The Business Committee of the Thirty-Second General Synod has recommended this proposed resolution be sent to a Committee of the General Synod.

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

A Prudential Resolution

Submitted by the Southwest Conference and Southern California Nevada Conference

Summary:
Based on the biblical pattern for the continuing growth of the Church as the Body of Christ, and our history as a reformed and reforming Church, this resolution calls for a UCC-wide discernment process regarding the nature, purpose, composition, covenantal autonomy, and definition of “Local Church” as “the basic unit of life and organization of the United Church of Christ.” The resolution also calls for articulation of revisions to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ predicated on that discernment process’s outcome, and the production of a resource to help the Local Churches live more fully into the obligations of covenantal autonomy articulated in the Constitution of the United Church of Christ. If adopted, this resolution will require a working group and others to engage our covenantal partners in conversation and action designed to accomplish the desired outcomes of the resolution.

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

Our ancestors in the Reformed tradition continued to discern God’s calling as Church, the history of which need not be recited here. The United Church of Christ is itself a product of that discernment.

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

As a living Body, the Body of Christ, the Church is ever-growing and becoming new. It has been said that we do not know what the Church of the future will be. Ongoing dialogue like the conversation called for in this resolution will help us discern and shape our future Church.
Practices within the United Church of Christ related to admitting Local Churches into the UCC, what constitutes a Local Church, and who, beyond Local Churches, may be members of associations and conferences continue to evolve. This resolution will open conversation across the denomination regarding those evolving practices.

The Text of the Resolution:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WHEREAS the current practice of conferences and associations is to “admit, or continue to fellowship with” Local Churches from other denominations and affiliations as well as faith communities that do not identify as a church in the spirit of the UCC value of extravagant welcome; and
WHEREAS the words “to formulate its own covenants and confessions of faith; to admit members in its own way” in paragraph 18 seem to conflict with paragraph 11 which prescribes three methods for being admitted to a Local Church belonging to the UCC;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the United Church of Christ Board and the General Synod of the United Church of Christ OR the Thirty-Second General Synod of the United Church of Christ calls on the United Church of Christ Board and the General Minister and President to convene a working group representative of the whole of the United Church of Christ to:

1. lead the United Church of Christ in a process of discernment regarding Article V of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ; and

2. recommend revisions to Article V in accordance with the working group’s discernment and conclusions including, but not limited to, equal clarity about Local Church covenant and autonomy, parameters for local church accountability and the oversight of local churches, a provision for releasing congregations from the United Church of Christ, and amendments to Articles III and VIII and other sections of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ so that the whole of the document is consistent; and

3. produce a Manual on the Local Church, akin to the Manual on Ministry, for use by all settings of the Church, akin to the Manual on Ministry, purposed to equip the Local Church to fully live into its covenantal responsibilities and privileges under the Constitution of the United Church of Christ; this Manual will speak to including items including, but not limited to, a Congregational Code, Marks of Faithful and Vital Congregations, and processes and resources for birthing, admitting, strengthening, revitalizing, and releasing congregations; and

4. report its progress along with its recommendations for revising Article V of the Constitution to the next General Synod.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Synod of the United Church of Christ invites and encourages all settings of the United Church of Christ to pray for and participate with this discernment process locally.

Funding: The funding for the implementation of the Resolution will be made in accordance with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

Implementation: The Officers of the Church, in consultation with appropriate ministries or other entities within the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.

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

ii The Southern California Nevada Conference has member churches which maintain dual standing with the American Baptist Churches USA and with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The Southwest Conference has member churches which maintain dual standing with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) or multiple denominational standing; examples include the United Church of Angel Fire and The United Church of Los Alamos.

iii Southwest Conference admits “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 membership of the Conference with voice and vote. Examples include
Journey and Beatitudes Campus. Southern California Nevada Conference has admitted diverse and nontraditional groups who have gathered around the presence of Christ, which embrace a United Church of Christ identity and the values of the Southern California Nevada Conference, and which exist or, in the case of a web-based group, have been organized within the geographical boundaries of the Conference into the Conference with voice and vote. These include Mary Magdalene Friends, United Church of Christ Second Life, and Urban Mission.