

# The Local Church

## MEMBERSHIP, ORGANIZATION, FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITIES

### prepare

#### What's behind all this?

As the UCC's Constitution says, "The basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ is the local church." It is within the local church that people are "organized for Christian worship, for the furtherance of Christian fellowship, and for the ongoing work of Christian witness" (Article V).

One distinguishing feature of the UCC's polity is that its congregations are autonomous, meaning that each local church has the freedom to discern and decide for itself how it will structure and organize themselves, what style of worship they'll engage, how members are received into the congregation, etc.

The autonomy of each congregation, however, does not mean that congregations are purely independent. The local church is also called to be deeply and intentionally covenantal with other settings of the UCC. Members of a local church become members of the entire UCC, and local churches exist in relationship to one another, their association, their conference, and the General Synod. Each are called to speak and to listen to one another and to be in ministry alongside one another. Still, there is freedom for the local church to determine how to best respond to call to actions or recommendations from wider settings.

It is important to remember that, while there is great freedom for local churches, there is also great responsibility. As the Constitution and Bylaws articulate, "The local churches of the United Church of Christ have, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for that church, its labors and its extension, even as the United Church of Christ has, in fellowship, a God-given responsibility for the wellbeing and needs and aspirations of its local churches. In mutual Christian concern and in dedication to Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, the one and the many share in common Christian experience and responsibility" (Constitution, Article V).

#### Participants' Perspectives

- Many folks' only exposure to the UCC is their local church. This unit will help them see the role of the local church within the context of the wider UCC and strengthen an understanding of why local churches and intentionally Christian community are important.
- "We are autonomous," or, "We are congregational," is an often heard refrain in the UCC. While our local churches have autonomy and much freedom, local churches are also called to be covenantal and to listen and discern how best to

#### *As you prepare for this session*

- Check the length of any videos
- Make a timeline for this session
- Choose your "engage" activity/activities
- Double-check the materials needed

#### *Where is this going?*

Participants will explore the role of the local church in the UCC, what freedoms and responsibilities local churches have, as well as what membership means for the UCC.

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carry out ministry in their settings. Exploring the tension between autonomy and covenant may help participants discover some of the gifts of the UCC.

- Church vitality is a buzzword these days as churches face shifts in membership. One of the gifts of autonomy is that local churches are free to discern what God is calling them to be and do. This session links UCC polity with an invitation for churches to think about vitality perhaps a bit differently than they otherwise do.

## encounter

### Video

#### 1. Warm Up

Ask participants why they come to church. Thinking about your own response to that question will help as you discuss the church's role and importance with participants. Have participants spread out in the room, turn on dance music appropriate for ballroom dancing (a good, slow waltz will work), and ask them to dance, ballroom style, by themselves. Participants may need a quick explanation or example to follow so be ready to assume a partner dance position as though there is another person with you. About 30 seconds of dancing will illustrate the point. Talk with participants about how hard it is (and how strange it feels) to dance alone. Ask these questions: How do the people in their local church act as "dance partners" in Christian faith and practice? Can you be a Christian apart from a local church?

#### 2. Watch

"The Local Church: Membership, Organization, Freedoms, and Responsibilities"

#### 3. Unpack

- Why be a member of a church community?
- The host says that you actually become Christian by being a part of a congregation. What does the host mean by this?
- How is the UCC's understanding of membership (and the responsibilities) reflective of its commitment to Christian unity?
- How is the UCC's understanding of membership reflective of its hope to be a united and uniting Church?
- In our polity, when you join a local congregation, you join the entire United Church of Christ. Why is this significant in the UCC?
- How does a local church relate to other settings of the UCC?
  - What does it mean to say that the UCC is covenantal? In what ways are congregations autonomous? In what ways are they responsible to other parts of the UCC?
- How does this organizational structure reflect the UCC's commitment to diversity and unity?

### Materials:

-Ability to show video

### Set up:

Make sure there is space to move around

### Adaptation:

Instead of dancing, ask participants to spread out and play tag by themselves for a minute, before telling them to "freeze." Ask what it was like and talk with them about the need to have other people to make it work. Ask them how being a part of a church is similar.

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- Being in community matters, so how do churches, with so many different people from different walks of life, figure out how to live together?
  - What role does democracy play? What role does healthy conflict play? In what other ways do churches maintain community?

## engage

Choose one or more activities to explore the session's themes.

### Activity One: Members

Christians are communal people. We worship together, learn together, and serve together because the gifts and graces of others help each of us to grow in love of God and love of neighbor. In many communities of faith, people have a rite of passage where they formalize their relationship to the rest of the church community and make a commitment to be a part of the community, to help make decisions, and to shape its ministry. This formalized commitment is often referred to as membership, though a similar idea may have a different title in different local churches.

Have participants look through the liturgies used when people become members as well as any of the formalized places that the role of members is laid out. This may be in your constitution, bylaws, or other documents.

Questions for conversation while participants work:

- Who can be a member? What does it mean to be a member of this church?
- What promises do members make? What rights and responsibilities come with being a member?
- How do people become members?
- How does the membership of this church relate to being a member of the wider UCC?
- Does membership in the church matter?
- How is being a member similar or different to being an active non-member?

### Activity Two: Freedom from, Responsibility for

In the UCC, congregations have autonomy, meaning that each local church has the freedom to determine how it will structure its communal life together. This formulation was an influence of the Congregational and Christian traditions who wanted local churches to have freedom from bishops, popes, and the like. But in the UCC, the freedom of autonomy is for specific purposes.

To help participants understand the role of local church autonomy in UCC polity, tape up two big sheets of newsprint. Title one "Freedom from..." and the other "Responsibility for..." Ask participants to think back to the video and what was said

#### *Materials:*

- Liturgy for acceptance of new members
- Any other documentation of rights and responsibilities of your members



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about the history and importance of local church autonomy. Invite them to elaborate on what they learned by circulating between the two sheets of newsprint and coming up with lists of what the local church has freedom from and what the church has a responsibility for.

- Example: freedom from a central authority that tells us how to organize
- Example: responsibility for discerning how to advocate for justice in the local community

When they've finished, go over the lists. In our polity, would you say that we focus more on freedoms or responsibilities? Would you say there actually are more freedoms or responsibilities? Is that a gift or a challenge?

## Activity Three: Diversity of UCC Congregations

In the UCC, congregations have autonomy, meaning that each local church has the freedom and responsibility to discern and decide for itself how it will structure and organize themselves, what style of worship they'll engage, what pastor to call, how members are received into the congregation, etc. The beautiful result of local church autonomy is that churches across the denomination vary widely. Choose one of the following ways to explore the diverse expressions of UCC churches.

### Explore the Diversity of Local Churches' Polity

Invite participants to look through the constitution and bylaws of their local church and then compare and contrast it with the constitutions and bylaws of other UCC congregations. A quick internet search will pull up many UCC churches that have their constitutions and bylaws online, or simply ask a few churches if they'd be willing to email you copies. Having documents from a wide variety of churches (different sizes, ages, geographical locations, historic roots, etc.) will be beneficial.

Questions for conversation while participants work:

- What are the similarities and differences in the purpose and missions of congregations?
- How are the structures of officers, boards, and other groups similar or different?
- What role does covenant have?
- What is asked or required of their members?
- How does the local church relate to the wider church?
- Are there statements of faith or belief? What role do those have?
- How are decisions made?

### Explore the Diversity of Church Expressions

Depending on the technology you have available, either in small groups or as a large group, explore the diversity of UCC congregations by looking through their websites. Each church website is a window into the congregation that will allow you to see who they are as a church. Have folks visit different UCC congregations' websites and get a feel for the congregation. You may want to curate list of different websites you'd like folks to choose from and have that available to pass out.

### Materials:

- Newsprint
- Markers

### Materials:

- Constitution and bylaws of your local church
- Constitution and bylaws of other UCC churches
- Access and a way for participants to see UCC church websites
- Access and a way for participants to see worship services of other UCC congregations

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Questions for conversation while participants work:

- What are you seeing about the congregation you are exploring?
- What is their purpose, mission, and vision?
- What are they doing in their community?
- Are they doing any kind of innovative ministry?

### Explore the Diversity of UCC Worship

Several congregations record and broadcast some or all of their worship services. Watch all or part of worship in another congregation. Afterward, ask participants to compare and contrast that worship experience with their own and help them connect how the diversity in worship styles in the UCC reflect our polity that embraces congregational autonomy.

## Activity Four: Better Together

This question may linger: does being a part of a church really matter? Sometimes it can be tempting to do stuff solo--even trying to be a Christian--but we're better when we are together, and together we're able to do more impactful, more creative things. And, the truth seems to be, since the very beginning, people have always needed other people in their lives to help them figure out how life works and how God works. Help participants explore this idea by getting them up and moving.

Directions for the participants:

- Cut eight shapes out of construction paper. Make them various sizes and colors, then create a design using only your shapes. If you can, take a picture.
- Now, team up with someone else, and create a new design from both sets of shapes. Take a picture.
- Join up with another duo, and create another new design using all 32 shapes. Take a picture of what you've come up with.
- Now, just for fun, do the same thing, but as one giant group, using all the shapes. Of course, take a picture.

Questions for conversation while participants work:

- What are the perks and challenges of working with more people?
- How are the people you are working with helping you to see or understand something differently?
- How are you benefiting by being in a community of builders right now?

As you step back to admire the new masterpiece, call up the photos from each step of the way.

- What differences do you see between the giant work of shapes compared to the solo work you started off with?
- If people can create bigger and better creations by combining construction paper shapes, what else could you imagine we could manage to do if we all worked together?
- How is the Church like people bringing together all their shapes?

### Materials:

- Construction paper
- Scissors
- Tape
- Camera (or smartphone)

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Be prepared to tell a story of a time you benefited from being in a church community. Ask others to share a similar experience, and wind down time together by asking them why they suppose the UCC has placed such a high importance on being a part of a local church.

### Activity Five: Vital Congregations

Church vitality is closely linked to a clear sense of identity, purpose, and calling. The autonomy of local congregations means they have the freedom to discern what God is calling them to be and do.

Ask participants the following:

- Is your congregation a place of vitality? If not, what's holding it back? If so, what evidence do you see of vitality?
- What's your church's mission and vision for ministry? Does it continue to fit the needs of the community and the congregation, or is it time for discernment and rearticulating the mission and vision?

The Center for Analytics, Research, and Data (CARD) is the research wing of the UCC. Look at the recent reports on [ucc.org](http://ucc.org) to spot trends around the UCC on what new, revitalizing, and growing congregations are finding about how to create a vital church community together. Ask participants to look through the reports and spot trends that may be helpful for conversation or discernment in your local church. Consider how the reports represent the wide variety of church settings and contexts.

#### *Materials:*

-Access or copies of the CARD reports you'd like to investigate

## wrap-up

### Regroup

Gather to share and reflect on what you've discovered and learned today.

Questions for conversation:

- What was one new learning for you today?
- What do you want to think about more?
- What will do you in response?

### Closing

Close time together by having each participant share one thing they are grateful for from their time together.

### Sending

Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for your local church, its people, and its connection to the wider UCC. Offer blessing for each of the participants as they seek to support one another and grow as disciples of Jesus with one another.