropriate.

If more information is needed before the Oversight Team can faithfully discern a pathway forward, they work with Conference or Association staff to determine how to appropriately gather necessary information.

3. LOCAL CHURCH STANDING REVIEW BEGINS.

If the process moves to a Local Church Standing Review, the Oversight Team informs all stakeholders that a concern has been raised, and it is found to have merit.

Stakeholders include:

- The person or group who raised the concern



- The person or group harmed by the behavior
- Pastoral leadership
- Local Church elected officers, and
- Other leaders as identified by the Local Church.

Stakeholders are asked to participate fully, to honor the process of discernment and adjudication, and to honor the confidentiality of this process.

4. RESPONSE TEAM APPOINTED

A Response Team is appointed by the Oversight Team and/or Conference or Association staff to gather the additional information needed to discern faithful pathways forward. The Response Team consists of **Interview Team** members and **Process Guides**.

- **Interview Team** members are appointed to interview key stakeholders who have relevant, first-hand information about the concerns being raised. Interviews may be conducted in person or remotely, and one Interview Team member takes extensive notes.
- **Process Guides** are appointed to the key stakeholders. The role of a Process Guide is not to advocate or to adjudicate. They accompany and inform the key stakeholders about what to expect throughout the process. Process Guides work with the Oversight Team to communicate the steps of process and timelines, to answer questions about the process, and to convey questions to the Oversight Team. Each stakeholder group should have a different Process Guide.

5. INTERVIEW PROCESS AND FOLLOW-UP

Interviews are conducted with all key stakeholders, perhaps in several groups and/or individual interviews, depending on the nature of the concerns. The Interview Team takes extensive notes during each interview, and interviewees



have the opportunity to review those notes and offer any needed clarification. All interviews must include the name or names of the people interviewed; anonymous interviews are not permitted.

The notes of each interview are shaped into a comprehensive interview summary. Following all interviews, the key stakeholders have an opportunity to gather to read all the interview summaries and to offer responses to other interviews—sharing context if necessary and to build transparency in the process. If appropriate, this may be done in a discernment meeting with the Oversight Team and all stakeholders present at a mutually agreed-upon location, or it may be done at different times for different stakeholders. (In cases of abuse or criminal conduct, a discernment meeting is not recommended.)

6. WISDOM LEADERS CONSULTED

At any point in the discernment, the Oversight Team may consider conversation partners who can be brought in to offer a wider perspective. For example, a cultural consultant is particularly recommended to help observe clear differences in cultural norms when those attributes are not already a majority in the Oversight Team. Or, someone with specialized accounting training may be requested to help make sense of a complicated financial system in a Local Church. Conference staff can recommend trained cultural consultants or other conversation partners.

7. OVERSIGHT TEAM DISCERNS OUTCOME

Following the stakeholders' review of all the interview summaries, the Oversight Team meets to discern next steps of the Local Church Standing Review Process. A variety of outcomes are possible: Affirmation of Standing, Admonishment, Program of Growth, or Recommendation for Termination of Standing. This decision is communicated to Local Church elected and pastoral leadership, along with any supporting documentation related to a program of growth or the recommendation for termination of standing.



- **Affirmation of Standing.** The concern was not found to have merit, or the concerns did not relate to the UCC Congregational Code. No further action is required (though it may be appropriate to suggest a service of healing to help parties move forward).
- **Admonishment.** The concern had merit, but the congregation has already taken steps to address the concerns raised and are well on the pathway toward resolution.
- **Program of Growth.** The concern had merit, and the congregation needs to follow a program of growth to address or resolve the concerns raised within a specific timeline.
- **Recommendation for Termination of Standing.** The concern had merit and was found to be a serious violation of the Congregational Code for Local Churches. Further, the congregation is not acting in alignment with the Congregational Code for Local Churches, and it does not intend to act in covenant with the United Church of Christ. A congregation with terminated standing may no longer represent itself as a Local Church of the United Church of Christ. This action should be taken only after considerable attempts to invite the Local Church into faithful covenant with the Association/Conference. Recommendation for Termination of Standing may also result after a failed Program of Growth. After the recommendation, Termination of Standing must be decided by vote of a called meeting of the Association/Conference.

After a Local Church Standing Review Process has been completed the Association communicates the outcome to all stakeholders and the Conference Minister. This information is then documented in Association/ files and reported to the National Setting of the United Church of Christ.



PROGRAM OF GROWTH

A program of growth is a developmental plan to address the challenges illuminated in the Local Church Standing Review Process and to assist a Local Church on a pathway toward healing. A Program of Growth may vary from a few months to a few years, depending on the issue involved. A Program of Growth ideally includes:

- **DIRECTLY ADDRESSING** the concerns that were raised
- **AN OUTLINE OF AN EFFECTIVE PROGRAM** to address the concerns in a manner that is consistent with Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timebound, Inclusive, and Equitable (S.M.A.R.T.I.E.) goals
- **A RESOLUTION TIMELINE**, including various checkpoints for the Oversight Team to meet with the Local Church to assess progress, to connect with the Local Church, and to determine whether adjustments to the timeline are needed; and
- **A FINAL EVALUATION MEETING** where a decision will be made about resolution of the concern or the need for further steps.

A Program of Growth may also include specific educational trainings or desired outcomes, such as a behavioral covenant. The trainings may include attendance metrics in alignment with a certain percentage of the average worship attendance. During a Program of Growth, the Local Church continues to meet periodically with the Oversight Team for ongoing accountability and support.

When the Local Church has successfully completed its Program of Growth, the Oversight Team notifies the Association/Conference Designated Body and the Conference Minister. The Oversight Team also communicates to the Association/Conference Designated Body and Conference Minister if the timeline for the Program of Growth changes or if the Local Church has chosen not to engage the program or make sufficient progress.

TERMINATION OF LOCAL CHURCH STANDING

A Local Church is strongly encouraged to participate fully in any Local Church Standing Review process. Every effort should be



made for the Oversight Team to communicate with Local Church leaders to hear their concerns, to seek to create pathways toward a supportive and accountable covenantal relationship, and to seek reconciliation. If Local Church leaders are resistant to participating in this process, at least two members of the Oversight Team should request to speak with Local Church leaders and hear their concerns to try to understand better what issues have not been addressed that are causing blocks to continued participation. If the Local Church continues to refuse to participate in the process, the Oversight Team may recommend to the Association/Conference Designated Body that the standing of the church be terminated; this should be done only if every effort has been made to encourage participation in the covenantal processes.

An Association must vote to terminate the standing of a Local Church. If the Oversight Team recommends termination of Local Church Standing, notification may include an invitation to the Local Church to resume dialogue, seek reconciliation, and return to a covenantal relationship prior to the Association's vote to terminate standing. This business is brought to the Association after all avenues for participation in the Local Church Standing Review Process have been exhausted. In this case, a presentation to the Association is made prior to a vote. Should the Association vote to terminate the standing of the Local Church, provisions are made to assist the Local Church in the transition of their standing out of the United Church of Christ. If there is a mutual decision between the Local Church and the Association to part ways, the Association will offer to attend a worship service at the Local Church to participate in a ritual of release and blessings for both the Local Church and the Association and United Church of Christ.

Termination of the standing of a Local Church is not done lightly, and the church has the opportunity to decide to re-covenant with the United Church of Christ through the process of affiliation as articulated in the Manual on Local Church.



6 Resources

THE MANUAL ON LOCAL CHURCH RESOURCES is a living document that will be updated with regularity at ucc.org/manual-on-church. We have included just a few pieces here.



UCC MANUAL
ON LOCAL CHURCH

LITURGY FOR NEWLY AFFILIATING LOCAL CHURCH

GREETING

Conference Minister:

Greetings in the name of Jesus Christ,
the head of the church,
who is not without witness in any age.
Hear the prayer for wisdom made by the Apostle Paul
for the community at Ephesus:

Ephesians 3:13–21

Leader:

I bow my knees before Abba God,
From whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.
May God, out of the riches of divine glory,
strengthen you inwardly with power through the working of
the Spirit.
May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, so that you,
being rooted and grounded in love,
will be able to grasp fully
the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love,
and with God's holy ones, experience this love
that surpasses all understanding,
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.



People:

Glory be to the One, who, working in us, can accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine; to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

New Church Start Task Group Representative:

(addressing the Conference Minister)

The New Church Start Task Group, after carefully answering the call into being and formation of *(local church)*, respectfully requests that the *(conference)* receive *(local church)* as a church in formation, as led by *(pastor)*, according to the faith and order of the United Church of Christ.

RECOGNITION

Conference Minister:

(addressing church in formation)

The recognition of a church in formation is a way in which a Conference of the United Church of Christ affirms this church's call into covenant with the Body of Christ as expressed in our polity and process through prayerful discernment.

We celebrate the affirmation of the New Church Start Task Group to recommend you. We welcome you into beginning covenant on behalf of the Conference.

A congregation in covenantal partnership with the United Church of Christ is one that covenants to discern, with the members of the Committee on Ministry, its relationship to the United Church of Christ. They purposefully study the polity, history, and theology of the denomination, and participate in the life of the wider church, while bringing the unique and treasured identity of the congregation in the wholeness of its own becoming.

Your intention to enter full partnership with the United Church of Christ will require diligent and prayerful work. The denomination, through the Conference and Association, promises to assist you in your pilgrimage of learning so that when you request full communion, you will have been nurtured



by Christ's church in our midst. With you, we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the future opens before you, and we invite you to call on us wherever we may be helpful to you in your formation.

VOWS

Conference Minister

(addressing the church in formation)

As you enter into this covenant with this Conference, do you promise to seek guidance, to receive support, and to communicate regularly with your Committee on Ministry?

Church Representative:

We do, with God's help.

Conference Minister (addressing the Committee on Ministry):

As the authorizing body of ministry in the United Church of Christ, do you join in covenant with this newly recognized church in formation, on behalf of the wider church, vowing to encourage them along their formation and undergirding them with prayer, support and nurture?

Committee on Ministry Representative:

We do, with God's help.

Conference Minister (addressing the New Church Start Task Group):

As the advisors to a newly recognized community in care of the Conference, do you join in this covenant, pledging to support them in ways mutually agreeable to you as they continue the pilgrimage of becoming, to maintain regular contact with them, and to communicate regularly to the Conference of their journey?

New Church Start Task Group:

We do, with God's help.



Conference Minister (addressing the members of the Conference):

Do you, the members and delegates of this conference, affirm the covenant made this day with (*local church*)? Do you agree to offer encouragement and to sustain them in the continued preparation for full communion with the United Church of Christ, to pray for them, and to recognize them in special relationship with the conference?

Conference Members:

We do, with praise and thanksgiving to God.

PRAYER OF RECOGNITION:

Leader:

Let us pray, using a response from an early covenant from United Church of Christ history*:

Let us walk together in God's ways.

Let us walk together in God's ways!

Let this year be a year of mutual discernment, of hard questions, of listening together to the Still Speaking God:

Let us walk together in God's ways!

Let this year be a year of celebration, of growth in friendship and trust:

Let us walk together in God's ways!

Let this year be a year of mission, working together for a Just World for All:

Let us walk together in God's ways!

Holy One, you call us into this year of grace to seek your desire for our lives and work together.

Bless our journey

with insight and wisdom;

surprise us on the way with energy and joy.

Let us know that in this process you are with us,

Renewing your church to be a blessing in the world.

In the name of Jesus, our Companion on the Way, we pray:

Amen!



DECLARATION:

Conference Minister:

In the name of Jesus Christ, and on behalf of the (*conference*) of the United Church of Christ, I declare that (*church*) is a church in formation and covenantal relationship with the Body of Christ as expressed in the United Church of Christ.

All:

Thanks be to God!

(* *Response is adapted from the Salem Covenant, 1629.*)



RITUAL OF RELEASE FOR A LOCAL CHURCH LEAVING THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

This ritual is intended for use during an Association or Conference gathering.

Outline

- Introduction
- Recognition of the End
- Acknowledging the Grief of Separation
- Words of Release

Introduction

Association/Conference Minister:

The church recognizes that change is our constant. People gather in community with one another and the wider church. Those connections lend support, accountability, and connection. There are times in the life of the faith community when the covenantal claims of belonging in the United Church of Christ are no longer compatible with the ministry of a Local Church. In this ritual of farewell, we recognize the autonomy of the Local Church to make that determination, honor our shared history, and release them from standing in the (*Association*) of the (*Conference*) of the United Church of Christ.

Recognition of the End

(*Name of Local Church*), after prayerful discernment, has decided to disassociate from the United Church of Christ in all settings. We give thanks for their ministry even as we mourn the severing of the covenantal relationship. We pray for (*Local Church*) as they continue as a faith community apart from the United Church of Christ. Further, we reaffirm our commitment to unity in the body of Christ.

Ephesians 4:1–6

As the Apostle Paul said,

I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity



of the Spirit in the bond of peace: there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,

One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Acknowledging the Grief of Separation

As a United and Uniting Church, we recognize unity and union to be foundational to our ethos as a gathered body. We mourn the loss of this Local Church from our Association/Conference. We pray that we may realize the hope and expectation of Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one." We lament that our efforts at reconciliation proved insufficient for the present moment even as we hope that seeds for reconnection may be planted in God's realm, which has no end.

Words of Release

Association/Conference Minister:

After prayerful discernment and due process, I submit (*local church*) to be released from standing in the (*association*) of the (*conference*) of the United Church of Christ effective (*date*)

Do you, the members of (*association/conference*), release (*local church*) from standing in the (*association*) of the (*conference*) of the United Church of Christ?

Association Members:

We do, with the help of God.

Prayer

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

Gracious God, even as we lament this separation in your body, we trust in the power of healing and new life in Christ. May wounds be healed, brokenness be repaired, and despair be lifted. May we extend the grace we long to receive, and may we receive the peace we need to forge forward with renewed commitment to covenant and your kin-dom. Give us the capacity to hope for a good future as we journey forward on our distinct paths. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.



GLOSSARY



UCC CONSTITUTION
AND BYLAWS

AFFILIATION/AFFILIATE MEMBERSHIP

Some congregations welcome individuals to be part of the fellowship without the full privileges and responsibilities of membership. Examples include a non-Christian spouse of a member, a military member on assignment away from their home congregation, or college students who seek a church where they are in school but want to maintain membership in their home congregation.

AFFIRMATION/REAFFIRMATION OF FAITH (See also *Confirmation, Profession of Faith, Transfer of Membership*)

When an individual expressing a desire to become a member of a Local Church has previously been baptized (and usually confirmed) but does not have active membership in a congregation, many United Church of Christ congregations will encourage them to affirm (or reaffirm) their faith as part of the membership process. This might be done with the welcoming congregation in a litany renewing baptismal vows or in conversation with the pastor or board/team responsible for receiving new members.

Association (*Article IX, Paragraphs 44–51 of the [Constitution](#); Article II paragraphs 166–175 of the [Bylaws](#)*)

An **Association** is a geographically defined body of the United Church of Christ made up of the Local Churches and authorized ministers in the area.

Associations have the responsibility to assess the fitness of candidates for authorized ministry and to hold authorized ministers accountable to the standards for good standing as defined by the Committee on Ministry of the Association in accord with the *Manual on Ministry* of the United Church of Christ.

Local Churches hold standing in the Association, which has the responsibility to welcome new Local Churches after a period of discernment as well as to hold Local Churches accountable to the standards for membership within the UCC. This manual sets out suggested processes for receiving Local Churches as well as processes of support and accountability for Local Churches with standing.



AUTONOMY (*Article 2, Paragraph 18 of the Constitution*)

Autonomy is one aspect of relationship within the UCC: the Local Church is at all times able to make its own decisions about organization, worship, pastoral leadership, membership, property ownership and disposition, and voluntary membership in the UCC. This is the creative embodiment/incarnation and expression of our covenant and God's love in the context of a Local Church.

AUTHORIZED MINISTER (*Article IV of the Constitution, Article I of the Bylaws*)

An **authorized minister** of the United Church of Christ is someone who has been examined and deemed fit for service to the Local Church by an Association or Conference acting as an Association. Types of authorization include ordination, licensure, and "ordained pending call," a status reserved for Members in Discernment (MIDs) who have completed their path to authorization except for receiving a call to which they can be licensed or ordained. MIDs who are seeking ordination are often licensed to serve their calling Local Church while the planning of their ordination is underway.

BYLAWS (*Local Church Bylaws Information*)

A *Bylaws* document serves as the organizing template for Local Churches, Associations, Conferences, and the denomination. This document should adhere to state requirements for non-profit organizations and may include (depending on state requirements) the titles and duties of officers; the procedure for electing officers and governing board members as well as filling vacancies; a schedule for meetings of the governing board and the general membership, including whether or not virtual participation is allowed; conditions of membership and dismissal of members; terms for the dissolution of the organization and distribution of its assets without benefit to individuals; provisions for voting, including by proxy; definitions of conflict of interest; and indemnification.

COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY (COM)/CHURCH AND MINISTRY COMMITTEE (CMC)

The various names in use for the body within an Association (or a Conference acting as an Association) that holds mutual



discernment responsibility with candidates for authorized ministry and responsibility to hold **Authorized Ministers** accountable to the requirements for standing in the Association.

Some of these committees are divided or named separately according to need and tradition, with one part focused on the discernment process with authorized ministry candidates and the other on authorized ministers with standing.

COMMUNITY

In the context of the UCC, **community** is a gathering of people united in purpose to worship, love their neighbors, and build the just world proclaimed by the Prophets and by Jesus Christ. This could be a Local Church, an Association, a Conference, or the entire denomination, as these are all bound together in covenant to do this work, but it often refers to a Local Church. Local Churches have **autonomy** and are encouraged to do the work of justice in ways appropriate to their specific, individual contexts.

CONFERENCE (*Article IX, Paragraphs 52–57 of the Constitution, Article II, Paragraphs 176–186 of the Bylaws*)

A **Conference** is geographically defined and includes the Local Churches, Associations, and authorized ministers within those boundaries. Conferences may also act as an Association with the rights and responsibilities of that body.

The exception to the geographic definition is the Calvin Synod.

CONFIRMATION (*See also Affirmation/Reaffirmation of Faith, Profession of Faith, Transfer of Membership*)

Confirmation is the act of an individual's affirming the promises that were made by others on their behalf at their baptism, usually as an infant or small child or, on occasion, as a child old enough to understand the baptismal covenant promises but not yet old enough to assume full membership responsibilities in a congregation. This is separate from but often linked to the mutual discernment of adolescent individuals to join and congregations to accept those individuals into membership of a congregation as defined by that



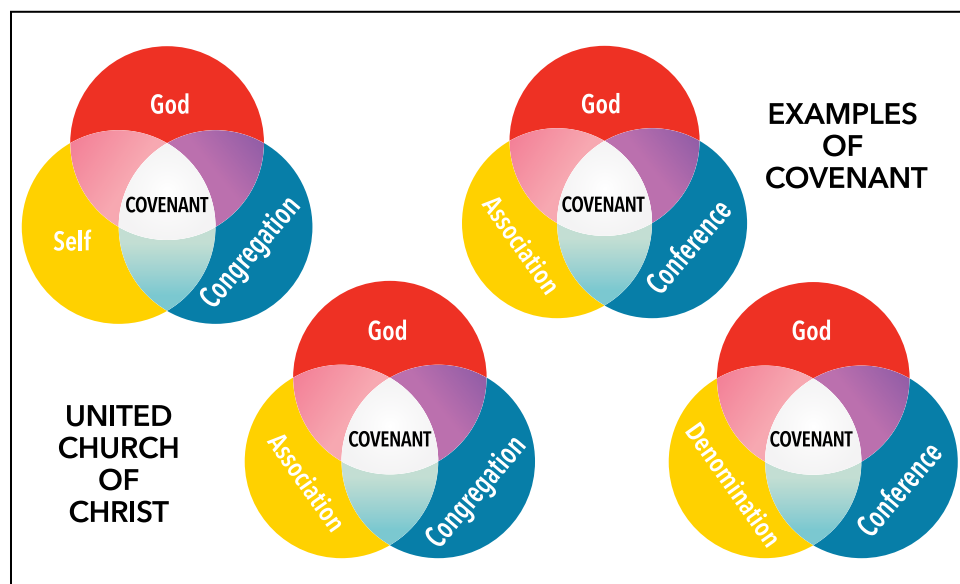
congregation. Some congregations encourage adults who are seeking membership to be confirmed if they were baptized as infants or young children and have not been confirmed in another congregation or denomination.

COVENANT (*Article III of the Constitution*)

A **covenant** is a solemn promise between God and humans for the flourishing of the world. Examples of covenant can be found throughout the Bible, beginning with Genesis 1 in which God calls all creation “very good” and gives human beings responsibility for its care. Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the Israelite people in the wilderness, and David and his descendants also have covenants with God. For the United Church of Christ, the covenant consists of God-initiated promises made to knit us together in relationship for the mutual flourishing of local and wider expressions of the United Church of Christ.

COVENANTAL PARTNER

A **covenantal partner** is any party in a relationship defined by a **covenant**. For example, spouses are covenantal partners in a marriage; in the UCC, each setting is a covenantal partner with every other setting, i.e., each Local Church is in covenant with its Association, which is in covenant with its Conference, which is in covenant with the whole denomination, so that ultimately each Local Church is a covenant partner with every other Local Church.



COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP

COVENANTED MINISTRIES (*Article XII of the Constitution, Article IV of the Bylaws*)

The **Covenanted Ministries** of the UCC are the programmatic arms of the UCC working at the national level to provide the settings of the denomination with resources and leadership in the areas of Local Church Ministries (LCM), Wider Church Ministries (WCM), and Justice and Witness Ministries (JWM). Each is separately incorporated with the **United Church of Christ Board** as its directors and holds the legacy and agency of prior organizations and offices within the UCC as appropriate to its specific charter.

- **JUSTICE AND WITNESS MINISTRIES** (*Article IV, Paragraphs 263–267 of the Bylaws*)

Justice and Witness Ministries (JWM) focuses on encouraging and supporting Local Churches to take direct action to make a difference in the world. JWM provides resources to Local Churches that nurture their ability to care for creation and for those who live on the margins of society due to oppression, economic circumstances, and discrimination of any kind—including racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality, disability, and mental illness. JWM also has a presence in Washington, D.C., where staff are active in the development of public policy.

- **LOCAL CHURCH MINISTRIES** (*Article IV, Paragraphs 258–262 of the Bylaws*)

As its name suggests, **Local Church Ministries** (LCM) works with and on behalf of Local Churches for the fulfillment of God's mission in the world. The Manual on Ministry and support of Church and Ministry Committees/Committees on Ministry are in the purview of the Ministerial Excellence, Support, and Authorization (MESA) team within LCM. This document and support of Local Churches are the purview of the FaithINFO team within LCM.



- **WIDER CHURCH MINISTRIES** (*Article IV, Paragraphs 268–272 of the Bylaws*)

The work of **Wider Church Ministries** (WCM) encompasses the Just World for All Covenants as well as the Common Global Missions Board in partnership with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Disaster ministries, health care, education, volunteer ministries, ecumenical partnerships, interfaith relationships, and social services domestically and internationally also make up a portion of the portfolio.

DISCERNMENT

Discernment is the spiritual practice of prayerfully considering choices available to a person, a family, or a faith community. The practice combines factual knowledge (the best available information); wisdom and guidance from trusted sources (such as Scripture, called leaders, and/or teams assembled for specific tasks of discernment, e.g., a pastoral search team); and intentional prayer with an open mind, heart, and soul to identify the best choice for the time. **Philippians 4:8 is a good model for the practice:** *Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things* (NRSV). The secular definition of “the ability to judge people and things well” (*Cambridge English Dictionary*) is another key element of the practice.

FAITHINFO

The **Faith Education, Innovation, and Formation (FaithInfo)** team supports and encourages Local Churches in their programmatic work as intergenerational communities of faith. Worship resources, webinars, grants and scholarships, and specialized support for new church starts, small and rural Local Churches, Local Churches of ethnic identity, and Local Churches of color all fall within the portfolio of the **FaithINFO** staff.

FIFTH STREAM

The “Fifth Stream” refers to the Afro-Christian Convention within the United Church of Christ’s broader historical narrative, recognizing



Black religious experience as a distinct and essential theological and ecclesial tradition alongside the denomination's founding streams. It affirms that the spiritual, cultural, and liberationist witness of Afro-Christian communities is not peripheral, but integral to the formation, identity, and ongoing covenantal life of the United Church of Christ.



GENERAL COUNSEL OF
THE UCC

GENERAL COUNSEL OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST (*Office of the General Counsel*)

The **Office of the General Counsel** assists all settings of the United Church of Christ with legal matters. Resources available include guidance for personnel policy development, copyright adherence, contracting, safe church/abuse policies, and tax exemption verification.

GENERAL SYNOD (*Article X of the Constitution, Article III of the Bylaws*)

General Synod is the periodic gathering of delegates from across the United Church of Christ where the church gathered discerns how God is calling the denomination and its many settings to work in the world during the next period of time. General Synod is responsible for directing the work of the United Church of Christ Board (UCCB), organizing groups to do the work of the church as needed, calling and electing the Officers of the UCC, electing certain members of the UCCB, maintaining a national headquarters office and a treasury, working with ecumenical and interfaith partners, exploring opportunities for Christian unity, and amending the Constitution and Bylaws of the UCC as required to comply with actions of Synod.

GOVERNING BOARD

In Local Churches, the **Governing Board** is the leadership elected to conduct the business of the congregation on behalf of the members of the church according to the Constitution and/or Bylaws of the Local Church. This board could have a variety of names, including Board of Ministries, Church Council, Consistory, Diaconate, Elders, Executive Board/Team, Leadership Team, and Vestry.

Associations, Conferences, and the denomination also have governing boards with similar functions defined by the Constitution and/or Bylaws of the organization. (See *United Church of Christ Board*.)



JUST WORLD COVENANTS (*Just World Covenants—United Church of Christ*)

The UCC has eight Just World Covenants that Local Churches and the diverse settings of the church may adopt as practices and resources for ministry, mission, and witness that strengthen their commitment to building a **just world for all**. These covenant development processes are modeled on the UCC's tradition and include a time of prayer, discernment, and education. Following that time, the Local Church may choose to write and adopt a covenantal statement committing to live out the Gospel in new ways. These Just World Covenant programs offer the many settings of the UCC unique and powerful ways to grow in spirit and vitality as they seek to transform the world.

These covenant programs are:

- *Accessible to All (A2A)*
(uccdm.org/a2a)
- *Creation Justice Churches*
(ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/efam/environmental-justice/creation_justice_churches)
- *Economic Justice*
(ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/justice/washington-dc-office/washington-dc/justice_ejcp_ef)
- *Global Missions*
(globalministries.org/get_involved/global_mission_church)
- *Immigrant Welcoming*
(new.uccfiles.com/pdf/Becoming%20an%20immigrant%20welcoming%20congregation%20updated%20Nov%202012.pdf)
- *Just Peace*
(ucc.org/worship-way/justice_just-peace_international-day-of-prayer)
- *Open and Affirming (ONA)*
(ucc.org/what-we-do/wider-church-ministries/gsjm/lgbtqia/lgbt_ona)
- *WISE (Welcoming Inclusive Supportive, Engaging of Mental Health)*
(mhn-ucc.org).



Other justice-based programs available to Local Churches include:

- *Our Faith, Our Vote*
(ucc.org/our-faith-our-vote)
- *Our Whole Lives*, comprehensive faith-based sex education for the whole church
(ucc.org/our-whole-lives)
- *Join the Movement toward Racial Justice*
(jointhemovementucc.org)
- *Refugee and Migrant Resources*
(ucc.org/what-we-do/wider-church-ministries/global-hope/refugee-and-migration-ministries)
- *Willing to Respond* (Disaster Response and Relief)
(willingtorespond.org).

KINDOM/KINGDOM

English translations from William Tyndale to the present have rendered the Greek phrase *basileia tou theou* as “Kingdom of God.” This choice made sense in the earliest translations because most English-speaking people lived in a hereditary monarchy—a “kingdom”—whose heads thought of themselves as the representative of God over their territories. What has been missed in this English translation of *basileia* is that it also means “empire,” particularly the Roman Empire, *basileía tôn rhōmaíōn*, of Jesus’ day. Perhaps King James of the King James Version doubled down on the use of “Kingdom” as a way of assuring that his subjects understood the correlation. To this day, our inclination in English is to associate “empires” with oppressive rulers (the Soviet Empire, the Empire in the *Star Wars* universe, etc.) and kingdoms with more benign rulers (and fun places such as the Magic Kingdom at Disney World and Kings Dominion amusement park).

This matters to how we read passages in the Bible where God’s Kingdom is contrasted with the kingdoms of humankind. There was a reason that God and Samuel both opposed the Israelites’ demand for a king “like other nations”; for the most part, the royal rulers and usurpers of the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah were proof that God and Samuel were right. The Jewish people of Jesus’ day knew the



stories of those kings even as they lived under the aegis of the Roman Empire. Jesus' presentation of the Realm of God as a both/and of what is in heaven and what is present on earth among God's people, even if it is not obvious, stands in direct contrast to their religious history and lived experiences as non-citizens in an earthly empire. Jesus contrasted the Kingdom of God (*basileia tou theou*) with Caesar's Roman Empire (*basileía tôn rhōmaíōn*) in his teaching. Notably, when he declared that it is right to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God, those listening understood his point that ultimately **everything and everyone** belongs to God. This contrast applies even if we no longer live in a world dominated by hereditary monarchies because the political realms of humankind, whatever form of government they may have, are almost always antithetical to the life that followers of Jesus are called to live as citizens of the Realm of God.

Use of the word “kindom” in place of “kingdom” evolved in the 1970s through Roman Catholic feminist and *Mujerista* (Hispanic Womanist) theology. These scholars sought and ultimately coined a word that more fully expresses the radical inclusivity of God's realm. It also incorporates the language of the Apostle Paul, who called members of house churches *adelphoi* (literally, “brothers,” updated to “siblings” in gender-inclusive language) who are united in their service in Jesus' way. “Kindom” can easily substitute in hymn texts for “kingdom” theologically and metrically.

See *From Kingdom to Kin-Dom and Beyond* (ewwc.com/kingdom-kindom-beyond/) by Rita Halteman Finger and *Basileia: Kingdom of God or Empire of God?* (earlychristiantexts.com/basileia-kingdom-of-god/) by Dr. B. Brandon Scott.

LOCAL CHURCH (*Article V of the Constitution*)

A **Local Church** in the United Church of Christ is a gathering of people who seek to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ by worshiping together, loving neighbors, and working for justice in the world.

LOCAL CHURCH CODE

The **Local Church Code** encapsulates the mutual promises of and to God, members of Local Churches, and other settings of the UCC





LIVING LEGACY
RESOURCE

in living out covenant relationships faithfully while building a just world for all.

LOCAL CHURCH PROFILES

The **Local Church Profile** is a church's deeply reflective document prepared in response to three questions: **Who are we? Who is our neighbor? Who is God calling us to become?** This becomes the primary way for candidates who are seeking a call to discover the Local Church and discern if the Local Church might be a good match for the candidate's abilities, gifts, skills, and personality.

The **Designated Term Profile** is a shorter but still deeply reflected document prepared by a local church seeking a Designated Term Pastor through the Search and Call Process. In a briefer way, this document allows the Local Church to provide answers to the same three questions but focuses on the work for which a Designated Term Pastor is being called. This work could include but is not limited to a capital campaign, a building project, a long-term discernment process about partnering with another Local Church, and discernment about the wisdom of becoming a **Legacy Local Church**. A Legacy Local Church is one that commits to a faithful process of closing, ensuring that material and spiritual resources continue on through other Local Churches.

LOCAL CHURCH PASTOR *(Article VI of the Constitution)*

Broadly, the **Pastor of a Local Church** is the authorized minister called to lead the Local Church in worship, service, and administration. The pastor may be **Settled, Designated Term, Interim (including Bridge Interim), Licensed, Supply, or a Member in Discernment** who has been deemed ready to search and serve a Local Church by their Committee on Ministry.

- **SETTLED PASTORS** serve Local Churches for several years, up to most of their career. They hold membership in the church in which they serve and have standing in the Association to which the Local Church belongs. Settled pastors may be ordained, licensed, or Members in Discernment who have been given authorization to service prior to authorization.



- **DESIGNATED TERM PASTORS** initially serve from 2-to-5 years in a Local Church with a specific set of goals and objectives to foster during their service. They hold membership in the church in which they serve and have standing in the Association to which the Local Church belongs. Designated term pastors may stay in the setting when the goals have been achieved if the call is mutual.
- **INTERIM AND BRIDGE PASTORS** serve Local Churches during specific times in the life of the community. An Interim Pastor is ideally someone trained to lead the Local Church through the development of a new Local Church Profile (or Designated Term Profile) when the pulpit is vacant—there is neither a Settled nor a Designated Term Pastor for the church. A Bridge Pastor may serve in the weeks after a pastor resigns or retires, the time between the departure of an Interim Pastor and the incoming Settled or Designated Term pastor, and during other times when the pulpit needs tending, such as a sabbatical or a medical absence for the pastor. The general expectation is that these pastors will fulfill the work of the pastor, such as emergency pastoral care, in addition to the particular work of the interim time. Interims of any kind are strongly discouraged from accepting any longer term pastoral role in the Local Churches they serve.
- **INTERIM/TRANSITIONAL CONSULTANTS** serve Local Churches in the Search and Call Process specifically for the work of developing the church's profile and preparing the search team for their work. Depending on the model, consultants may preach on occasion or provide other support such as emergency pastoral care when the church is otherwise served by Pulpit Supply Pastors or lay worship leaders.
- **PULPIT SUPPLY PASTORS** may serve as preachers/worship leaders who may be with a Local Church for one week at a time or for several weeks. The general expectation is that these pastors—who may be ordained, licensed, or MIDs—will not engage with the Local Church beyond worship leadership duties.



LOCAL CHURCH SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY PROCESS

In covenant, no Local Church stands alone. When Local Churches identify or have identified for them behaviors that are in breach of covenant, a **Local Church Support and Accountability Process** may be initiated to provide clarity and a path forward toward repairing the breach and restoring relationships. This process brings in relational but objective covenant partners from the Association and/or Conference, as well as subject matter experts when needed, to help the Local Church discover the root of the behavior, correct processes or habits that have led to the behavior, and hold itself accountable to learn new ways of behaving that are not outside the bounds of covenant. The expectation is that however hard the process might be, the Local Church, including its pastor, its elected leaders, and others in the Local Church, will participate in hopes of maintaining and even strengthening covenantal relationships.

- **LOCAL CHURCH SUPPORT CONSULTATIONS** provided by the Association or Conference at the request of Local Churches are designed to assist individual congregations with addressing and resolving conflicts within the Local Church.
- **SITUATIONAL SUPPORT CONSULTATIONS** provided by the Association or Conference can be requested by the Local Church Pastor or by Local Churches themselves in the event of conflict between the pastor and the congregation that has not been resolved internally. The goal is to achieve a just and faithful resolution for all parties.



MARKS OF FAITHFUL AND
EFFECTIVE AUTHORIZED
MINISTERS

MARKS OF FAITHFUL AND EFFECTIVE AUTHORIZED MINISTERS OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

The **Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers** are a constellation of competencies that authorized ministers (licensed or ordained) are called to develop over the course of their vocational careers. No one will be fully proficient in every Mark, and each authorized minister will have their own interests and skills that



lead them to be exemplary in several Marks. Matching a candidate's identified **Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers** to a Local Church's **Marks for Faithful and Vital Local Churches in the United Church of Christ** can be a way of discerning a more successful relationship moving forward, both for what a Local Church is already doing and for its identified opportunities in the future.

MARKS OF FAITHFUL AND VITAL LOCAL CHURCHES OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

The **Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches** are a constellation of competencies that Local Churches that are in covenant in the United Church of Christ are called to develop in and with each generation. No one Local Church will be fully proficient in every Mark, and each generation will have their own interests and skills that lead the Local Church to be exemplary in several Marks during their time. Matching a Local Church's **Marks for Faithful and Vital Local Churches in the United Church of Christ** to a pastoral candidate's identified **Marks for Faithful and Vital Local Churches** can be a way of discerning a more successful relationship moving forward, both to support what a Local Church is already doing well and to help it embrace its identified opportunities for future work.

MESA

The **Ministerial Excellence, Support, and Authorization Team (MESA)** of the United Church of Christ is responsible for implementing UCC policy concerning authorized ministry in the denomination. MESA team members resource Committees on Ministry and the Search and Call process, including profiles by churches and pastors.

MINISTERIAL PROFILE

The **Pastoral Profile** is the primary document by which pastors in the Search and Call process make themselves known to settings of the church that are also in the process. This is similar to a **curriculum vitae** for an academic professional and includes details about the places the pastor has served, their education, other experiences, and reflections on their own proficiencies with the Marks of Faithful and Effective Authorized Ministers of the United Church of Christ.



PROFESSION OF FAITH (See also *Affirmation/Reaffirmation of Faith, Confirmation, Transfer of Membership*)

The act of an individual who wishes to become a member of a Local Church but who has been neither baptized nor confirmed. This is usually the culmination of a time of study with the pastor and/or mentors in the Local Church and often includes baptism. In some traditions, this may also be referred to as Confession of Faith.

SACRAMENTS (*Article 1 of the Constitution*)

Sacraments are practices of the Christian faith that we receive from the examples of Jesus' life according to the Gospel story. In the UCC, we recognize two sacraments, **Baptism** and **Communion**, or the Eucharist.

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

— UCC Statement of Faith in the Form of a Doxology, 1981

- **BAPTISM** is the practice by which we are acknowledged to be members of the Body of Christ, or the Church Universal. In the UCC, this is a communal event usually celebrated in the context of a worship service for God's people of any age; infants and young children who are baptized may go through the rite of confirmation as teens or young adults to affirm the vows that were made on their behalf, while older children (in some Local Churches), teens, and adults make their vows for themselves. In accordance with the ecumenical commitments of the UCC, the baptismal words include traditional language—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and may also include expanded language to acknowledge that the Trinity cannot be contained in single names for each person. UCC theologian Louis Gunnemann calls Baptism “the Sacrament of Christian Vocation” as it echoes the baptism of Jesus, which “gives shape to the mission of the church” to work for justice in the world.

See Gunneman's *Baptism: Sacrament of Vocation* (ucc.org/)



[wp-content/uploads/2021/01/gunnemann-on-baptism.pdf](#)) and *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* ([ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-1982.pdf](#)).

- **COMMUNION** is the practice of remembrance of Jesus' last meal with his disciples before his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. According to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this supper was a Passover meal where the gathered friends remembered the escape of the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt under Moses' leadership. Because of the words Jesus used to bless the bread, "This is my body, broken for you," and the cup, "This is my blood, shed for you," Communion came to be understood as a time of thanksgiving and remembrance that our sins are forgiven. Louis Gunnemann reminds us that the celebration of Communion is a "**eucharist**, a service of thanksgiving"; an act of the "community of memory" (*anamnesis*) "by participation in Christ's life, death, and resurrection"; and "invocation of the Spirit" (*epiklesis*) that helps us to be less selfish and more centered on others. It is also, he writes, "*communion with Christ*" at which Christ is the host, and thus to participate is to respond to the presence of Christ in the act. In all these things, we are shaped into disciples, and thus Gunnemann considers Communion to be the "Sacrament of Discipleship" from which our calling is renewed and we are sent out to exercise our vocation. This sacrament is known by different names, including "Communion," "Eucharist," and "The Table"/"The Table of Christ."

See Gunnemann's *The Eucharist: Sacrament of Discipleship* ([d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/205/gunnemann-on-eucharist.pdf?1418423569](#)) and *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (see "Baptism").

SEARCH AND CALL PROCESS

Search and Call is the means by which Local Churches and many other settings of the UCC seek new pastoral leadership after a pastor



resigns or retires. The basic process involves the development of a Local Church Profile (or Designated Term Profile), often with the assistance of a trained Interim Pastor or Interim/Transitional Consultant, the receipt of Pastoral Profiles, interviews, candidate call events, and affirmation of the call of a new pastor.

TRANSFER OF MEMBERSHIP *(See also Affirmation/Reaffirmation of Faith, Confirmation, Profession of Faith)*

When an individual is a member of one Local Church but desires to become an active member of a different Local Church, a **transfer of membership** is appropriate. This action recognizes the active, lived faith of the individual and the work of the sending congregation in the development of the individual's maturity in the faith.

Generally speaking, such transfers are received from most Christian denominations and congregations, though a time of orientation to the new Local Church and, if the individual is new to the United Church of Christ, to the denomination are appropriate to the process.

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST BOARD *(Article XI of the Constitution, Article III, Paragraphs 227–254 of the Bylaws)*

The **United Church of Christ Board** (UCCB) functions as the governing board of directors of the UCC, with responsibilities for strategic planning and policy-making, creating and maintaining ecumenical and interfaith relationships at the denominational level, and directing the **Covenanted Ministries** of the UCC.



A Note from the Manual on Local Church Working Group

THE MLC WORKING GROUP WAS CONVENED through a rigorous nomination, application, and interview process ensuring representation across the diverse theologies, settings, and cultures of the United Church of Christ as well as capacity and commitment over a six-year period. It took months to select the team. In the early winter of 2019, we eagerly planned for our first gathering in person, but then came COVID-19. We mourned, and we adapted. The working group adapted as our local churches adapted. We struggled as our local churches struggled. We witnessed the United Church of Christ, in small and profound ways, move and grow with the Living Spirit of God, pulled into mass demonstrations for racial justice, pandemic hospice work and funerals, supporting increasing numbers of vulnerable people, and asking over and over again what it means to be a church.

All of us on the working group feel honored and blessed to have been part of this project and bring this resource together. We are honored and blessed because we have come to know the United Church of Christ in such a special, unique, and historic way. We pray that all who open this resource find both deep grounding and inspirational vision. Thank you to everyone who took the time to be interviewed, fill out a survey, read a draft in process, and contribute to this collective work. We also extend gratitude to the UCCB Ministry Committee and all of the members who served over these years. We give special thanks to Erica Dollhopf for creating the Grow Your Church game exploring the Marks for Faithful and Vital Local Churches, Barb Powell for layout and design, and to Nancy Krody for extensive editing.

The Manual on Local Church Working Group members are: Becky Leonard, *Lay Leader, South Dakota*; Cheryl Lindsay, *National Staff, Ohio*; Nicholas Knoblauch, *Pastor, Missouri*; Melanie Oommen, *National Staff, Central Pacific Conference, Oregon*; Aaron Wade, *National Staff, Washington, D.C.*; Beth Walker, *Lay Leader, UCCB Member, Pennsylvania*;



Marsha Williams, *Conference Minister and UCCB Member, New York*; Lisa Hart, *Conference Staff, Wisconsin*; Amanda Lape-Freeberg, *Pastor, Maine*; Doug Wooten, *Pastor, North Carolina*; Zillah Jackson Wesley, *Lay Leader, Washington, D.C.*; Liddy Barlow, *Pastor, Pennsylvania*; Kevin Petitt, *Lay Leader, Colorado*; Elizabeth Dilley, *National Staff, Ohio*; Yinessa Romero, *Pastor, North Texas Association & Colectivo de UCC Latinx Ministries*; Chris Davies, *Conference Staff, Massachusetts*; Roberto Ochoa, *National Staff, Living Water Association, Ohio*; Heather Kimmel, *National Staff, Ohio*; Diane Weible, *Conference Minister, Oregon*; Adam Hanley, *National Staff, United Church of Canada*; Viktor Toth, *Pastor, Calvin Synod, California*; Rock Fremont, *Pastor, Arizona*; Ruth Shaver, *Pastor and UCC History & Polity Teachers' Network, Connecticut*; Tracy Howe, *National Staff, Arizona*; Ellis Arnold, *Conference Staff and Pastor, California*; Sharon MacArthur, *Beloved Pastor, Died 2023, California*; Sepulona Tanuvasa, *Beloved Pastor, United Samoan Ministries, Died 2022, California*.



Addendum

Note: Any changes and/or additions are represented in italics.

PAGE 5 PARAGRAPH 1

AFTER THE DEVASTATION OF TWO WORLD WARS, a global movement for Christian unity emerged in the middle of the twentieth century. In the United States, multiple churches of Reformed Protestant heritage discerned a shared call to witness to the love of God in the world and to testify to the ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They came together in 1957 as the United Church of Christ. As the first two denominations united, the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches, they sought to blend Presbyterian and Congregational polities into a polity of covenant. *Subsequent denominational reflection, confession, and archival research expanded this historical narrative by recognizing the Afro-Christian Convention as the “Fifth Stream,” a distinct ecclesial and theological current within the United Church of Christ. This affirmed Black religious experience, ecclesial formation, and liberationist witness as central to the denomination's identity. The covenantal weaving of all these traditions as streams continues to shape who we are today.*

PAGE 25-26 PARAGRAPH 3

Nonprofit corporate status and tax-exempt status are distinct. Churches are automatically recognized as 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations under federal law and are not required to file Form 1023 with the IRS to obtain recognition of their tax-exempt status. The United Church of Christ, as a denomination, maintains a federal group tax exemption with the IRS. Local Churches *granted* standing in an Association (or Conference acting as an Association) of the United Church of Christ *prior to January 20, 2026*, are included in the group exemption. *Local Churches granted standing on or after January 20, 2026, must apply for membership. An application can be found on the National Ministries website under Tax Exemption Resources. An organizational purpose statement as specified on the application must be included in the church's governing document.* Local Churches generally do not appear in the IRS's exempt organizations database because religious denominations holding group exemptions are not required to update the membership of the group exemption with the IRS. A letter indicating proof of group exemption membership is available *for download from the National Ministries website under Tax Exemption Resources for group exemption members.* The letter can only be created for the church name and address as it appears in the Yearbook (and the UCC Database and Directories) to ensure the Conference has the most current information for the church.



Addendum (cont.)

PAGE 26 BULLET 2

Organizational purpose: *for churches granted standing on or after January 20, 2026, that want to apply for membership in the UCC's group tax exemption, a specific purpose statement is required. The application is available on the National Ministries website under Tax Exemption Resources.*

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FIFTH STREAM

The “Fifth Stream” refers to the Afro-Christian Convention within the United Church of Christ’s broader historical narrative, recognizing Black religious experience as a distinct and essential theological and ecclesial tradition alongside the denomination’s founding streams. It affirms that the spiritual, cultural, and liberationist witness of Afro-Christian communities is not peripheral, but integral to the formation, identity, and ongoing covenantal life of the United Church of Christ.

