

The Business Committee of the Thirty-Fifth General Synod recommends this proposed resolution be sent to a Committee of the General Synod.

THE SMALL TOWN AND RURAL COALITION OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST REQUESTS TO BE RECOGNIZED AS A FORMAL GROUP

A Prudential Resolution

Submitted by:
Illinois Conference
Iowa Conference
Kansas-Oklahoma Conference
Montana-Northern Wyoming Conference
Nebraska Conference
Penn Central Conference
Penn Northeast Conference
South Dakota Conference

1 **SUMMARY**

2
3 The Small Town and Rural (STAR) Coalition seeks to be recognized as a Self-Created Group
4 according to the United Church of Christ By-Laws, Article VI, existing to be a supportive
5 expression of the Living Christ, in relationship with one another and with the Body of Christ, in
6 all its forms. As defined by the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ “the
7 basic unit of organization and life within the United Church of Christ is the local church.”¹ Local
8 churches may self-identify as a “small town and rural church,” meaning they are geographically
9 separated from metropolitan and suburban communities. The STAR coalition serves to support
10 STAR churches in various ministry functions. This action requires a Bylaws amendment at the
11 Thirty-Fifth General Synod.

12
13 **BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND HISTORICAL GROUNDING**

14
15 The fundamental biblical grounding for the proposed recognition of the Small Town and Rural
16 coalition is found in Christ’s farewell discourse in the Gospel according to John, “...that they
17 may all be one.” John 17:21 (NRSV). This scripture has served the basis for uniting Christians
18 throughout the world.

19
20 Beginning in 2019, small town and rural church pastors have been seeking additional resource
21 support from the national setting of the UCC. There was little response to that correspondence
22 and request for resources.

23
24 After the virtual 2021 General Synod, a small group of individuals met to share experiences in
25 small town and rural ministry. The Rev. Dr. Bonnie Bates, Penn Northeast Conference Minister,
26 identified that congregations from small town and rural communities had much different needs
27 than the congregations in her larger, urban congregations. Others in the group shared frustrations
28 and concerns about resources available to these smaller congregations. For example, small
29 churches rely heavily on lay members to lead ministries and perform administrative functions as

30 opposed to paid staff.² From those discussions, the Small Town and Rural (STAR) Coalition
31 developed.

32
33 The United Church of Christ is known for responding to the needs of the overlooked and
34 marginalized.³ Because of this prophetic compassion, significant ministries developed that
35 address the needs and presence of our often-overlooked siblings, neighbors, and communities.⁴
36 In the context of challenges Small Town and Rural churches face, we identify with Paul’s letter
37 to the Corinthians, “The one who plants and the one who waters work together with the same
38 purpose. And both will be rewarded for their own hard work.” 1 Corinthians 3:8 (NLT). This
39 means that we are called to become stronger and more supportive for these STAR ministries by
40 building a stronger and larger network of covenants serving as the body of Christ across the
41 breadth of the United Church of Christ.

42
43 Official recognition in the United Church of Christ bylaws will ensure that the needs of Small
44 Town and Rural Churches are not ignored or sidetracked by staff restructuring, resources re-
45 allocation, or shifts in the leadership of the national setting.

46
47 While STAR congregations can, and do, bind together and are strong and vital presences in their
48 immediate and global communities, offering spiritual, missional, and relational sources of hope,
49 reflecting the love and light of Jesus Christ, who spent most of his ministry reaching out to those
50 who are tied to the land and community, the recognition and support of the national setting is
51 necessary for external resourcing support to be developed and maintained. The covenant is not
52 just with the churches, but between the churches as well.⁵⁶ This means building and maintaining
53 a covenantal and collaborative relationship with all United Church of Christ STAR churches
54 through the existence and support of the STAR coalition.

55
56 The STAR Coalition seeks to live out its purpose of:

- 57 ● Planting and maintaining a covenantal and communal relationship with all United Church
58 of Christ STAR ministries.
- 59 ● Growing and nurturing a covenantal and communal relationship with the United Church
60 of Christ Council of Conference Ministers, officers of the Church, UCC Covenantal
61 partners, UCC Board of Directors, and Alliance of Associate Conference Ministers.
- 62 ● Being a resource to share information and best practices to promote excellence in our
63 various ministries.
- 64 ● Being a collective voice of advocacy for concerns important to the role and work of
65 STAR ministries as they relate to the life of the United Church of Christ.

66
67 In the past, the United Church of Christ was asked to be aware of the predicament of the small
68 town and rural congregations, its members and pastors.⁷⁸ Yet, that acknowledgement and the
69 subsequent resourcing needs have not been developed. Individuals from congregations across the
70 United Church of Christ have come together and met monthly sharing ideas and resources. We
71 have intentionally discerned a call to unite for the intention of being a resource to share support,
72 information and best practices to promote excellence in our various ministries.

73
74 **TEXT OF THE MOTION**

75

76 **WHEREAS** 64% of the churches in the United Church of Christ are located in small towns and
77 rural areas.

78
79 **WHEREAS** the vitality, relationality, and ecological aspects of our STAR congregations with
80 their important presence within the body of the United Church of Christ, is as essential and
81 important to the health of the entire Church as any other group of people (Ephesians 4:4).

82
83 **WHEREAS** the United Church of Christ seriously holds the call to be an open and welcoming
84 faith community, accepting into the church body and leadership all facets of expression found in
85 God's people, creating a rich diversity of expression, background, culture, sexual and gender
86 identity and expression.⁹

87
88 **WHEREAS** STAR congregations frequently find their needs and unique lived experiences
89 underrepresented on a Conference and National level.

90
91 **WHEREAS** STAR congregations are not recognized as an essential majority of the churches
92 within the United Church of Christ.

93
94 **WHEREAS** official recognition of the STAR Coalition will provide needed relational, resource,
95 and representational support for our Small Town and Rural Churches.¹⁰

96
97 **THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** that the Small Town and Rural Coalition be included in the
98 United Church of Christ Bylaws, Article VI, Self-Determining Groups.

99
100 **FUNDING:** The funding for the implementation of the Resolution will be made in accordance
101 with the overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

102
103 **IMPLEMENTATION:** The Officers of the Church, in consultation with appropriate ministries
104 or other entities within the United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.

¹ R.A. Shears (1990) A Covenant Polity. In D.L. Johnson and C. Hambrick-Stowe Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements, and Polity in the United Church of Christ (pp. 67-78). Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press.

² Danny Davis (2020) Rural Church Turnaround: Real Life Experiences of Rural Pastors and Lay-Leaders. Rapid City, South Dakota: CrossLink Publishing.

³ <https://uccresolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/19-GS-20.pdf>

⁴ <https://uccresolutions.org/resolution-archive/renewing-the-covenant-with-the-rural-church/>

⁵ Jane Fislser Hoffman (2008) Covenant: A Study for the United Church of Christ. Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press.

⁶ <https://uccresolutions.org/resolution-archive/reaffirming-our-commitment-to-covenantal-relationships/>

⁷ Roberto Ochoa (2022) Where our UCC Congregations Call Home: Rural, Town, Suburban, and Urban Congregations. UCC Statistical Profile 2022, Special Report, pp. 55-57.

⁸ Church Hall virtual meeting with UCC General Minister and President Rev Dr John Dorhauer, Sunday, Feb. 11, 2023 on the last day of a three day Virtual National Gathering of UCC Rural/Small Town Churches and Ministries, Feb. 9-11, 2023.

⁹ <https://uccresolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/05-GS-52.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://uccresolutions.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/01-GS-18.pdf>