

United Church of Christ

Excerpts from the “Constitution and By-Laws” and other Relevant Information

PREAMBLE

1 The United Church of Christ, formed June 25, 1957, by the union of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and The General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches of the United States in order to express more fully the oneness in Christ of the churches composing it, to make more effective their common witness in Him, and to serve His kingdom in the world, hereby adopts this Constitution.

2 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.

ARTICLE III. COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIPS

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

ARTICLE V. LOCAL CHURCHES

9 The basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ is the Local Church.

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

11 In accordance with the custom and usage of a Local Church, persons become members by (a) baptism and either confirmation or profession of faith in Jesus Christ as

Lord and Savior; (b) reaffirmation or reprofession of faith; or (c) letter of transfer or certification from other Christian churches.

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

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

18 The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action. Nothing in this Constitution and the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ shall destroy or limit the right of each Local Church to continue to operate in the way customary to it; nor shall be construed as giving to the General Synod, or to any Conference or Association now, or at any future time, the power to abridge or impair the autonomy of any Local Church in the management of its own affairs, which affairs include, but are not limited to, the right to retain or adopt its own methods of organization, worship and education; to retain or secure its own charter and name; to adopt its own constitution and bylaws; to formulate its own covenants and confessions of faith; to admit members in its own way and to provide for their discipline or dismissal; to call or dismiss its pastor or pastors by such procedure as it shall determine; to acquire, own, manage and dispose of property and funds; to control its own benevolences; and to withdraw by its own decision from the United Church of Christ at any time without forfeiture of ownership or control of any real or personal property owned by it.

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

ARTICLE VIII. ASSOCIATIONS AND CONFERENCES

37 Associations and Conferences are bodies organized on a territorial basis to perform functions in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution and the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ.

Associations

38 An Association is that body within a Conference of the United Church of Christ which is composed of all Local Churches in a geographical area, all Ordained Ministers holding standing or ordained ministerial partner standing therein, all Commissioned Ministers of that Association, and those Licensed Ministers who have been granted voting membership in that Association.

40 An Association is that body which determines, confers, and certifies to the standing of the Local Churches of the United Church of Christ within its area.

41 An Association is that body which grants, certifies to, transfers and terminates ordained ministerial standing or ordained ministerial partner standing in the United Church of Christ.

43 An Association is related to the General Synod through its Conference.

44 When an Association meets, its voting membership includes the lay delegates selected by and representing the Local Churches of that Association, all Ordained Ministers holding standing or ordained ministerial partner standing therein, all Commissioned Ministers of that Association and those Licensed Ministers who have been granted voting membership in that Association.

45 Meetings of the Association are held annually and at such other times as may be necessary for the discharge of its responsibilities.

Conferences

46 A Conference is that body of the United Church of Christ which is composed of all Local Churches in a geographical area, all Ordained Ministers holding standing or ordained ministerial partner standing in its Associations or in the Conference itself when acting as an Association, all Commissioned Ministers in its Associations, and those Licensed Ministers who have been granted voting membership in its Associations

49 A Conference is related to the General Synod as described in the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ.

50 When a Conference meets, its voting membership includes lay delegates selected by and representing the Local Churches of that Conference, all Ordained Ministers holding standing or ordained ministerial partner standing in its Associations or in the Conference itself when acting as an Association, all Commissioned Ministers in its Associations, and those Licensed Ministers who have been granted voting membership in its Associations.

51 Meetings of the Conference are held annually and at such other times as may be necessary for the discharge of its responsibilities.

ARTICLE IX. THE GENERAL SYNOD

53 The General Synod is the representative body of the United Church of Christ and is composed of delegates chosen by the Conferences, voting members of Boards of Directors of Covenanted Ministries who have been elected by General Synod, as described in the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ, and of ex officio delegates; these shall constitute the voting delegates. There shall not be fewer than three delegates allocated to each Conference. A quorum for the conduct of business shall consist of one-third of the voting delegates, provided that in this number at least two-thirds of the Conferences are represented by at least one delegate each. There shall also be associate delegates, without vote, as determined by the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ or action of the General Synod.

Powers of General Synod

54 The General Synod has the following powers, provided, however, that no power vested in the General Synod shall invade the autonomy of Conferences, Associations, and Local Churches, or impair their right to acquire, own, manage, and dispose of property and funds:

Meetings of the General Synod

55 The General Synod shall hold meetings at regular intervals as provided in the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ. Special meetings may be called in the manner provided in those Bylaws.

Correlation

56 The General Synod and its Executive Council shall consider the work of all Covenanted, Affiliated, and Associated Ministries. It shall also correlate their work, publicity and promotion, preventing duplication and effecting economies of administration, so as to secure maximum effectiveness and efficiency through careful stewardship of personnel and financial resources. Due protection shall be given to all trust funds, including pension funds.

What is the United Church of Christ?

The United Church of Christ came into being in 1957 with the union of two Protestant denominations: the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches. Each of these was, in turn, the result of a union of two earlier traditions.

■The *Congregational Churches* were organized when the Pilgrims of Plymouth Plantation (1620) and the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (1629) acknowledged their essential unity in the Cambridge Platform of 1648.

■The *Reformed Church in the United States* traced its beginnings to congregations of German settlers in Pennsylvania founded from 1725 on. Later, its ranks were swelled by Reformed immigrants from Switzerland, Hungary and other countries.

■The *Christian Churches* sprang up in the late 1700s and early 1800s in reaction to the theological and organizational rigidity of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist churches of the time.

■The *Evangelical Synod of North America* traced its beginnings to an association of German Evangelical pastors in Missouri. This association, founded in 1841, reflected the 1817 union of Lutheran and Reformed churches in Germany.

■Through the years, other groups such as American Indians, Afro-Christians, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Volga Germans, Armenians, and Hispanic Americans have joined with the four earlier groups. In recent years, Christians from other traditions, including the Roman Catholic Church, have found a home in the UCC, and so have gay and lesbian Christians who have not been welcome in other churches. Thus the United Church of Christ celebrates and continues a broad variety of traditions in its common life.

Characteristics of the United Church of Christ

The characteristics of the United Church of Christ can be summarized in part by the key words in the names that formed our union: Christian, Reformed, Congregational, Evangelical.

■ *Christian*. By our very name, the United Church of Christ, we declare ourselves to be part of the Body of Christ—the Christian church. We continue the witness of the early disciples to the reality and power of the crucified and risen Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

■ *Reformed*. All four denominations arose from the tradition of the Protestant Reformers: We confess the authority of one God. We affirm the primacy of the Scriptures, the doctrine of justification by faith, the priesthood of all believers, and the principle of Christian freedom. We celebrate two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper (also called Holy Communion or the Eucharist).

■ *Congregational*. The basic unit of the United Church of Christ is the congregation. Members of each congregation covenant with one another and with God as revealed in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. These congregations, in turn, exist in covenantal relationships with one another to form larger structures for more effective work. Our covenanting emphasizes trustful relationships rather than legal agreements.

■ *Evangelical*. The primary task of the church is the proclamation of the Gospel or (in Greek) *evangel*. The Gospel literally means the "Good News" of God's love revealed with power in Jesus Christ. We proclaim this Gospel by word and deed to individual persons and to society. This proclamation is the heart of the *leiturgia*—in Greek, the "work of the people" in daily and Sunday worship. We gather for the worship of God, and through each week, we engage in the service of humankind.

What we believe

We can tell you more about the United Church of Christ with the help of seven phrases from Scripture and Tradition which express our commitments.

■ *That they may all be one*. [John 17:21] This motto of the United Church of Christ reflects the spirit of unity on which it is based and points toward future efforts to heal the divisions in the body of Christ. We are a uniting church as well as a united church.

■ *In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity*. The unity that we seek requires neither an uncritical acceptance of any point of view, nor rigid formulation of doctrine. It does require mutual understanding and agreement as to which aspects of the Christian faith and life are essential.

■ *The unity of the church is not of its own making*. It is a gift of God. But expressions of that unity are as diverse as there are individuals. The common thread that runs through all is love.

■ *Testimonies of faith rather than tests of faith*. Because faith can be expressed in many different ways, the United Church of Christ has no formula that is a *test* of faith. Down through the centuries, however, Christians have shared their faith with one another

through creeds, confessions, catechisms and other statements of faith. Historic statements such as the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Evangelical Catechism, the Augsburg Confession, the Cambridge Platform and the Kansas City Statement of Faith are valued in our church as authentic *testimonies* of faith. [See [✦ Faith](#) for the complete texts of some of these testimonies.] In 1959, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ adopted a [✦ Statement of Faith](#) prepared especially for congregations of the United Church. Many of us use this statement as a common affirmation of faith in worship and as a basis for study.

■ *There is yet more light and truth to break forth from God's holy word.* This affirmation by one of the founders of the Congregational tradition assumes the primacy of the Bible as a source for understanding the Good News and as a foundation for all statements of faith. It recognizes that the Bible, though written in specific historical times and places, still speaks to us in our present condition. It declares that the study of the scriptures is not limited by past interpretations, but it is pursued with the expectation of new insights and God's help for living today.

■ *The Priesthood of All Believers.* All members of the United Church of Christ are called to minister to others and to participate as equals in the common worship of God, each with direct access to the mercies of God through personal prayer and devotion.

Recognition is given to those among us who have received special training in pastoral, priestly, educational and administrative functions, but these persons are regarded as *servants*—rather than as persons in authority. Their task is to guide, to instruct, to enable the ministry of all Christians rather than to do the work of ministry for us.

■ *Responsible Freedom.* As individual members of the Body of Christ, we are free to believe and act in accordance with our perception of God's will for our lives. But we are called to live in a loving, covenantal relationship with one another—gathering in communities of faith, congregations of believers, local churches.

Each congregation or local church is free to act in accordance with the collective decision of its members, guided by the working of the Spirit in the light of the scriptures. But it also is called to live in a covenantal relationship with other congregations for the sharing of insights and for cooperative action under the authority of Christ.

Likewise, associations of churches, conferences, the General Synod and the churchwide "covenanted ministries" of the United Church of Christ are free to act in their particular spheres of responsibility. Yet all are constrained by love to live in a covenantal relationship with one another and with the local churches in order to make manifest the unity of the body of Christ and thus to carry out God's mission in the world more effectively.

The members, congregations, associations, conferences, General Synod, and covenanted ministries are free in relation to the world. We affirm that the authority of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and interpreted with the aid of the Holy Spirit stands above and judges all human culture, institutions and laws. But we recognize our calling both as individuals and as the church to live in the world:

- To proclaim in word and action the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- To work for reconciliation and the unity of the broken Body of Christ.
- To seek justice and liberation for all.

This is the challenge of the United Church of Christ.