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

Oversight of the Local Church and its Covenantal Relationship with the Association in Which it Holds Standing as a Local Church of the United Church of Christ.

A Prudential Resolution

Submitted by the Southern California Nevada Conference

Summary:

Based on the commitment of the United Church of Christ that all expressions of the Church live in covenant with one another, and understanding that the motto "That they may all be one" has meaning only when covenantal partners desire unity and willingly live into respectful covenantal relationships with each other, this resolution recognizes that there are Local Churches within the United Church of Christ who have broken the covenantal relationship yet have not voted to terminate their standing as a member congregation of the United Church of Christ. This resolution encourages a closer relationship between Associations or Conferences Acting as Associations and Local Churches, and asks that the United Church of Christ Board provide guidelines for Associations and Conferences for the release of member congregations who have not lived into the covenantal responsibilities of a Local Church as outlined in the United Church of Christ Manual on Church. We recognize that these developing practices may require a revision to Articles III and V of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ and/or add new language to the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ, which would provide consistent criteria and mechanisms in all Conferences and Associations.

Biblical, Theological and Historical Grounding:

The motto of the United Church of Christ, "That they may all be one," is a phrase that the author of the Gospel of John put upon the lips of Jesus. The context of the saying is that Jesus is giving his final instructions to his disciples following the Last Supper, and shortly before his arrest, trial and death. In this "Farewell Discourse" and "Farewell Prayer," Jesus stresses the connection and unity between him and God (whom he calls Father), the unity between him and his followers (eg "I am the vine, you the branches") and therefore the unity between the disciples and God. Jesus sends his disciples into ministry in the world in imitation of his ministry among them.

The various expressions of the United Church of Christ have entered into covenantal relationships with one another for the sake of unity in the midst of our many diversities. General Synod affirmations that the UCC be a denomination that is Reformed and Reforming, United and Uniting, Multicultural and Multiracial, Accessible to All, and Open and Affirming is a witness to our deep desire for unity as lived out in covenant.

Article III of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ calls the various expressions of the United Church of Christ into covenantal relationship, stating that "each expression of the Church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the other." It further states that each expression of the United Church of Christ "listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways."

45 Unfortunately, we do not always live up to our best ideals. There are provisions within the

- 46 Bylaws of the United Church of Christ (Article I, Paragraphs 152-154: Ministerial
- 47 Accountability) and within the bylaws of each of the four Associations of the Southern
- 48 California Nevada Conference that give the responsibilities of oversight and accountability to the
- 49 Association in which the authorized minister holds standing. It is the responsibility of the
- Association to grant, suspend or terminate the authorized standing of a minister.

The Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ are silent on matters of oversight and accountability on the part of Local Churches. Article V, Paragraph 18 of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ states that the autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action, including "to withdraw by its own decision from the United Church of Christ at any time." As membership in the United Church of Christ is a covenantal relationship that includes multiple parties, we read in this paragraph that releasing a Local Church from membership in the United Church of Christ would not impede, but rather enhance the autonomy of the Local Church.

The Association is called upon to offer encouragement, guidance, and assistance in the organization of new Local Churches and to receive Local Churches into the United Church of Christ. (UCC Bylaws Article II, Paragraphs 155-164.) Conferences are called upon to receive from Local Churches contributions for denominational support and to discharge duties and provide services to Local Churches. (UCC Bylaws, Article II, Paragraphs 171 & 174.)

The United Church of Christ Manual on Church, which stresses both autonomy and covenant in the relationships between Local Churches and the Association, states that an Association or Conference acting as an Association "may also develop policies concerning the fitness or discipline of local churches." (Lines 443-444) The Manual does not make suggestions as to what those policies may or should include.

The UCC Manual on Church attempts to set forth "Covenantal Expectations of the Local Church." These expectations include:

- a. Providing delegates to the Association and Conference meetings
- b. Participating in Ecclesiastical Councils, Ordinations, Installations and other celebrations
- c. Nominating representatives from among its members for election or appointment to the standing committees, task forces and working groups of the Association and Conference
- d. Providing statistics, data, annual reports, and other information
- e. Making timely per capita payments to the Association and Conference
- f. Contributing generously to Our Church's Wider Mission
- g. Providing support for UCC related seminaries, agencies and special offerings
- (UCC Manual on Church, lines 694-719)

While the Manual on Church provides excellent guidance for establishing a covenantal relationship between a Local Church and an Association, it, too, is silent on how to dissolve a covenantal relationship.

Given that the governing documents of the United Church of Christ provide no guidance for how or when a Local Church may be released from membership in the United Church of Christⁱ, and given that the Manual on Church clearly states measureable and minimal responsibilities of a Local Church living in covenant with its Association and Conference, we submit the following resolution for consideration at the Thirty-Second General Synod of the United Church of Christ in Milwaukee in 2019.

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The Text of the Resolution:

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

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WHEREAS Article V of the Constitution of the United Church of Christ defines how Associations receive churches into membership in the United Church of Christ, yet provides no guidance as to how a local church may be released from membership; and

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WHEREAS the United Church of Christ Manual on Ministry names specific responsibilities of the Local Church to the Association and the Conference;

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THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the United Church of Christ Board provide guidance, which may include revisions to the Constitution of the United Church of Christ, for Associations and Conferences on how to release Local Churches from membership in the United Church of Christ.

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

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

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ⁱ At its 2018 Annual Meeting, the Southern California Nevada Conference passed a resolution that established criteria and guidelines through which an Association can remove a local church from its membership. The language of the resolution:

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Conference requests that the Church and Ministry Committees of its member Associations:

- 1. Maintain records of each Local Church's participation in regularly called and special meetings of the Association, Ecclesiastical Councils, Ordinations and Installations.
- Consider revisions to their bylaws that intend to strengthen the relationships and the mutual accountability
 between the Association and its Local Churches, including oversight for Local Churches and the possibility
 of releasing Local Churches from membership, just as the Association exercises oversight for authorized
 ministers and grants, suspends and terminates authorized ministerial standing.
- 3. Consider suspending or terminating the standing of a Local Church when all of the following applies:
 - a. The Local Church has not participated in a regularly called meeting of the Association for more than three years,
 - b. The Local Church has not contributed to the financial well-being of the Association, Conference and denomination through payment of Association and Conference per capita dues or Our Church's Wider Mission for more than three years,
 - c. The Local Church does not respond to overtures from the Association or Conference that would initiate conversation aimed at improving the covenantal ties between the Local Church and the Association and/or Conference.