

United Church of Christ Manual on Local Church

May 2024 Draft

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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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.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are a “united and uniting” church, a body formed by two or more denominations coming together. 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 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.

Our covenantal structures and practices make the United Church of Christ unique. Since its inception, the United Church of Christ has sought to clarify 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:

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:

40 1) recognizing themselves as part of the whole body of the United Church of Christ
41 through covenant;

42 2) building and continuing faithful and effective expressions of the Local Church through
43 healthy governance; and

44 3) proclaiming and engaging their identity and membership in the United Church of
45 Christ through obtaining and maintaining Local Church standing in its Conference or
46 Association.

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

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

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

56 In this living manual, you will find resources on vitality, leadership, accountability, organization
57 and governance. This manual articulates and defines the relationship between a Local Church
58 and its covenantal partners in the Congregational Code. Once a local church establishes healthy
59 governance, the Congregational Code frames Local Church standing, support, and
60 accountability. Finally, the Marks for Faithful and Vital Local Churches are an aspirational
61 resource for engagement and assessment.

62 The *Manual on Local Church* was written in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, mass
63 demonstrations for racial justice, and continued political polarization. This context brought
64 attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion to every sphere, including the church. Diversity of
65 thought, expression, and experience are intentionally woven into this manual's pages. The
66 manual was researched and written by a working group representing the full diversity of the
67 United Church of Christ denomination, as charged by General Synod 32. The members of the
68 working group offered their wisdom across generations, theological and regional diversity,
69 identity and authorized minister status, ability, ethnicity, and more.

70 Through study of United Church of Christ history and texts, surveys, focus groups, case studies,
71 and conversations with key wisdom leaders in the denomination, the *MLC Working Group*
72 synthesized learning with policy and filtered it through equity and accountability. Although staff
73 from the National Setting, specifically from the FaithINFO and MESA teams, administrated this
74 process, the *Manual on Local Church* is a grassroots document. It is the result of prayerful
75 discernment by people deeply grounded in Local Churches across the United Church of Christ.

76 As the Local Churches of the United Church of Christ read, explore, and implement The *Manual*
77 *on Local Church*, we pray that across all their diversity, every Local Church will find itself
78 reflected in these pages: that the faithfulness and vitality, the covenantal relationships, and the

79 good governance described in these pages express what you cherish about the Local Church that
80 is your home. We pray too that every Local Church will find inspiration in this manual to deepen
81 its covenants, refine its mission, and grow ever more into God’s calling. Connected in holy,
82 loving, life-giving covenantal relationship, we can be the Body of Christ together, building a just
83 world for all.

84 **Definition of a Local Church**

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

90
91 In the United Church of Christ, a Local Church is any community of people within the United
92 Church of Christ, consistent with Article V of the UCC *Constitution*, that:

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- 95 1. Gathers to explore faith, hope, and love through worship, learning, and service in person,
96 virtually or both;
 - 97 2. Finds theological resonance in conversation with the UCC’s *Statement of Faith* and seeks
98 to be in conversation with every generation to make the faith its own;
 - 99 3. Demonstrates an ongoing commitment to covenantal relationship with the UCC through
100 the Congregational Code in the Manual on Local Church;
 - 101 4. Practices ongoing spiritual growth and congregational health as described in the Marks
102 for Faithful and Vital Local Churches in the Manual on Local Church;
 - 103 5. Engages in discernment, seeks to be recognized as a Local Church by the Association (or
104 Conference acting as an Association), is granted Congregational Standing with the
105 denomination, and maintains Congregational Standing; and
 - 106 6. Fulfills the responsibility of congregational autonomy by discerning God’s call for the
107 congregation, setting the congregation’s missional priorities, organizing the gathered
108 community, and attending to the corporate and legal responsibilities of being an
109 organization.

110 **Definition of Local Church Autonomy**

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

117 **Definition of Covenant for the Manual on Local Church**

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

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Congregational Code for Local Churches of the United Church of Christ

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

136
137 The Local Churches of the United Church of Christ live in an interrelated set of covenants. **Each**
138 **Local Church is in covenant with God**, the One who calls us together to faith and community
139 and inspires our shared spiritual journey through worship, learning, service, and justice-making.
140 **Each Local Church makes covenants among its own members**, as they seek to build a healthy
141 and thriving community that demonstrates respect and love for each person. **Each Local Church**
142 **is in covenant with other expressions of the United Church of Christ**, recognizing that
143 effective ministry does not happen in isolation.

144
145 The **Congregational Code** describes these three relationships, naming the specific commitments
146 and shared understandings implied by our Local Church’s covenantal promises. Each statement
147 in the Code flows from scripture, the wider Christian tradition, our experience in the United
148 Church of Christ, and both our theological lineages and the commitments made by General
149 Synod. Each statement also describes what can be plainly witnessed already in our Local
150 Churches as they live out these covenantal commitments. These covenants will take shape in
151 varied ways across our diverse contexts: each Local Church will discern how each statement can
152 be faithfully practiced in its own setting.

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

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

- 161
- 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.
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¹Donald 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.

- 163 • Celebrate that the Church is an outpouring of the gifts of God through the Holy Spirit,
164 and, although individual members and Local Churches contribute to it in their own
165 contexts, the whole Church belongs to God.
- 166 • Continue to deepen our faith and embody our unique ministry in the world using the
167 Bible, traditions, experiences, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and other resources that
168 inspire and guide faithful discernment.
- 169 • Administer the sacraments of Baptism and Communion faithfully, recognizing the legacy
170 of previous generations, the importance of our ecumenical commitments, and the calling
171 of the Spirit in our own time.
- 172 • Demonstrate our living relationship with the still-speaking God by faithfully engaging
173 spiritual practices.
- 174 • Use with care and grace the theological symbols, images, and languages that best express
175 our understandings of God, one another, and the world.
- 176 • Care for God’s creation by stewarding the resources of our planet for future generations.
- 177 • Nurture the gifts of all members of the Church and cultivate a culture where those gifts
178 can uplift the entire body of Christ.
- 179 • Model the generous and just love of God for all people through our service and care for
180 our local and global communities.

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

- 183 • Discern the nature of our call as a Local Church using multiple resources including the
184 Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches.
- 185 • Steward the time, talents, and financial resources of the Local Church responsibly, with
186 an appropriate balance of transparency and confidentiality.
- 187 • Attend to the physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being of our clergy, lay
188 leaders, and members by sharing responsibilities and communicating clear expectations.
- 189 • Have governance practices that are attentive to our faith community and context, as well
190 as the law.
- 191 • Accompany those in our communities whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by
192 systemic injustice, violence, poverty, and abuse, while acknowledging our relationships
193 to historic injustices.
- 194 • Foster honest and humble communication with one another, respecting the traditions and
195 practices of diverse cultures and lineages.
- 196 • Strive for just and equitable behaviors, policies, and practices in our congregation so all
197 persons are free from threats, harm, abuse, discrimination, and exclusion.
- 198 • Act when harm of any kind is reported or suspected to have occurred in our church,
199 addressing it with courage and clarity.
- 200 • Navigate conflict within our congregation with care toward the health of the whole
201 church.
- 202 • Assess our congregation’s ministry regularly.

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

- 210 • Participate in the covenantal life of the United Church of Christ, including with other
211 Local Churches, the Association, Conference, General Synod, and national and global
212 expressions of the Church.
- 213 • Engage in activities that strengthen the denomination’s mission, vision, and purpose,
214 including those that expand the tangible unity of all of Christ’s followers.
- 215 • Maintain Local Church Standing as set forth by the Association and be responsive to the
216 guidance of the Association.
- 217 • Honor the Search and Call processes of the United Church of Christ, including
218 Conference practices, and strive to offer equitable compensation for all staff.
- 219 • Support the wider expressions of the United Church of Christ through denominational
220 support (Our Church’s Wider Mission), special mission offerings, and other pledges,
221 dues, and gifts.
- 222 • Seek the counsel of others, including Conference staff and/or the Association Committee
223 on Ministry, should divisive tensions threaten our relationships within the congregation,
224 pastoral leadership, or wider expressions of the United Church of Christ.
- 225 • Model ecumenical and interfaith engagement with respect and cultural humility, offering
226 clarity about our beliefs while respecting the differing beliefs of others.
- 227 • Prayerfully consider the [Just World Covenants](#) and if entering into them, engage them
228 with integrity and ongoing reflection.
- 229 • Utilize established processes to dissolve our covenant with our Association should our
230 Local Church choose to end our ministry with the United Church of Christ.
- 231 • Strive to know, understand, and respect the diversity of perspectives within the United
232 Church of Christ, affirming that all settings speak to the Local Church and not for it.

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

- 237 • Attend to the physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being of our clergy, lay
238 leaders, and members by sharing responsibilities and communicating clear expectations.
- 239 • Accompany those in our communities whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by
240 systemic injustice, violence, poverty, and abuse, while acknowledging our relationships
241 to historic injustices.
- 242 • Foster honest and humble communication with one another, respecting the traditions and
243 practices of diverse cultures and lineages.
- 244 • Strive for just and equitable behaviors, policies, and practices in our congregation so all
245 persons are free from threats, harm, abuse, discrimination, and exclusion.

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248 [Additional resources for the Congregational Code.](#)
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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. 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:

- 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.

To help the Local Church engage in discernment about its own strengths and growing edges, consider using the [Grow Your Church board game](#), or other resources from the National Setting to explore the Local Church Marks in more depth.

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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- 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 employment related decisions.
 - Implementing safe conduct and abuse prevention practices and policies to foster a healthy environment for all people, particularly vulnerable individuals.

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Building Leadership Skills Within Local Churches

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- 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.

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Caring For the Wider Community

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- 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.

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Working Together for Justice and Mercy

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- 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.

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- 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.]

Living into United Church of Christ Identity

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- 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.

414 [Additional resources for the Marks for Faithful and Vital Local Churches.](#)

Local Church Governance

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418 Listening to God's unique call in each place and context, each Local Church in the United

419 Church of Christ will organize itself for ministry. Across the diversity of the United Church of

420 Christ, there are common structural and organizational practices of Local Churches that promote

421 health, reduce the risk of harm, and help foster congregational vitality. Together, these structures

422 and policies are called *governance*. Good governance helps each Local Church live into its

423 mission.

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425 While the needs of each context will vary, the governance structures of a Local Church will

426 typically include:

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- 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' responsibilities, and

433 · Faithful processes for making decisions, nurturing healthy relationships, working
434 through conflict and disagreement, and developing future leaders.

435 Given the variety of contexts and expressions within the United Church of Christ, this Manual
436 does not prescribe specific policies to be adopted in a uniform way in every Local Church.
437 Instead, it seeks to name fruitful practices, to raise important questions, and to uncover common
438 ground across the diverse Local Churches of the United Church of Christ. In covenant with one
439 another in every setting, we can affirm practices of Local Church governance that build up the
440 body of Christ across the whole church.

441 442 **Legal Status for Local Churches;** 443 **Incorporation, Nonprofit Status, and Tax Exemption**

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

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

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

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461 • Approving the church’s annual budget
462 • Calling a pastor
463 • Electing officers
464 • Approving amendments to the church’s governing documents
465 • Approving resolutions of the church to be sent to the Conference Annual Meeting
466 or to the General Synod
467 • Approving the purchase or sale of property
468 • Approving affiliation or disaffiliation with the denomination, and
469 • Approving the decision to dissolve the corporation and distribute its assets.

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471 To incorporate, a Local Church files a document called the *corporate charter* or *articles of*
472 *incorporation* with the state, stating its name, location, and basic details of its structure. This
473 incorporating document is distinct from the Local Church’s Constitution and Bylaws, which
474 provide more information about its governance practices. The document should be prepared with
475 the assistance of an attorney. The corporate charter or articles limit the powers of a church
476 corporation and impose certain obligations on the church corporation. Prior to amending its
477 Constitution or Bylaws, a Local Church should review its corporate charter or articles of

478 incorporation to ensure that the document remains reflective of the way the Local Church has
479 chosen to structure itself to support the ministry and mission to which it is called. Otherwise, it
480 may need to amend its charter or articles prior to amending its Constitution or Bylaws.

481
482 Incorporation as a nonprofit corporation under a state statute may confer tax advantages under
483 state law, and may also come with obligations to register, and/or report to, the state attorney
484 general’s office. Most states exempt churches from annual reports to the attorney general’s
485 office, but some states require a church to apply for such an exemption. A Local Church should
486 confer with an attorney licensed to practice in their state to learn more about their rights and
487 responsibilities under state law.

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489 Nonprofit corporate status and tax-exempt status are distinct. Churches are automatically
490 recognized as 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations under federal law and are not required to file
491 Form 1023 with the IRS to obtain recognition of their tax-exempt status. The United Church of
492 Christ, as a denomination, maintains a federal group tax exemption with the IRS. Local Churches
493 with standing in an Association of the United Church of Christ are included in the group
494 exemption. Local Churches generally do not appear in the IRS’s exempt organizations database
495 because religious denominations holding group exemptions are not required to update the
496 membership of the group exemption with the IRS. A letter indicating proof of group exemption
497 membership is available from the Office of General Counsel, an office of the National
498 Ministries, on request. The letter can only for the church name and address as it appears in the
499 Yearbook (and electronic Datahub) so ensure the Conference has the most current information
500 for the church.

501 **Constitutions and/or Bylaws for Local Churches**

502
503
504 A Local Church’s Constitution and/or Bylaws is a legal document that sets forth how the Local
505 Church is organized. Typically the *Constitution* outlines the basic principles and structure of the
506 Local Church, while the *Bylaws* offer additional detail. Sometimes these are combined into a
507 single document.

508
509 The Constitution and/or Bylaws is a legal contract between the church and its members, and the
510 church and the state in which it is incorporated (if it is incorporated), and therefore must be
511 followed. Ignoring or disregarding the Constitution and/or Bylaws places the church at financial,
512 legal, and reputational risk.

513
514 When writing, reviewing, or editing the Constitution and/or Bylaws, a Local Church should:

- 515
516 · **Seek outside expertise.** Because these are legal matters and have legal implications,
517 a Local Church should get assistance before drafting or amending the Constitution and/or
518 Bylaws from an expert with experience specific to the Local Church’s state, such as an
519 attorney. It is best to consult with someone who is not a member of the church to avoid
520 any conflicts of interest that may arise.
- 521 · **Stick to the basics.** The Constitution and/or Bylaws should deal with only the
522 broadest level of governing issues, providing an outline for organization without extra
523 detail. Remember, these are legal documents: In general, a state will require the

524 Constitution and/or Bylaws to address and comply with state law on some or all of the
525 following issues:

- 526
- 527 • Organizational purpose
 - 528 • Governing board structure
 - 529 • Officer positions and descriptions of their duties
 - 530 • Election of officers, terms of office, how vacancies will be filled, and who is
531 eligible to seek office
 - 532 • Assigning authority for executing contracts with third parties
 - 533 • Notice and frequency of meetings of governing board
 - 534 • Notice and frequency of meetings of the members
 - 535 • Conditions for membership, voting rights of members, and dismissal of members
 - 536 • Gift of corporate assets upon dissolution
 - 537 • Non-inurement of corporate assets to individual benefit
 - 538 • Cumulative voting, voting by proxy, and remote participation in meetings
 - 539 • Conflicts of interest
 - 540 • Indemnification.

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

- 543
- 544 • **Specify how the Local Church calls and dismisses a minister.** The Constitution
545 and/or Bylaws should also clarify the expectation that any called or employed
546 minister holds a form of ministerial standing in the United Church of Christ, as
547 defined by the [Manual on Ministry](#), or will take the necessary steps to gain this
548 standing within six months of being called or hired. Alternatively, a Local Church
549 might simply choose to specify that the church follows their Association or
550 Conference’s recommended practices for search and call, as a reflection of covenant
551 with the Wider Church and evolving practices. Evolving practices include lay
552 leadership of Local Churches. While Lay Ministerial Standing is defined in the
553 Manual on Ministry, the intentional decision to be a lay-led church should happen in
554 conversation and good covenantal relationships with the Association or Conference.
 - 555 • **Set a reasonable quorum for meetings of the Local Church.** The number of
556 members present that is required for the Local Church to be able to conduct business
557 in a meeting is called the *quorum*. To best prepare for any changes to the church’s
558 membership size in the future, quorum for annual and special meetings of the Local
559 Church should be a set percentage of the Local Church’s average worship attendance
560 (as reported by the Local Church to the United Church of Christ Datahub the prior
561 year), rather than a set number of people. Be sure the quorum complies with any
562 state law requirements.
 - 563
 - 564 • **Include an intentional plan for the distribution of assets upon dissolution of the**
565 **Local Church.** Though difficult to talk about, it is a gift to future generations (and
566 often a state requirement of the Constitution and/or Bylaws) to include a provision
567 about how assets will be handled if, and when, the Local Church closes. The Local

568 Church is limited by state and federal law regarding how and to what type of
569 organizations assets can be dispersed. Church assets cannot be disbursed to
570 individuals. A Local Church can consult with Conference staff for appropriate
571 language to ensure that distribution/dissolution provisions are consistent in the
572 articles and Bylaws.

573
574 • **Make provision for revisions.** A Local Church must be able to amend the
575 Constitution and/or Bylaws when it no longer helps the church live into its sense of
576 call. It is recommended practice that a vote reflective of a supermajority be required
577 for revision to the Constitution and/or Bylaws. States often have laws on what is
578 required. Be sure to check your state’s laws on any required vote.

579
580 Once the Constitution and/or Bylaws has been adopted, the Local Church’s work is not yet done.
581 The document must remain part of the Local Church’s common life, as in these ways:

582
583 **Equip Local Church leaders.** Officers and governing board members (council members,
584 consistory members, etc.) have a fiduciary duty to follow and enforce the church’s Constitution
585 and/or Bylaws. Be sure new board members receive a copy. Leaders should consult it regularly.
586 Copies should be readily accessible by all members of the Local Church.

587
588 **Review the Constitution and/or Bylaws annually.** Because following the Constitution and/or
589 Bylaws is a legal requirement, if it is not working for the church, it must be amended. An annual
590 review of the Constitution and/or Bylaws allows the Church to discern changes that will be
591 needed in the future, and to plan a time for revision prior to a meeting of the Local Church
592 members.

593
594 **Keep track of the Constitution and/or Bylaws.** If a Local Church cannot find its Constitution
595 and/or Bylaws, it should consult an attorney. A new Constitution and/or Bylaws may need to be
596 drafted and approved by the Local Church.

597
598 **Policies for Local Churches**

599
600 While a Constitution and/or Bylaws speaks to the broad organization of a Local Church, policies
601 are the Local Church’s operational guidelines. Policies protect and guide leaders, staff, and
602 members as they fulfill the mission of the Local Church. Policies and accompanying procedures
603 are a reference tool for action, decision making, and consistency regarding shared values and
604 expectations.

605
606 When adopting a policy, a Local Church should carefully consider how the policy will be
607 implemented, monitored, and enforced. The Local Church should ensure that it has the capacity
608 to implement all policies that it adopts. It is rarely satisfactory or appropriate for a Local Church
609 to adopt a template policy without some form of modification or contextualization. The resources
610 provided are for consideration only; each Local Church should seek the appropriate legal advice
611 in drafting and adopting policies to ensure compliance with best practices and the law in its
612 state.

613

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

619
620 Local Church leaders should review all policies regularly to ensure that they reflect current
621 practices, still serve the needs of the Local Church, and continue to support the Local Church's
622 values, mission, and ministry.

623

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

627

628 • **Abuse Prevention.** The Local Church's members, friends, clergy, employees, and
629 program participants must be able to worship, learn, and work together in an atmosphere
630 free from all forms of discrimination, harassment, exploitation, or intimidation. This
631 policy outlines practices that prevent or respond to abuse of many kinds. It is of particular
632 importance that this policy include practices to protect vulnerable members of the
633 community, e.g., children, older adults, and people with disabilities.

634 • **Building Use and Rental Agreements.** Inviting others in the community to use the
635 church's property can further the church's ministry and outreach. By setting a policy
636 establishing clear expectations and responsibilities for community use, a church can
637 reduce the risk of liability for the actions of outside users.

638 • **Conflict of Interest.** Officers, governing body members, and key employees should not
639 participate in making decisions for the church when they have a personal or business
640 interest in those decisions. This policy establishes guidelines for determining when, due
641 to a conflict of interest, a person should not be involved in church decision-making.

642 • **Copyright and Intellectual Property.** Federal and state laws describe the ownership and
643 use of writings and intellectual work products: In many cases it is necessary to secure the
644 permission of the creator of the work to use it. While the U.S. Copyright Act does allow
645 some music can be performed by churches during worship services without a license, that
646 exception is limited. As a matter of justice for the creators of material, it is important to
647 obtain permission from content creators to use their materials in worship and other
648 places, to properly attribute use, and to pay licensing fees where necessary. This includes
649 the use of hymns, prayers, or poetry used by others. There are additional copyright
650 concerns if a worship service is recorded or live-streamed.

651 • **Cybersecurity.** To safeguard data stored in computer systems, a Local Church should
652 develop and codify practices regarding data access, back-up storage, password and
653 authenticator use, and prevention of viruses and identity theft.

654 • **Employment Policies.** Strong and clear employment policies and practices are necessary
655 for good stewardship of the church's assets and fair and just treatment of employees. This
656 is true even if the church employs a small number of employees. The Insurance Board
657 and other insurance companies may provide a sample employee handbook that will help
658 get a church started, but churches are often subject to state and local employment laws, so

659 it is important to have a local attorney review the church’s employment handbook.
660 Churches can also refer to Conference salary guidelines for ministers and General Synod
661 resolutions on compensation for lay employees.

- 662 • **Financial Policy.** Managing money securely and faithfully is a key requirement of good
663 stewardship. Best practices in financial controls should inform the church’s financial
664 policy. This policy should reflect IRS regulations and any state laws or regulations to
665 which the church is subject.
- 666 • **Gift Acceptance Policy.** Any gifts the church accepts should further the mission and
667 ministry of the church and not create burdens that the church will have difficulty
668 carrying. This policy sets forth the circumstances under which the church will refuse a
669 gift that does not further its mission or which is too expensive to administer.
- 670 • **Investment Policy.** This policy describes the ways that the Local Church’s money,
671 including any restricted funds, can be invested and how the principal and interest can be
672 accessed. A church’s endowment may be subject to the state’s Uniform Prudential
673 Management of Institutional Funds Act, which describes certain responsibilities of
674 institutions in honoring donor intent and prudently investing funds.
- 675 • **Privacy and Consent.** Local Churches should develop policies to protect personal
676 information and images of their members and guests. For example, Local Churches
677 should exercise care that all people included in images published in print and electronic
678 media have consented to their use.
- 679 • **Record Retention.** Preservation of the appropriate records is essential to good
680 governance and in some cases, such as employment and financial data, may be required
681 by law. This policy will set forth expectations for church leaders and staff as to how
682 records of the church will be maintained and for what period of time.
- 683 • **Social Media and Technology.** The Local Church should establish expectations for how
684 church leaders and staff will use social media and other technology to further the
685 church’s ministry, and set limits on the use of church accounts for personal use or for
686 uses inconsistent with the church’s status as a tax-exempt organization under IRC
687 501(c)(3).

688
689 Samples of each of these policies, which should be customized to meet the needs of each Local
690 Church and the requirements of its state’s laws, are available in the Resources section.

691 **Membership in Local Churches**

692

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

694 **Members of the Body**

695

696 In popular culture, the word “membership” is used to describe a wide variety of affiliations. A
697 person might be a member of a gym or a warehouse store. These affiliations are typically
698 transactional: a member pays a fee and then is entitled to certain benefits. Or, a person might be a
699 member of a fraternity, or of the local school board. In these cases, membership implies an
700 exclusive status that comes with both privileges and responsibilities.
701

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

703

704 *For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the*
705 *same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we*
706 *are members one of another.* — Romans 12:4–5

707

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

713

714 **Disciples**

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

720

721 **Covenant Partners**

722 “Covenant—the commitment of God to God’s people, of the people to God, of the people to one
723 another as the Body of Christ—is foundational to UCC identity and is at the heart of our
724 governance (Manual on Ministry, page 6).” These holy committed relationships connect the
725 members of our Local Churches.

726

727 In colonial New England, churches of the Congregationalist tradition asked each member to
728 agree to a covenant, pledging (in the words of the 1629 Salem Covenant), “to walke together in
729 all [God’s] waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his blessed word of
730 truth.”

731

732 The members of a Local Church may not have identical beliefs; they may represent
733 varied races, cultures, and backgrounds; they may disagree on politics or theology.
734 Across all these differences, the idea of covenant holds the Local Church together. In
735 joining a Local Church, a member claims this particular expression of Christ’s body as
736 their own spiritual community. Together, church members covenant to follow Christ
737 together, to labor together in service to neighbor, to accompany one another in sorrow
738 and rejoicing, and to work through conflicts with respect and love: to walk together in all
739 God’s ways, as God is revealed in their midst.

740

741 **Stewards**

742 Members are entrusted with responsibility for governing and sustaining Local Churches.
743 Members share in discerning the Local Church’s future, being responsible stewards of its
744 resources, and helping to choose its leaders. Members of Local Churches are also members of

745 the whole United Church of Christ and may represent their Local Church in an Association, a
746 Conference, and the National Setting.

747

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

750

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

754

755 **Becoming a Member**

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

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

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

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

775

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

781

782 **Reaffirmation of Faith:** Individuals who have been baptized, and have been at one time a
783 member of a Christian church, but are not currently members of any church, may become a

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.”

784 member of a Local Church by reaffirmation of faith. The Local Church may offer a period of
785 preparation prior to a rite of welcome during the worship service.³

786
787 **Transfer:** Individuals who are members of another Christian church, within or outside the
788 United Church of Christ, may transfer their membership to a Local Church. It is courteous to
789 request a letter of transfer from the previous Local Church so that the church may remove them
790 from their rolls. In practice, there may be circumstances where such correspondence is not
791 feasible, and it need not stand in the way of welcoming new members. The Local Church may
792 offer a period of preparation prior to a rite of welcome during the worship service.

793
794 Where a Local Church has access, expertise, and interest in using technology, the Local
795 Churches may choose to welcome members joining through any of these pathways who
796 participate in the life of the Local Church exclusively through online means.

797
798 Many Local Churches specify that all candidates for membership, joining through any of these
799 pathways, be affirmed by the leadership body (Council, Deacons, Consistory) prior to joining the
800 church. This process is not intended to determine if candidates are “good enough” to join, nor is
801 it a perfunctory clerical step. Instead, it is an opportunity to begin building covenantal
802 relationships with new members, discovering their gifts, their needs, and their interests to
803 promote mutual flourishing. In rare cases, the leadership body may decide not to approve an
804 individual’s request to become a member; for example, when a person would not be able to
805 affirm the Local Church’s relational covenant.

806
807 Whether joining through confirmation, profession of faith, reaffirmation of faith, or transfer, it is
808 appropriate to recognize new members through a rite in the worship service.

809 810 **Affiliation**

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

- 813
- 814 • A person from another faith tradition who wants to participate in the Local Church where
815 their spouse is a member, but who cannot in good conscience make the Christian faith
816 commitments of membership.
 - 817 • A person who participates for part of the year in one Local Church (as a college student,
818 seasonal resident, etc), while holding membership in another.
 - 819 • A person who participates in the online ministries of one Local Church while
820 participating in the onsite ministries of another.

821
822 Some Local Churches have created a category of affiliation suitable for these people.
823 (Frequently, this category is called “Associate Members” or “Friends.”) Local Churches that
824 have such a category should create policies outlining the ways these people may participate in
825 the life of the Local Church, making clear whether they are permitted to vote in congregational
826 elections, hold elected offices, serve on boards and committees, etc. It is appropriate to welcome
827 these people through a rite of welcome in the worship service.

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

828

829 **Multiple Membership**

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

835

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

839

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

843

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

848

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

851

852 **Life as a Member**

853 Membership requires more than good intentions: it is an ongoing relationship of interaction, and
 854 participation in the life of a Local Church. To help current and potential members understand this
 855 relationship, it is helpful for Local Churches to outline their expectations for membership:

856

- 857 • A church *covenant* might outline the role and responsibilities of church membership,
 858 including expectations for prayer, participation, and stewardship.
- 859 • A *relational covenant* (or *behavioral covenant*) is a document that describes the ways
 860 church members will relate to one another, such as demonstrating mutual respect,
 861 communicating effectively, committing to anti-racist practices, accessibility and
 862 inclusion, and working through conflict in mature and loving ways. Relational covenants
 863 can be an important tool in addressing complaints of inappropriate or offensive conduct
 864 in a just manner.
- 865 • The *Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches* is a tool Local Churches can use for
 866 self-reflection on their Local Church's vitality. While embodying the Marks is a
 867 collective effort that no individual member can pursue entirely on their own, the Marks
 868 are also helpful for members' own self-reflection as they consider ways they can use their
 869 gifts for the flourishing of their faith community.

870

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

874
875 It is important for Local Churches to maintain an accurate list of members (often known as a
876 *membership roll*). Having an accurate count of members is critical to the National Setting's data
877 collection ministries; maintaining records of members' names is a gift to future historians. Local
878 Churches should review their membership roll in regular intervals (a minimum of every four
879 years is recommended) to ensure accuracy and to identify any members who may have become
880 inactive. A review of the membership roll can also be a helpful tool in times of congregational
881 transition, such as preparing a Local Church Profile for a pastoral call process, or in periodic
882 evaluation and planning.

883

884 **When Membership Ends**

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

888 **Voluntary Withdrawal**

889 Just as individuals become members by their own choice, individuals can voluntarily tender their
890 resignation from a Local Church by advising the Local Church's leadership of their withdrawal
891 of membership. An individual can do this by requesting a letter of transfer to another Local
892 Church, by writing to request removal from the membership roll, or by other step that would
893 clearly reflect their change in status. The Local Church is obligated to respect this decision, and
894 should provide a letter to the individual confirming their choice to withdraw and affirming that
895 their name has been removed from the roll. In some cases it may be appropriate to mark this
896 transition through a rite of farewell in the worship service.

897

898 **Withdrawal due to inactivity**

899 Members may also be removed from membership after prolonged inactivity in the Local Church.
900 In its written policies, the Local Church should define what "inactivity" means: what kind of
901 participation is expected of members, and how frequent this participation should be.

902

903 Each Local Church should periodically review its membership roll to identify inactive members.
904 The church should attempt to contact these members to determine their interest in remaining on
905 the membership roll. If inactive members are uninterested in continuing in membership, or if
906 they are unable to be contacted within a specified amount of time, their names should be
907 removed from membership.

908

909 **Removal**

910 Local Church leadership must address behavior on the part of a member that is incompatible
911 with healthy congregational life. Behavior by a Local Church member that creates a threat to the

912 safety or wellbeing of another member, of the Local Church, or of the wider community must
913 receive an expedient and appropriate response.

914
915 Procedures for responding to problematic behavior should be included in the Local Church's
916 Constitution and/or Bylaws, or in other written policies. The steps for addressing concerns
917 outlined in Matthew 18:15-17 may provide an initial framework. Local Church leadership may
918 develop an individualized behavior plan with a member setting conditions for continued
919 participation in the Local Church.

920
921 When problematic behavior cannot be resolved in this way, or when egregious behavior that
922 requires immediate action occurs, a Local Church may need to terminate an individual's
923 membership in the Local Church. The former member should receive clear and prompt
924 communication notifying them of the Local Church's decision to terminate their membership and
925 the implications of that decision.

926

927 **Leadership in the Local Church**

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

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

941 **Decision-Making in the Local Church**

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

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

947 **Strategic Decisions** that guide a Local Church's calling, mission, and leadership over the long
948 term, such as:

- 949 • Discerning the Local Church's mission and vision
- 950 • Designing a governance structure
- 951 • Calling pastoral leaders

- 952 • Setting expectations for Local Church members
- 953 • Crafting policies for the use or investment of assets.

954 **Tactical Decisions** that provide programmatic direction for those engaged in the Local Church's
955 ministry, such as:

- 956 • Selecting or creating programs that support the Local Church's mission
- 957 • Planning how ministries will be carried out
- 958 • Developing processes for administration
- 959 • Ensuring practices of accountability.

960 **Operational Decisions** that Local Church leaders make on a daily basis as they carry out the
961 Local Church's ministry, such as:

- 962 • Managing details of a planned program
- 963 • Spending funds within an agreed-upon budget
- 964 • Determining how to implement a policy.

965 These different types of decisions require different methods for decision-making. Having a clear
966 understanding of how a Local Church makes different types of decisions creates a sense of
967 transparency and collaboration among its members.

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

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

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

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

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1001 **Engaging Conflict in the Local Church**

1002 Conflict and disagreements are a part of living in a community. Even though discord can feel
1003 uncomfortable, it can also be a sign of vitality, inviting a community to hear diverse voices, to
1004 grow, and to change. Each Local Church should have [practices and structures](#) in place to address
1005 conflict as it occurs, helping its members relying on their faith to help them respond with
1006 maturity, building healthy relationships, and seeking a fresh way forward. These practices might
1007 be included in a Local Church’s policies or its Relational Covenant.

1008 When the Local Church experiences conflict that is challenging for the congregation to navigate
1009 on its own, wider church settings can offer assistance; see the chapter on Local Church Standing,
1010 Support, and Accountability for more detail.

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1013 **Leadership Development in the Local Church**

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1015 As a popular adage says, “God does not call the equipped, but God equips the called.” A Local
1016 Church can be part of God’s work by equipping its members with the skills needed for
1017 leadership. Developing new leaders is a gift the Local Church can offer not only to its own future
1018 ministry but also to other settings of the United Church of Christ, as our Associations,
1019 Conferences, and National Setting also benefit from excellent leadership.

1020

1021 Leadership development in Local Churches might take shape in these ways:

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- 1023 • **Discover the gifts each member can bring.** Use tools such as a spiritual gift inventory,
1024 a survey of skills and interests, and one-to-one meetings to reveal the ways that each
1025 member of the Local Church can contribute to its mission and ministry.
- 1026 • **Extend invitations into leadership.** Some members may need encouragement to feel
1027 welcome or confident serving in positions of leadership. When gifts for leadership are
1028 evident, make room for these new voices by intentionally offering leadership
1029 opportunities. In extending invitations to lead, a Local Church should remember that gifts
1030 for leadership are present in people of all ages, genders, races, backgrounds, and abilities.
- 1031 • **Offer opportunities to learn.** Provide educational options such as workshops and book
1032 studies that help leaders grow familiar with Local Church governance and ministries.
1033 Take advantage of opportunities offered by the Association, Conference, or National
1034 Setting. Look for resources available from seminaries, regional theological education
programs, and other church organizations.

- 1035 • **Encourage mentorship and ecumenical partnership.** Experienced leaders can help
1036 new leaders find confidence in ministry. (Remember that a mentor can be a person of any
1037 age or background.) Ecumenical neighbors can offer fresh perspectives on governance; a
1038 Local Church might visit a neighbor’s governing board meeting and invite guests to
1039 comment on its own.
1040

1041 **Assessing and Improving Governance**

1042 The work of Governance is never done. Changes in the demographics of the membership,
1043 changes in pastoral leadership, changes in the Local Church’s context, and discernment of new
1044 calls to ministry and mission all require consideration of how the governance structure may need
1045 to change to best support the mission and ministry of the Local Church. On a regular basis, the
1046 Local Church should review its bylaws, leadership structures, and policies to ensure they are
1047 allowing the Local Church to fulfill its mission.

1048 [Additional Resources for Local Church Governance.](#)

1049 **Local Church Standing, Support, and Accountability**

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1051 In the United Church of Christ, each Local Church lives in covenantal relationship to its
1052 Association. In some areas, the responsibilities assigned to Associations in the United Church of
1053 Christ Constitution and Bylaws are performed by a Conference acting as an Association. *All*
1054 *references to Associations in this section also apply to Conferences acting as Associations.* This
1055 section of the Manual on Local Church explores how this covenant takes shape:

- 1056 • The Association confers **standing** on Local Churches, accepting them as members of the
1057 United Church of Christ. The Association sets standing requirements for Local Churches,
1058 including faithfulness to the Congregational Code for Local Churches.
1059
- 1060 • The Association provides **support** to Local Churches, assisting with assessment, search
1061 and call, and conflict resolution.
1062
- 1063 • The Association ensures **accountability** for Local Churches, staying abreast of each
1064 Local Church’s ministries through annual reports, and offering processes for review and
1065 repair when standing requirements have not been met or when covenantal ties are
1066 strained.
1067

1068 In every season of a Local Church’s life—whether joining the United Church of Christ for the
1069 first time, celebrating faithful ministry, seeking a new pastor, managing conflict, or even
1070 discerning an end to its relationship with the United Church of Christ—the covenant between the
1071 Local Church and its Association offers tools and relationships to strengthen its discipleship.

Standing

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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.

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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.

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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

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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 or a Conference Acting as 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 in the faith community
- Initial meeting of the faith community and the Association (or a designated body with the Association, such as a Committee on Ministry)
- Development of a Preparation and Formation Plan

- 1116 • Creation and Review of foundational documents (such as articles of incorporation,
1117 constitution and/or bylaws, and key policies)
- 1118 • Development of a Local Church Profile
- 1119 • Final review and Association vote on Local Church Standing
- 1120 • Liturgical celebrations at Conference Annual Meeting and General Synod

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1122 Guidelines for each step in the Local Church Standing Discernment Process are available in the
1123 MLC Resources.

1124 **Release of Local Church Standing and Voluntary Disaffiliation With the UCC**

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1126 There are many reasons why a Local Church may seek to leave the United Church of Christ. In
1127 some cases, a Local Church may no longer have the capacity or resources to continue as a Local
1128 Church, and may choose to make the most faithful decision of entering a process of Legacy. A
1129 Legacy process involves celebrating what has been done and passing on wisdom and resources to
1130 the next generation of Local Churches. [Legacy resources can be found in the Resource section.](#)

1131

1132 In other situations, a Local Church may determine that continued affiliation with the United
1133 Church of Christ is not in the best interest of the Local Church or its members. This may be
1134 because there is a fundamental disagreement with the polity of the denomination that cannot be
1135 overcome, when there has been irreparable damage or harm in the relationship between the Local
1136 Church and other expressions of the United Church of Christ, or for other reasons the Local
1137 Church may discern. Before pursuing disaffiliation, every effort should be made to attempt to
1138 repair damaged relationships and to cultivate a relationship of care and trust.

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1140 [*A complete Local Church Disaffiliation Process is available in the MLC Resources.*](#)

1141 **Ecumenical Relationships and Standing**

1142 The United Church of Christ, living out its identity as a United and Uniting denomination, finds
1143 congregational expression in various partnerships with churches of different denominational
1144 traditions. Many such partnerships are found with churches from our full communion partners,
1145 which are:

- 1146 • The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- 1147 • The United Church of Canada
- 1148 • The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- 1149 • The Presbyterian Church (USA)
- 1150 • The Reformed Church in America

1151 In addition to these partnerships, the UCC has formal agreements with the Alliance of Baptists,
1152 Congregational Christian Churches of American Samoa (CCCAS) and the Fellowship of
1153 Affirming Ministries (TFAM). Additionally, the UCC has a church partnership agreement
1154 (Kirchengemeinschaft) with the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD).

1155 These various partnership agreements bring with them different expressions of mutual
1156 recognition of ministry, as well as other potential areas for church cooperation.

1157 Other ecumenical partnerships include relationships with denominations with whom the United
1158 Church of Christ shares no formal agreements, but where a local partnership has proved to be
1159 fruitful.

1160 **Yoked Congregations**

1161 In some cases, congregations within the UCC have “yoked” with congregations of a different
1162 denomination, resulting in the sharing of clergy who serve the two churches and with oversight
1163 by both denominations. Such arrangements require significant, intentional organization to ensure
1164 the needs of the separate congregations will be met. At the same time, attention must be paid to
1165 ensure that fair and realistic expectations are placed upon the minister(s) serving the
1166 congregations. In such cases, the congregations remain separate, autonomous institutions, who
1167 each maintain good standing with their respective denominations. Given that there may be
1168 differing systems for the selection or appointment of clergy, thoughtful attention is given to how
1169 clergy will be selected to serve the congregations.

1170 **Merged Congregations**

1171 In other cases, congregations within the UCC have merged with congregations of a different
1172 denomination. This process results in a new congregation that may have standing in two or more
1173 denominations. In these cases, the congregation has the responsibility to maintain covenantal
1174 relations with each denomination to which it belongs and must fulfill the requirements to
1175 maintain good standing in those denominations.

1176 The congregation may also choose to relinquish its standing in one of the two denominations,
1177 choosing to maintain standing with only one denomination. Should the congregation choose to
1178 maintain standing only with the UCC, it will be responsible to maintain full covenantal relations
1179 with the UCC through its Association and/or Conference. However, even in such a circumstance,
1180 it is likely that the history/ethos of the relinquished denomination will remain present in the
1181 congregation and may continue to play a role in its ongoing life.

1182 **Dual Affiliation**

1183 At times, the Spirit leads a congregation from another ecumenical body to seek dual affiliation
1184 with the UCC. In these cases, the congregation will maintain full standing with its original
1185 denomination, while also meeting the covenantal expectations for standing in the UCC through
1186 the Association and/or Conference.

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Support

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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

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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. 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 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. A Local Church will also benefit from using the Marks for Faithful and Vital Local Churches and revisiting the expectations of the Congregational Code for Local Churches as part of this self-assessment. 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 a result of a self-assessment.

Search and Call Support

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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.

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Access to the Local Church Profile portal is mediated with the assistance of Conference staff. The Short-Form Profile is intended for churches who are either seeking to call someone for a short-term vacancy of less than 6 months, an interim pastor, or a settled pastor for ½ time or less. Once the Local Church completes the Local Church Profile, Conference staff validate the Profile and create a post on the UCC Ministry Opportunities website. That posting remains until the

1231 position has been filled. All pastoral vacancies in the United Church of Christ must be published
1232 on the UCC Ministry Opportunities website.

1233
1234 A Local Church can expect to receive ministerial profiles from any and all United Church of
1235 Christ ministerial candidates who desire to be considered for that position. Similarly, an
1236 authorized minister in good standing in the United Church of Christ has the right to have their
1237 ministerial profile be sent to any Local Church position for which they would like to be
1238 considered.

1239
1240 It is expected that any minister serving in a Local Church of the United Church of Christ holds a
1241 form of ministerial standing in the United Church of Christ or will take the necessary steps to
1242 gain this standing within six months of being called or hired. This standing may include:
1243 Ordained Ministerial Standing, Ordained Ministerial Partner Standing (for ministers ordained in
1244 the Christian Church [Disciples of Christ] or the United Church of Canada), Dual Standing (for
1245 ministers ordained in other traditions), or Lay Ministerial Standing (temporary ministerial
1246 authorization for lay ministers engaged in pastoral ministry).

1247 **Situational and Local Church Support Consultations**

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1249 Conflict and disagreements are a part of living in a community. Even though discord can feel
1250 uncomfortable, it can also be a sign of vitality, inviting a community to hear diverse voices, to
1251 grow, and to change. Each Local Church should have practices and structures in place to address
1252 conflict as it occurs, relying on faith to help all partners respond with maturity, build healthy
1253 relationships, and seek a fresh way forward. These practices might be included in a Local
1254 Church's policies or its Relational Covenant. A Local Church may also request support from the
1255 Conference to find a trained mediator to facilitate a conflict resolution or restorative justice
1256 process. This will enable the Local Church to build capacity to resolve conflicts themselves in
1257 healthy and faithful ways.

1258
1259 When there is conflict within the Local Church that is beyond the ability of the congregation to
1260 navigate, it is appropriate for Local Church leadership or pastoral leadership to request a
1261 Situational or a Local Church Support Consultation from the Association and/or Conference.

1262
1263 When conflict involves an authorized minister but does not suggest or warrant a Ministerial
1264 Fitness Review, the Association's Committee on Ministry can offer a ***Situational Support
1265 Consultation***. Members of the COM will meet with the parties involved seeking mutually-
1266 agreeable options for resolving the situation.

1267
1268 In other experiences of conflict, a Local Church can request a ***Local Church Support
1269 Consultation*** from the Association and/or Conference. A Local Church Support Consultation is a
1270 series of facilitated conversations that seek to examine the issues that are contributing to the
1271 conflict, identify those involved in these issues, and discern faithful and just resolutions to the
1272 conflict.

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1274 [A full process for situational and Local Church support consultations is outlined in the MLC](#)
1275 [Resources.](#)

Accountability

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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:

1282 Local Church Annual Report Form

1283 Each year, the National Setting requests information from each Local Church about its
1284 participation, membership, staffing, budget, and giving in a Request for Annual Church Data.
1285 This information is vital for the United Church of Christ because it offers a critical lens into the
1286 trends of the denomination over time, ensures that the denomination shares accurate data with its
1287 members and partners, and enables Conferences to appropriately resource Local Churches and
1288 authorized ministers.

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1290 Timely completion of this annual report by a representative of the Local Church is encouraged
1291 and expected. If a Local Church has difficulty completing this report for any reason, a Local
1292 Church representative is encouraged to reach out to Association and/or Conference staff for
1293 assistance and guidance in completing these forms.

1294 Local Church Standing Review Process

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1296 There are times in any church's life when conflict, practices, or behaviors disrupt the ministry of
1297 the congregation. In many cases, challenges within a congregational life can be resolved
1298 internally or through the use of a Local Church Support Consultation as described above.
1299 However, when chronic conflicts, practices, or behaviors of a Local Church violate the ethical
1300 expectations as outlined by the Congregational Code for Local Churches or inhibit ongoing
1301 covenantal relationship with its Association, a Local Church Standing Review may be
1302 appropriate.

1303

1304 This review process, conducted by an Association-appointed Oversight Team, seeks to address
1305 significant concerns about a Local Church's conduct with respect to its members, its pastoral
1306 leadership, and/or other expressions of the Church. The process is designed to determine the
1307 merit of the concern(s) raised, to create space for all relevant parties to share their perspective
1308 about the concern(s), and to find a pathway for the Local Church toward health and alignment
1309 with the Congregational Code for Local Churches.

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1311 *[A full Local Church standing review process is outlined in the MLC Resources.](#)*

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1313 [Glossary](#)

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1315 [Bibliography](#)

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1317 **The Manual on Local Church Resources** is a living document that will be updated with
1318 regularity. You can find the Resource section [here](#) and suggest your own additions [here](#).