May 2018

TO: United Church of Christ Council of Conference Ministers

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in everyone of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing the gospel from the first day until now.”

Living in a time of challenge and controversy, the church of Jesus Christ began in small localities and spread. Each church wrestled with unique hurdles to overcome. Paul strove to be present to each community and when his physical presence was not possible he penned numerous letters --some of which stand today as a part of our heritage, tradition, and sacred texts.

As Paul wrote these words of greeting to the church in Thessalonica, so we lift them up to you, mindful that together we bring our unique witness to a world that needs the radical embracing love of Jesus Christ. This letter comes to you based on our mutual covenant and love for the gospel as we strive to live out our faith together as the United Church of Christ.

As the first churches experienced continual change, so do we. The transition to unified government is still in process. There have been successes and stumbles along the way as we live into the single governance model. Transparency and clarity in communication are key. Wrestling with changes to the Constitution and Bylaws has been necessary as the new governing structure finds its way. When a set of proposed governance changes failed at General Synod 30 in 2015 with many voices raising the issue of transparency, the UCC Board (acting in its role as General Synod ad-interim) strove to open the process so there would be better awareness and accountability to the greater church. The process included in-depth discussions about proposals considered but not adopted at General Synod 30. The discussions included the UCC Board, conversations with the Council of Conference Ministers, collaboration with staff of UCC and a survey of the wider church with participation by more than 2000 individual members.

John Dorhauer, the GMP, also visited with 24 of 38 Conferences to address questions about Constitution and Bylaws changes and members of the UCC Board met with delegations from many Conferences prior to and at General Synod 31 to discuss the amendments. General Synod 31 in 2017 positively noted the increased transparency which we plan to continue and improve upon.

It is the General Synod that now asks the Conferences to ratify these amendments to the Constitution.

Amendments:

The Constitution gives the UCC Board a good deal of latitude in designing a structure that works for the National Setting. The Conferences are not
being asked to vote on the amendments to the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ. The General Synod has approved the changes to the Bylaws and no Conference ratification is required. The Conferences are only being asked to ratify changes to the Constitution. Some of the changes to the Bylaws depend on the ratification of the Constitutional amendments, but these are largely changes of terminology for the governance changes.

The Importance of the Local Church:

As Paul determined to strengthen and lift up the first churches, the UCC Board, the National staff and the General Synod desire to strengthen and support the local congregations. The Local Church is the foundation and cornerstone of the United Church of Christ. The National Setting exists to support the Local Church. The determination not to fill the position of Local Church Executive Minister did not arise out of a decreased commitment to the Local Church, but rather in an attempt to serve the Local Church more fully as the structure of the National Setting continues to change.

The truth is, our staff is one third the size it was when we first occupied the National office in Cleveland. From over the years, cuts to staff as a result of budget constraints have meant continual evaluation of how we steward our resources for the sake of our call to serve the Local Church. Many of the cuts have come from the lower end of our pay scale. This left our organization heavy at the top where higher salaries are paid; and with Executive and Management level personnel supervising smaller and smaller teams of employees.

The Board approved the decision to manage program staff and support staff with a smaller Executive Management structure. The leadership and oversight of the programmatic life that supports the mission of the church has not suffered from this decision. Though one position was eliminated from the LCM staff, the position was reconfigured and expanded and ultimately filled. In fact, this year new positions were funded from the establishment of new priorities in our stewardship that support the work of Local Churches. Those new positions include staff who will support our work with youth and young adults, our work with congregations of color, and our work with disabilities ministries. The Board believes that a new alignment creates a better balance between Executive level managers of Mission and Ministry with program and support staff who create the resources that serve the needs of our Local Churches.

The amendments to the Bylaws, adopted by General Synod 31, give the Board new flexibility. Changing times and circumstances call for new approaches to living out the mandate to serve the needs of our Local Churches. The General Minister and President and the Board consult together about whether or not the management of the resources requires additional Executive level officers. In order to move out of the previous silo-like model, where each Executive Officer had responsibility for only one program area, the officers of the church, under the leadership of the GMP now work as a team to manage the programs and support staff to do the work of the Wider Church.

We are persuaded now that the management and oversight of the operations of our National Setting can be conducted with three Executive level officers: a General Minister and President and two Associate General Ministers. The collective must have the shared capability to conduct the ministry of the National Setting: the work of Wider Church Ministries; the work of Justice and Witness Ministries; and the work of Local Church Ministries. As always, these three program areas support the shared mission and ministry of our local churches. The reduction in Executive Management level oversight has
given us an opportunity to hire additional program staff. We remain convinced that this is a better stewardship of your OCWM dollars, and delivers more direct services to the Local Church.

We will continue to discover and implement the best structure, policies and practices for moving the United Church of Christ in to the future.

Faithfully yours,

Frank Bolden,
Chair, United Church of Christ Board

John C. Dorhauer,
General Minister and President