

1 **Examining, Articulating, and Resourcing the Nature, Purpose, Composition, Covenantal**
2 **Autonomy and Definition of ‘the basic unit of life and organization of the United Church of**
3 **Christ’ for the Twenty-first Century**

4 Southwest Conference United Church of Christ

5 A Prudential Resolution

6 Submitted by the Southwest Conference Board of Directors

7 Summary:

8 Based on the biblical pattern for the continuing growth of the Church as the Body of Christ, and
9 our history as a reformed and reforming Church, this resolution calls for a UCC-wide
10 discernment process regarding the nature, purpose, composition, covenantal autonomy, and
11 definition of “Local Church” as “the basic unit of life and organization of the United Church of
12 Christ.” The resolution also calls for articulation of revisions to the Constitution of the United
13 Church of Christ predicated on that discernment process’s outcome, and the production of a
14 resource to help the Local Churches live more fully into the obligations of covenantal autonomy
15 articulated in the Constitution of the United Church of Christ. If adopted, this resolution will
16 require the Southwest Conference Board of Directors and staff to engage our covenant partners
17 in conversation and action designed to accomplish the desired outcomes of the resolution.

18 Biblical, Theological and Historical Grounding:

19 The Book of Acts bears witness to the newly formed Church engaging self-defining questions
20 regarding its nature, purpose, composition, covenants, autonomy, from almost the very
21 beginning of its existence. In Acts 6 and 15, the early Church met to discuss and settle concerns
22 about covenantal relationships. In Acts 10-16 the earliest Christians wrestled with extravagant
23 welcome, redefining covenant, and holding one another accountable.

24 Our ancestors in the Reformed tradition continued to discern God’s calling as Church, the
25 history of which need not be recited here.

26 The Twenty-Seventh General Synod of the United Church of Christ, meeting in Grand Rapids,
27 MI, adopted Article V of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ as it reads currently.
28 During the hearing regarding that action, process rules prohibited changes to the language of
29 Article V. This resolution continues the struggle to overcome systemic sexism and to adopt
30 language that is consistent with previous General Synod resolutions regarding inclusive
31 language.

32 As a living Body, the Body of Christ, the Church is ever-growing and becoming new. It has been
33 said that we do not know what the Church of the future will be. Ongoing dialogue like the
34 conversation called for in this resolution will help us discern and shape of our future Church.

35 Practices within the United Church of Christ related to admitting Local Churches into the UCC,
36 what constitutes a Local Church, and who, beyond Local Churches, may be members of
37 associations and conferences continues to evolve. This resolution will open conversation across
38 the denomination regarding those evolving practices.

39 The Text of the Resolution:

40 WHEREAS Article V, paragraphs 10 and 11 of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ
41 employ sexist language; and

42 WHEREAS Article V of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ met with criticism during
43 the hearing preceding its adoption at the Twenty-Seventh General Synod, but rules prevented
44 changes in the language of the Article that delegates found objectionable; and

45 WHEREAS the Bylaws adopted by the Thirty-First General Synod contain that same
46 objectionable language; and

47 WHEREAS General Synods 9, 11, 12, 14, 16 and 17 have affirmed the use of inclusive language;
48 and

49 WHEREAS Article III of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ describes the ideals of
50 covenantal relationships but does not describe or provide for the accountability necessary to
51 living into these covenantal relationships; and

52 WHEREAS Article V, paragraph 10, of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ limits to
53 three the purposes for which a Local Church may be organized: Christian worship, for the
54 furtherance of Christian fellowship, and for the ongoing work of Christian witness; and

55 WHEREAS Article V, paragraph 10 of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ omits as a
56 purpose for which a local church may be organized creating a just world for all;¹ and

57 WHEREAS Article V of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ does not include the word
58 “covenant;” and

59 WHEREAS Article V, paragraph 17 of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ uses the
60 word “fellowship” instead of the word “covenant;” and

61 WHEREAS Article V, paragraph 16, of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ singles out
62 Congregational Christian local churches and prohibits them from a dual affiliation with the UCC,
63 calling into question the UCC value of extravagant welcome; and

64 WHEREAS the current practice of conferences and associations is to “admit, or continue to
65 fellowship with” Local Churches from other denominations² and affiliations as well as faith

¹ The words “Christian witness” and “creating a just world for all” are not synonymous.

² For example, New York Conference admits to membership in a non-geographical association, local churches that maintain dual standing with the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church in America.

66 communities³ that do not identify as a church in the spirit of the UCC value of extravagant
67 welcome; and

68 WHEREAS the words “to formulate its own covenants and confessions of faith; to admit
69 members in its own way” in paragraph 18 seem to conflict with paragraph 11 which prescribes
70 three methods for being admitted to a Local Church belonging to the UCC;

71 THEREFOR, BE IT RESOLVED that the Southwest Conference calls on the United Church Board
72 and the General Synod of the United Church of Christ to convene a working group
73 representative of the whole of the United Church of Christ to:

- 74 1. lead the United Church of Christ in a process of discernment regarding Article V of the
75 Constitution of the United Church of Christ; and
- 76 2. recommend revisions to Article V in accordance with the working group’s perspicacity,
77 including, but not limited to, equal clarity about Local Church covenant and autonomy,
78 parameters for local church accountability and overseeing congregations, a provision for
79 releasing congregations from the United Church of Christ, and amendments to Articles
80 III and VIII and other sections of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ so that
81 the whole of the document is consistent; and
- 82 3. produce a *Manual on the Local Church* for use by all settings of the Church akin to the
83 Manual on Ministry, purposed to equip the Local Church to fully live into its covenantal
84 responsibilities and privileges under the Constitution of the United Church of Christ,
85 including but not limited to a Congregational Code, Marks of Faithful and Vital
86 Congregations, and processes for birthing, admitting, strengthening, revitalizing,
87 dismissing, and laying to rest congregations; and
- 88 4. report its progress along with its recommendations for revising Article V of the to the
89 next General Synod; and

90 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that if adopted, the Southwest Conference staff is directed to share
91 this resolution with United Church Board and the Officers of the United Church of Christ, our
92 covenant partners, with an invitation to accomplish its outcomes in advance of General Synod
93 in 2019.

94 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that if adopted, the Southwest Conference staff is directed to seek
95 conversation partners among the Council for Conference Ministers and our sister Conferences
96 to advance the resolution’s intended outcomes.

³ For example, Southwest Conference will admit “a network of people organized around the presence of Christ, which embraces a United Church of Christ identity and the values of the Southwest Conference, which exists within the geographical boundaries of the Conference” into the Conference with voice and vote.

97 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we call upon the Executive Board of the Southwest Conference,
98 in prayerful discernment and dialogue with our covenant partners, to put this resolution into a
99 form appropriate for consideration by the Thirty-Second General Synod;

100 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we call on all covenant partners of the Southwest Conference to
101 continuing conversation and prayerful support for this resolution's intended outcomes.