

1 **Proposal for a Unified Fitness Review Committee formed by**
2 **The Associations of the MACUCC**
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5 **A Brief Review of United Church of Christ Oversight Proceedings:**
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7 United Church of Christ clergy generally hold their authorization for ministry in the Association
8 where their local church membership is held. Association Committees on Ministry¹ oversee the
9 initiation of authorization for ministry as well as the oversight of it.
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11 The Manual on Ministry (MOM) of the United Church of Christ outlines four proceedings which
12 are available for Committees on Ministry to utilize to fulfill their charge of providing oversight
13 of authorized ministers. Two of these, “Periodic Support Consultations” and “Situational
14 Support Consultations”, provide nurture and support to pastors. They are a “. . . deliberate and
15 intentional effort to identify, build up, and strengthen those God has called into authorized
16 ministries in the church.”²
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18 Two other proceedings, “Information Reviews” and “Fitness Reviews” are ecclesiastical
19 reviews. As such they are used to “. . . ensure that those engaged in ministry embody faithful
20 witness to, and extension of, the ministry of God in Jesus Christ - that they are accountable for
21 the ministry they carry out on behalf of the church.”³
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23 An Information Review “. . . verifies that all authorized ministers continue to meet the basic
24 standards required for authorization.”⁴
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26 A Fitness Review, which relates to the focus of this proposal for a Unified Fitness Review
27 Committee, is initiated in order “. . . to determine whether an authorized minister continues to be
28 fit for the ministry for which he or she is authorized.”⁵ It is undertaken by an Association
29 Committee on Ministry after a charge has been brought and it is subsequently determined by the
30 Committee on Ministry:

- 31 ▪ that the pastor has standing in the Association, and
- 32 ▪ that if the charge was true, it would call into question the authorized minister’s fitness for
- 33 ministry.
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¹ For the sake of clarity, in this document Committee on Ministry refers to Association committees which are currently responsible for ministerial standing.

² Manual on Ministry, Section 8, page 4.

³ Manual on Ministry, Section 8, page 4.

⁴ Manual on Ministry, Section 8, page 9.

⁵ Manual on Ministry, Section 8, page 9.

35 A Fitness Review is meant to guarantee that concerns about a pastor’s ministry are taken “. . .
36 seriously and considered in depth, and that decisions and resulting actions rendered are just, fair,
37 merciful and compassionate for all concerned.”⁶

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39 **Proposal Summary:** The 11 Associations of the Massachusetts Conference, United Church of
40 Christ will delegate the various functions and adjudication of a Fitness Review to a Unified
41 Fitness Review Committee. The Unified Fitness Review Committee is a “Committee formed by
42 the Associations of the MA Conference” and would be staffed by an Associate Conference
43 Minister. Suggested Association bylaw changes are provided beginning on line 203.

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45 **Biblical Context:**

46 *So the LORD said to Moses, ‘Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be*
47 *the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them*
48 *take their place there with you. I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of*
49 *the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along*
50 *with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself. – Numbers 11:16-17*

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52 *But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into*
53 *Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is*
54 *equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in*
55 *love. - Ephesians 4: 15-16*

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57 **Steering Committee:**

58 Central	Lisa Durkee Abbott	Lisa_Durkee@breadnet.middlebury.edu
59 MBA	Bradford L. Harding	lbharding@verizon.net
60 Northeast	Ellie Richardson	ellielrhg@aol.com
61 Southeast	John Terry	pastor@federatedchurch.org
62 Western	Joel Huntington	stars153@earthlink.net

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64 **Context:**

- 65 • Since it is beneficial to have trained and experienced volunteers when conducting a
66 Fitness Review, it is helpful to draw those volunteers from a larger pool. Since 1962, the
67 Mass Conference has lost 66% of its members. Presently, the entire Conference has 10%
68 *fewer* members than the MBA alone had in 1962.
- 69 • While there has been a significant decrease in Fitness Reviews since the MACUCC
70 initiated the Pastoral Excellence Program and required boundary training, it remains the
71 case that each Fitness Review requires an enormous commitment of both staff and
72 volunteer time. We estimate that a recent Fitness Review required over 400 hours of staff
73 and volunteer time. Even when a Fitness Review goes as well as possible, it can still
74 require over 60 hours of staff time.
- 75 • Assuring compliance with official policies and procedures is of critical importance in
76 Fitness Reviews. Assuring compliance when there are 11 distinct sets of official policies
77 and procedures – each lodged in a distinct Association - is challenging.

⁶ Manual on Ministry, Section 8, page 10.

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Some Rationales for a Unified Fitness Review Committee

- A Unified Fitness Review Committee would identify the best volunteers who would then offer concentrated focus and expertise.
- A Unified Fitness Review Committee would diminish the overall workload of each Committee on Ministry. This is important because Committees on Ministry now face an increasing work load due to the new discernment process.
- As the number of members in each Association has dramatically diminished, the likelihood of conflicts of interest has dramatically increased. By establishing a Unified Fitness Review Committee that is populated by volunteers from many Associations, we sharply reduce the likelihood of conflicts of interest.
- While it is “good news” that the Conference has had fewer Fitness Reviews of late, in our current arrangement this can mean that when a Fitness Review is undertaken, the Committee on Ministry must relearn all the procedures. A Unified Fitness Review Committee would assure that a capable group of authorized volunteers would stand prepared to respond to a concern.
- A Unified Fitness Review Committee would make more effective use of staff time. All regional ACMs would thus be familiar with a single set of procedures. The magnitude of the staff time each Fitness Review requires makes this a very important consideration.
- The UCC Nationwide Special Council, Don Clark, recommends a unified approach to Fitness Reviews.
- Adopting a Unified Fitness Review Committee would be a return to a practice that was present in the MA Conference as recently as in the mid-1980s.

Process and Polity:

- Each Association’s “Committee on Ministry” would retain the authority to initiate a Fitness Review. Thus, in accordance with the procedure outlined in the Manual on Ministry, when a complaint is registered, it would come before the appropriate Association’s Committee on Ministry. This preliminary discernment, while preserving the anonymity of the parties involved, would answer the two key questions: Does the person about whom concerns have been raised have standing? If he or she does, do these concerns, if true, call into question this person’s fitness for ministry in and on behalf of the United Church of Christ?
- Upon voting to initiate a Fitness Review of one its authorized ministers, the Committee on Ministry would refer the Fitness Review to the Unified Fitness Review Committee. That referral would include an explicit statement that the outcome rendered by the Unified Fitness Review Committee will be received and accepted as that of the Committee on Ministry. This statement would also be directed to the respondent in the case.
- A Regional Associate Conference Minister from another region will partner with the Associate Conference Minister of the region where the complaint was registered to manage the Fitness Review.
- The Conference Minister and President:
 - a. Will be informed of the status of the Fitness Review and all decisions.

- 123 b. Will be the contact person for accessing expert advice, e.g. legal services from the
124 Conference attorney.
- 125 c. Will insure budgetary support for the work, training and support of the Unified
126 Fitness Review Committee and Fitness Review process.
- 127 d. Will serve as spokesperson for the Massachusetts Conference and provide advice to
128 spokespersons for the Local Church and other affected bodies.
- 129 • The Unified Fitness Review Committee would be specifically charged to move the
130 Fitness Review through the information gathering, support, deliberative and outcome
131 phases of the process as outlined in the Manual on Ministry and any additional processes
132 agreed upon by the Associations.
 - 133 • The Unified Fitness Review Committee will inform the Committee on Ministry where the
134 Fitness Review originated of its progress and decisions.
 - 135 • If the Unified Fitness Review Committee prescribes a program of growth, it will be
136 monitored and adjudicated by the Unified Fitness Review Committee. The Unified
137 Fitness Review Committee will provide informational updates to the Committee on
138 Ministry chairperson or designee of progress and outcomes of a program of growth.
 - 139 • An Association - through its Committee on Ministry - will retain primary authority and
140 responsibility for those who are authorized for ministry and have been called to a setting
141 in that Association. These responsibilities include, but are not limited to:
 - 142 • Information Reviews
 - 143 • Periodic Support Consultations
 - 144 • Situational Support Consultations
 - 145 • Formation of Members in Discernment & Authorization of Ministers
 - 146 • Ordination of Those Approved and Called
 - 147 • Installation of Authorized Ministers
 - 148 • Exit Interviews with Pastors/Congregational Leaders
 - 149 ○ Participation in Farewell Service Liturgies
 - 150 • The Unified Fitness Review Committee will be responsible to assure that the full
151 executive body of each Association (variously referred to as the Board of Directors, the
152 Council, the Executive Committee (where there is no Council)) receive appropriate
153 training from time to time so that they would be prepared in case an appeal to a fitness
154 review decision is made.

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156 **Composition of the Unified Fitness Review Committee:**

- 157 • Each participating Association will appoint one member.
- 158 • If all 11 Associations vote to participate, the committee will be composed of 16 members.
159 That size will be reduced by one for each non-participating Association.
- 160 • An additional five members will be appointed by the Conference Board of Directors in
161 consultation with staff, from a pool of candidates nominated by the Associations. In
162 making its choices the Board will consider the balance of gender, clergy, lay Committee
163 members, as well as the skills and experience needed for effective service on the Unified
164 Fitness Review Committee. Further, the Board will be mindful of guidance provided by
165 the Bylaws of the Conference with regard to diversity of nominees.
- 166 • The Unified Fitness Review Committee will be staffed by an Associate Conference
167 Minister.

- 168 • Unified Fitness Review Committee members will have fulfilled a term on a Committee
169 on Ministry during some portion of the 6 years before their appointment to the Unified
170 Fitness Review Committee. This assures that they will bring to the Unified Fitness
171 Review Committee prior knowledge and expertise.
- 172 • All parties responsible for the composition of the Unified Fitness Review Committee will
173 seek a balance of women, men, clergy and lay persons on the Committee, as well as the
174 skills and experience needed for effective service. Further, all parties will be mindful of
175 guidance provided by the Bylaws of the Conference with regard to diversity of nominees.
- 176 • The term of service for each member will be three years. The full executive body of the
177 Association (variously referred to as the Board of Directors, the Council, the Executive
178 Committee (where there is no Council)) (or the Conference Board of Directors, if
179 appointed by them) may choose to renew a member of the Unified Fitness Review
180 Committee for up to two more terms of service. Prior to doing so, the appointing body
181 must confirm the member's willingness to continue to serve and must consult with staff.
- 182 • Initially there would be a staggered term of service established. A portion of the first
183 class will hold one year, two year and three year terms. All those serving may renew
184 their membership for two full three year terms.

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186 **What is being done to implement this model in the MACUCC?**

- 187 • The Regional staff introduced the general idea for discussion and feedback.
- 188 • A Steering Committee has been assembled to review this proposal, and to initiate and
189 guide the process of its implementation.
- 190 • A near final draft of the proposal has been vetted by the UCC Nationwide Special
191 Counsel prior to being submitted to the Associations for approval.
- 192 • The Steering Committee are presenting this document as a formal proposal to Association
193 Committees on Ministry and Association BODs and the Conference BOD for
194 consideration.
- 195 • Adoption of this proposal and proposed Association by-law revisions by no fewer than
196 five (5) Associations will create the Unified Fitness Review Committee.
- 197 • Any Association not voting in the affirmative would not be represented on the Unified
198 Fitness Review Committee. The Conference would continue to provide staff support and
199 response team support to non-participating Associations, and this would be done through
200 the Unified Fitness Review Committee.
- 201 • The goal is to implement this model by having the Unified Fitness Review Committee in
202 place by fall 2012.

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204 **Suggested Wording to use in Revising Association By-laws:**

- 205 ➤ When a complaint is brought against an authorized minister with standing in an
206 Association, it is the Association Committee on Ministry that is responsible for
207 determining whether the complaint raises the question of ministerial fitness in and on
208 behalf of the United Church of Christ. Upon voting in the affirmative to initiate a
209 Fitness Review for an authorized minister, the Committee on Ministry will refer such
210 review (except those where the subject is a Conference Minister, Associate Conference
211 Minister, or their family members) to the Unified Fitness Review Committee.

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- 213 ➤ The Unified Fitness Review Committee will follow the process for conducting a Fitness
214 Review as described in the then current Manual on Ministry of the United Church of
215 Christ. The Unified Fitness Review Committee will also follow any additional
216 processes agreed upon by all of the participating Associations so long as those processes
217 do not conflict with the then current Manual on Ministry of the United Church of Christ.
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- 219 ➤ The particular Association’s Committee on Ministry will accept the outcome of the
220 Unified Fitness Review Committee as its own and report the same to the appropriate
221 settings of the United Church of Christ.
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- 223 ➤ Any appeal of the process by the subject of the review must be filed with the
224 Association Moderator within ten (10) days of receipt of notification of the outcome of
225 the Fitness Review.
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- 227 ➤ When an oversight decision of the Unified Fitness Review Committee is appealed, the
228 full executive body of the appropriate Association (variously referred to as the Board of
229 Directors, the Council, the Executive Committee (where there is no Council)) shall be
230 convened as a Board of Appeal. The grounds for appeal of oversight decisions shall be
231 limited to questions of process. The appeal will determine whether the approved process
232 of the Committee on Ministry and Unified Fitness Review Committee were adhered to.
233 The outcomes of an appeal are:
- 234 1. Affirmation that the process used was consistent with the Unified Fitness
235 Review Committee’s process and with the Association’s Committee on
236 Ministry’s process – in which case the decision of the Unified Fitness
237 Review Committee stands.
- 238 2. Recognition that the process used was not consistent with the Unified
239 Fitness Review Committee process and the Association’s Committee on
240 Ministry process. The full executive body of the Association (variously
241 referred to as the Board of Directors, the Council, the Executive
242 Committee (where there is no Council)) will refer the case back to the
243 Unified Fitness Review Committee and the Association’s Committee on
244 Ministry to be completed pursuant to the adopted process.
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- 246 ➤ The full executive body of each participating Association (variously referred to as the
247 Board of Directors, the Council, the Executive Committee (where there is no Council))
248 will appoint one (1) member to the Unified Fitness Review Committee. The appointee
249 must have been a member of an Association’s Committee on Ministry within the last 6
250 years. The term of service for each member will be three years. The full executive body
251 of the Association (variously referred to as the Board of Directors, the Council, the
252 Executive Committee (where there is no Council)) may choose to renew the appointee for
253 up to two more terms of service. Prior to doing so, the full executive body of the
254 Association (variously referred to as the Board of Directors, the Council, the Executive
255 Committee (where there is no Council)) must confirm the appointee’s willingness to
256 continue to serve on the Unified Fitness Review Committee and must consult with
257 Conference staff. Attention to the importance of balancing gender, clergy, lay and the
258 needed skills and experience on the Unified Fitness Review Committee shall be

259 considered by the full executive body of the Association (variously referred to as the
260 Board of Directors, the Council, the Executive Committee (where there is no Council)) in
261 making or renewing its appointments.
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263 **Related (but distinct) Association By-laws Suggestion:**

264 Your Associate Conference Ministers and Conference Minister join the Nationwide Special
265 Counsel of the UCC in urging all Associations, whether or not they choose to participate in the
266 Unified Fitness Review Committee, to adopt the following by law language at their next
267 opportunity.

268 ➤ Any member of an Association board or committee or participant in an Association
269 oversight action who has a financial, personal, or official interest in, or conflict or
270 appearance of a conflict with any matter pending, of such nature that it prevents or may
271 prevent that member from acting in an impartial manner, will offer to voluntarily recuse
272 him/herself and refrain from discussion of, participation in and/or voting in the activity
273 where the conflict or appearance of a conflict exists. If there is a conflict either real or
274 perceived and the individual does not voluntarily recuse him/herself, the Association
275 board or committee may, by a super majority vote of 2/3 of the members then present and
276 voting, require involuntary recusal.
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278 **Proposed Operating Procedures for the Unified Fitness Review Committee:**

279 Here are the initial operating procedures, including those responsibilities of the UFRC already
280 mentioned:

- 281 ■ The Unified Fitness Review Committee will organize itself to carry out the Fitness
282 Review. Its organization may vary depending on the situation. It is also free to consult
283 with whomever it chooses, recognizing the necessity of maintaining strict confidentiality.
- 284 ■ When a Fitness Review is referred to the Unified Fitness Review Committee, the staff
285 person will consult with the Unified Fitness Review Committee to identify who from the
286 Unified Fitness Review Committee will serve as the interview team for that particular
287 Fitness Review. In any particular Fitness Review, once the interview phase is completed,
288 those serving on the interview team will participate in the deliberations of the Unified
289 Fitness Review Committee, but will not vote on that particular Fitness Review. Should
290 the outcome of the vote include a growth plan, the interview team will participate with
291 the other members of the Unified Fitness Review Committee in developing an
292 appropriate growth plan.
- 293 ■ When a Fitness Review is referred to the Unified Fitness Review Committee, the Unified
294 Fitness Review Committee will identify one person (lay or clergy) to serve as Chaplain
295 and provide pastoral support to the UFRC itself for the duration of that case. The
296 Chaplain may not be a member of the interview team for that particular case.
- 297 ■ The Unified Fitness Review Committee will inform the Committee on Ministry where the
298 Fitness Review originated of its progress and decisions.
- 299 ■ If the Unified Fitness Review Committee prescribes a program of growth, it will be
300 monitored and adjudicated by the Unified Fitness Review Committee. The Unified
301 Fitness Review Committee will provide informational updates to the Committee on
302 Ministry chairperson or designee of progress and outcomes of a program of growth.

303 ▪ The Unified Fitness Review Committee will meet at least annually for training, support
304 and evaluation. The Unified Fitness Review Committee and Conference staff will be
305 responsible for scheduling these activities.

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