

GENERAL SYNOD OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

GENERAL SYNOD 34

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RESOLUTION REPORT

Resolution 17-GS-17 Pattern of Giving

A Resolution Declaring the Work of the Pattern of Giving in the United Church of Christ Complete and on Proposing a New Framework for Covenantal Giving and Implementing Fundraising Best Practices

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The Thirty-First General Synod adopted a resolution that redefined the concept of covenantal giving in the United Church of Christ. The resolution grew out of a multiyear study by the Giving Taskforce under the direction of the United Church of Christ Board. The taskforce engaged a wide array of stakeholders and settings of the church. (The full resolution and taskforce report can be found at [A New Ecology of Generosity 2016](#). The resolution can be found on pp. 23-25 of the [GS31-Minutes-Final](#)).

The resolution made six important changes:

- Celebrated and declared complete the work of the previously adopted “Plan on Giving” that long defined covenantal giving in the UCC.
- Advised all settings to develop new fundraising programs that address the needs of all settings of the church, are donor-centered, and encourage both congregations and individuals to give directly to the mission priorities most compelling to the donor.
- Directed the national setting to provide resources to increase the fundraising capacity of all settings of the church.
- Continued the movement of Our Churches Wider Mission – Basic Support from congregations to Conferences; and from Conferences to the national setting. Further, the resolution called on Conferences to maintain their Basic Support average sharing ratio from 2014-2016 for the five years from 2018 through 2022. After five years of stability in sharing ratios, the resolution recommended a conversation between conferences and the national setting on the sharing ratios.
- Encouraged a cost-benefit analysis of the four special mission offerings: One Great Hour of Sharing, Strengthen the Church, Neighbors in Need, and the Christmas Fund.
- Recommended a marketing analysis of the names “Our Church’s Wider Mission,” “Our Church’s Wider Mission – Basic Support,” and “Our Church’s Wider Mission – Special Support.”

Five full years after the adoption of this resolution, we want to look back to evaluate the progress made, continuing challenges encountered, and unexpected lessons learned.

Plan of Giving Completed

The resolution acknowledged the important work of the Plan of Giving at one historical moment of the United Church of Christ. It met the needs of the 1950's church, especially as we brought together different branches of Protestantism into a new denomination. Over time, our church and society changed and faced new situations. We needed a new understanding of covenantal giving that focused on mission instead of institutional maintenance.

Five full years later, moving away from the Plan of Giving continues to prove difficult. Financial practices of congregations, conferences, and the national setting remain rooted in the Plan of Giving instead of being rebuilt along donor-centered principles. For example, all settings of the church lag behind nonprofit industry standards in acknowledging gifts (3 days is industry norm). Additionally, the Giving Taskforce Report called for a streamlining of our pass-through practices such that congregations would be encouraged to send their funds directly to the end-recipient mission. While the national setting has directed Christmas Fund Offerings to flow from conferences directly to the Pension Boards, much remains to streamline and shorten the distance from donor to destination. Moving forward, we need our treasurers and financial teams to critically reflect on their current practices, asking: how can donor-centered principles be better implemented?

We would suggest a few metrics for moving towards better donor-centered giving:

- Thanking: many congregations only thank a donor once a year; Conferences and the national setting acknowledge gifts more frequently, but all settings have work to do in more speedily thanking donors. We can all ask: How long does it take us to acknowledge a gift? What could we change to get closer to acknowledging gifts within three days of receiving it?
- Pass-throughs: the resolution sought to shorten the distance between donors and the destination of their giving by reduce the number of "pass-throughs." Much generosity continues to flow through intervening church layers. We can ask: How long does it take us to send a pass-through gift on to the intended organization or mission? What could we change to send all pass-through gift on within one month? How does our acting as a pass-through organization add-value to the gifts we pass along?

New Approaches to Giving

The United Church of Christ Board and its Development Committee engaged in several reviews of the Giving Taskforce work and conducted another round of inquiry on the "Financial Sustainability of the National Setting." The taskforce charged with this question looked at both the creation of a foundation for the national setting and other ways to generate revenue. After substantial conversation, the taskforce did not opt to pursue the creation of a foundation at this time. Instead, the taskforce recommended, and the board approved an increase in the staffing of the Philanthropy Team. The expanded Philanthropy Team will include 6 regionally based Generosity Officers to amplify connection with donors across the country.

The Philanthropy Team developed an increased capacity to promote multiple giving options at the same time. The team now runs concurrently an annual campaign, two to three multiyear capital campaigns, targeted micro-campaigns, and special initiative asks of major donors. From 2017 to present, this work helped significantly offset the losses experienced in Our Church's

Wider Mission giving. The expansion of the Philanthropy Team will further increase the ability of the team to generate resources for our national ministries.

While there is always more to do in creating new approaches to giving, the UCCB and Philanthropy Team aligned their vision for the national setting with this resolution.

Increasing Training for Fundraising

Early in the implementation of the resolution on giving, the United Church of Christ Board heard the importance of fundraising capacity building from our conference partners. The Philanthropy Team added a part-time staff person to increase the number of fundraising trainings offered. Working with the Lake Institute of the School of Philanthropy at Indiana University, the Philanthropy Team offered a variety of best-practice educational opportunities for Conference leaders. The national setting also increased the training opportunities available to congregational leaders, many of these offered in conjunction with conference partners.

The national setting has long produced a stewardship resource for congregations. We renewed a partnership with the Disciples of Christ to jointly produce resources, resulting in a higher quality product.

The national setting created a case statement to guide its fundraising efforts. National staff worked with interested Conferences to develop Conference case statements.

Over the last five years, several Conferences took concrete steps to add or expand fundraising professionals to their staff. This move, at times funded in part by the Council of Conference Ministers, significantly increased the capacity of the Conferences.

OCWM Basic Support

Hopes for stability in OCWM Basic Support proved to be a systemic challenge.

The resolution left in place the movement of OCWM Basic Support from congregations to Conferences and then from Conferences to the national setting. While the structure remained, the results continued a decades long decline. Several trends shaped this:

- General giving to congregations increases or decreases with church membership. Over the last 11 years, membership in aggregate declined by 28% and giving by 26%.
- Congregations retain more of their contributions for their own local expenses; less is passed on to Conferences.
- Conferences retain more of what they receive for their own conference mission; fewer resources are sent to the national setting.

The first trend remains the most important; declining membership results in declining Basic Support. Stated another way, we do not have a fundraising problem but an evangelism problem.

The resolution invited conferences to hold their OCWM Basic Support steady by maintaining their average sharing ratio of 2014-2016 for the years 2018-2022. For the most part, conferences were not able to sustain their sharing ratio. The aggregate sharing ratio declined from 26.84% as the average of 2014-2016 to 21.70% in 2021. Several conferences did implement the call of the resolution. The Iowa, Kansas-Oklahoma, Maine, South Dakota, and Southern Conferences

increased the portion of OCWM Basic Support shared with the national setting. The Central Pacific, Florida, Hawaii, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania Southeast Conferences all held steady or increased the percentage shared with the national setting.

The resolution, along with the more recent Sustainability Taskforce of UCCB, encouraged a conversation between conference and national leaders about OCWM Basic Support. Given the persistent declines in congregational gifts to OCWM Basic Support and increased conference retention, a conversation about the future of OCWM Basic Support seems imperative.

Special Mission Offerings

The resolution encouraged a broad review of the Special Mission Offerings – One Great Hour of Sharing, Strengthen the Church, Neighbors in Need, and the Christmas Fund. While not called out in the resolution, the Giving Taskforce report additionally called for a review of the 5-for-5 program.

Cost-Benefit

The special mission offerings advance our shared mission as the United Church of Christ. One Great Hour of Sharing provides resources to domestic and global ministry partners for alleviating issues related to refugees, disaster relief, and sustainable development. Strengthen the Church is equally shared by the national setting and conferences. Neighbors in Need supports both justice ministries and the Council on American Indian Ministries. The Christmas Fund equips the United Board for Ministerial Assistance of the Pension Boards to provide assistance to church workers.

The fundraising results vary widely between the offerings. OGHS continues to raise the greatest number of resources. Fundraising costs vary too, with Strengthen the Church being the least expensive (and least generative) offering. In general, for each dollar spent on fundraising costs, the offerings raise between \$15 and \$35 for mission. These fundraising results out-perform typical non-profit fundraising because of the significant but uncounted promotional efforts of our local congregations (e.g., the passionate church member who gives a testimony about OGHS or the pastor offering a NIN-inspired sermon).

In terms of the cost-benefit analysis requested by the resolution, we see tremendous value in continuing the special mission offerings.

Declining Fundraising Results

The resolution was drafted at a time when special mission offerings held steady against a persistent decline in OCWM Basic Support. Over the last five years, the special mission offerings and OCWM Basic Support giving declined at the same rate. The earlier trend – which we no longer see – may have been a response to the Great Recession piquing interest in special offerings for numerous reasons (e.g., public need, economic uncertainty stressing congregational budgets but not individual wallets). In the current moment, we see special mission offerings trending on the same path of decline as OCWM Basic Support. This suggests a relationship between declining OCWM Basic Support and declining special mission offerings that may call for a holistic strategy to remedy. Resources spent on raising Basic Support may lift special mission offerings too.

5-for-5

The 5-for-5 designation arose as a marketing strategy to promote the Strengthen the Church Offering when it began over 25 years ago. During the period of 2017 to 2021, the percentage of UCC congregations that are 5-for-5 declined from 32.7% of congregations to 25.6%. At one-time, 5-for-5 may have increased church participation, but the marketing benefit lapsed over time (e.g., in 2003 22.9% of churches took the STC offering; this rose in 2013 to 40.2%; it then declined in 2021 to 34.3% of congregations). The program does not meaningfully attain its marketing objectives.

At the same time, the 5-for-5 strategy reflects an older concept of loyalty giving out-of-sync with the donor-centered approach of our new understanding of covenantal giving. It creates odd scenarios. For example, one mid-sized congregation sent a check to its conference for \$25 - \$5 for Basic Support and each of the 4 special mission offerings. It was celebrated as a great 5-for-5 congregation. Another small congregation held 3 fundraisers to send in \$1000 for Basic Support. For all their effort, they received no special mention.

Finally, the need to “get credit” towards the 5-for-5 designation keeps many of our settings locked into the old Plan of Giving formula of routing dollars around to various places before reaching its final destination.

As a marketing strategy, 5-for-5 does not appear to be working as designed and does not encourage a donor-centered approach. We recommend declaring the work of the 5-for-5 strategy complete and moving instead of a strategy that celebrates donors who champion a specific offering.

Marketing Analysis

The resolution called for a marketing analysis of the names used for Our Church’s Wider Mission and its constituent parts. Unexpected challenges affected the implementation of this recommendation. Most notably, a staff-reduction at the national setting in 2017 eliminated two positions intended for OCWM promotion and subsequent staff changes further delayed action. We recommend the United Church of Christ Board continue to monitor this resolution task for implementation as resources allow.