

A Commitment to Covenant

CONNECTING CONGREGATIONS WITH THE WIDER CHURCH

prepare

What's behind all this?

When the UCC began in 1957, there was much discussion about what kind of governance would be best to organize this new Church. It was decided that our governance structure would be *covenantal*.

Coming to this decision was not easy. Historically speaking, at the time of the formation of the UCC and the merger of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, there was worry among many in the Congregational tradition that their congregational autonomy would be lost to the more presbyterian church order of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, where synods and a General Synod made decisions on behalf of the whole denomination. To balance these two different governance structures, the first UCC Constitution affirmed autonomy for local churches while also calling upon all the settings of the Church--the local church, the associations, the conferences, and the General Synod--to listen to one another and to respect each other's actions and give them thoughtful and prayerful response.

Though the UCC's polity was understood to be covenantal, it wasn't until the 2000 revision that the Constitution and Bylaws spoke more clearly on our covenantal polity. It now reads, "Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways" (Constitution, Article III).

It is our covenantal polity that holds the various settings of the UCC together. Though each setting is autonomous, each is called to listen to and collaborate with the others. Our polity sets out different settings of the UCC. There is the local church. Groups of local churches unite as associations. Groups of associations unite as a conference. Conferences, in sending representatives from local churches in their conference, unite all together as a General Synod.

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 various settings of the Church and how they relate covenantally to one another.

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There is an additional expression of the UCC that is important to note as we talk of our covenanted polity. Headquartered in Cleveland, the national setting of the UCC and its staff support various denominational programs as well as the conferences, associations, and local churches. They are also involved in implementing and helping the Church live into General Synod's decisions, pronouncements, and resolutions. Among the staff are those supporting our Covenanted Ministries: Office of General Ministries, Local Church Ministries, Wider Church Ministries, and Justice and Witness Ministries.

Participants' Perspectives

- “We are autonomous,” or, “We are congregational,” is an often heard refrain in UCC local churches. But the truth is our polity is *covenantal*. Each expression of the Church exists in relationship to the others. Participants will explore what it means to have a covenantal polity and why it is so important to the UCC.
- Many folks don't know much about the UCC's structure beyond the local church. This unit will help them understand the various settings of the denomination, what each does, and how each setting relates to one another.

encounter

Video

1. Warm Up
Participants may realize that in our polity, local churches have autonomy. What they may not know is that while churches are autonomous, they are also called to be covenantal, meaning that they are to be in mutual relationship with all settings of the Church. It may be helpful to review or teach some of the history of the UCC included in the preparation section of this unit to help contextualize this conversation. Ask participants what they suppose it means for the UCC to have a covenantal polity. How have they experienced the UCC beyond their local church? What were those experiences like?
2. Watch
“A Commitment to Covenant: Connecting Congregations with the Wider Church”
3. Unpack
 - What are the various settings of the UCC?
 - How are they related and connected to one another?
 - The UCC has a covenantal polity. What does that mean?
 - How have you or your congregation been involved in the UCC beyond your local church?

Materials:

-Ability to show video

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engage

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

Activity One: Looking to Scripture

Covenant is word not used much outside of church. Help participants understand what a covenant is, and help them connect the historical and theological understandings of covenant with our polity. Look at different stories where God makes covenant with God's people. Work with participants to figure out a working definition for covenant. Ask participants what a covenant entails. What is the role of mutuality? Invite them to share the common themes they see among different examples of covenants. Compare and contrast the Biblical idea of covenant with the UCC's idea of covenantal polity.

Examples of covenants in scripture to explore with participants:

- God's covenant with Noah, see especially Genesis 9:8-17
- God's covenant with Abraham, see especially Genesis 12:1-7, 15:1-6, 17:1-8
- God's covenant with Moses, see especially Exodus 19:1-9, 20:1-17
- God's covenant with David, see especially 2 Samuel 7:8-17

Activity Two: Real Life Experience

Dive a bit deeper into the concept of covenant by asking participants to spend a few minutes thinking about a covenant in their own lives. Ask them to list its characteristics. Who is involved? What kind of promise was made? How are parties held accountable? When they've finished, ask them about how the characteristics of that covenant are or aren't reflected in the polity, organization, and structure of the UCC.

If participants can't think of a covenant in their lives, encourage them to consider examples like marriage vows, ordination vows, the promises offered in becoming a member of a church, taking the Hippocratic Oath or another oath taken to protect and serve, or perhaps a neighborhood covenant they have signed.

Activity Three: Conference Connection

Local congregations have membership in regional associations, which have the authority to authorize pastors and grant ministerial standing to them. Associations are in turn gathered into conferences. The UCC Constitution and Bylaws outlines some of the basic administrative roles of the conference, but it is clear to highlight the conferences' central role. A conference, in the interest of the local churches, conducts administrative duties and provides support to strengthen the witness of the United Church of Christ. Conferences live into that commitment in various

Materials:

-Bibles

Materials:

-Paper
-Pens or pencils

Materials:

-Access to your conference's website or print materials about the conference

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ways. Some do so by rendering counsel to local churches and ministers in situations calling for help beyond their own resources, advising local churches and ministers with search and call processes, establishing and maintaining conference offices, conference centers, institutions, and other agencies that support its growth and welfare, or conducting meetings, retreats, clinics, workshops, and continuing education events.

Because each conference adapts itself to the needs of its context and its local churches, each varies slightly from the next in terms of its style, leadership, programs, and focus. Help participants gain a better understanding of how your conference functions by looking at your conference's website or other materials created to get the word out about their work.

Questions for conversation while participants work:

- What's the conference's mission and purpose?
- What activities or resources provided or curated by the conference reflect the mission and purpose?
- In what ways does the work of the conference support local churches? Associations? Ministers?
- What staff support the work of the conference? What are their roles?
- Is your conference involved in ecumenical work? Justice work? Advocacy work?
- How does your conference reflect the UCC's core values of continuing testament, extravagant welcome, and changing lives?

Discuss with participants if and how their local church connects with the conference. Does their connection to the conference reflect our covenantal polity? Is there anything that needs to be changed to better live into the covenantal relationship between local churches and the conference?

Activity Four: Covenanted Ministries

Headquartered in Cleveland, the national setting of the UCC and its staff support various denominational programs and work diligently in helping the Church live into General Synod's decisions, pronouncements, and resolutions. Among the staff are those supporting what we call our covenanted ministries. There are four covenanted ministries: Office of General Ministries, Local Church Ministries, Wider Church Ministries, and Justice and Witness Ministries.

Help your group learn more about one of our covenanted ministries.

- Choose one of the covenanted ministries to focus on with your group or divide into smaller groups, with each group focusing on a different covenanted ministry. Because their work is constantly evolving as the needs of the Church change and in response to the actions of the General Synod, visit each covenanted ministries section of ucc.org to find out what their current projects are.

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- Walk participants through the background of the covenanted ministry, their work historically, and their current work.
- Help them make connections about how the covenanted ministry and its work reflect a distinctly UCC theology.
- As a local church, you exist in covenantal relationship with each of these ministries. What does that mean for your local congregation?

An overview of some of the Covenanted Ministries:

Justice and Witness Ministries is one of four Covenanted Ministries in the UCC. It helps local congregations and all settings of the Church respond to God's commandments to do justice, seek peace, and effect change for a better world. Their work is guided by the pronouncements and resolutions approved by the General Synod. Their vision is a just, compassionate, and peaceful world that honors all of God's creation, and their mission is to speak and act prophetically through community mobilization, leadership training, issues education, public witness, and public policy advocacy. Learn more about their work at www.ucc.org/jwm.

Local Church Ministries is one of four Covenanted Ministries in the United Church of Christ. Their purpose is to encourage and support the church's congregations in the fulfillment of God's mission. Local Church Ministries has specific areas of focus and work that include evangelism, stewardship and church finance, worship and education, publications, resources and distribution, parish life and leadership, and the Church Building and Loan Fund. Teams within Local Church Ministries support local congregations in their concerns about growth, finances, liturgy, and education; support ordained and lay ministers in their vocations; and manage, with the Office of General Ministries, the UCC's publishing houses and distribution services. Learn more about their work at www.ucc.org/lcm.

Wider Church Ministries is one of four Covenanted Ministries in the United Church of Christ. They support congregations and the other settings of the Church in developing relationships with a wider Church that is global, multiracial and multicultural, open and affirming, and accessible to all. Wider Church Ministries is in partnership with the Division of Overseas Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Common Global Ministries--the worldwide mission program of both denominations. Some Wider Church Ministry programs are unique to the United Church of Christ; others are shared with the Disciples of Christ. Learn more about their work at www.ucc.org/wcm.

wrap-up

Regroup

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

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Questions for conversation:

- What was one new learning for you today?
- What do you want to think about more?
- What will you do 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, your association, your conference, and the national setting of the UCC. Offer blessing and a word of hope that whatever the setting, people of the Church find ways to faithfully live after the example of Jesus, in connection with one another, loving God and loving neighbor, and working towards a just world for all.