

1 **Draft Proposal: A Unified Fitness Review Committee**

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3 **Summary:** The 11 Associations of the Massachusetts Conference, United Church of Christ will
4 delegate the various functions and adjudication of a Fitness Review to a Unified Fitness Review
5 Committee. The Unified Fitness Review Committee is a “Committee formed by the
6 Associations of the MA Conference” and would be staffed by an Associate Conference Minister.
7 Suggested Association bylaw changes are provided beginning on line 172.

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9 **Biblical Context:**

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

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

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21 **Steering Committee:**

22 Central	Lisa Durkee Abbott	Lisa_Durkee@breadnet.middlebury.edu
23 MBA	Bradford L. Harding	lbharding@verizon.net
24 Northeast	Ellie Richardson	ellielrhg@aol.com
25 Southeast	John Terry	pastor@federatedchurch.org
26 Western	Joel Huntington	stars153@earthlink.net

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28 **Context:**

- 29 • Since it is beneficial to have trained and experienced volunteers when conducting a
30 Fitness Review, it is helpful to draw those volunteers from a larger pool. Since 1962, the
31 Mass Conference has lost 66% of its members. Presently, the entire Conference has 10%
32 *fewer* members than the MBA alone had in 1962.
- 33 • While there has been a significant decrease in Fitness Reviews since the MACUCC
34 initiated the Pastoral Excellence Program and required boundary training, it remains the
35 case that each Fitness Review requires an enormous commitment of both staff and
36 volunteer time. We estimate that a recent Fitness Review required over 400 hours of staff
37 and volunteer time. Even when a Fitness Review goes as well as possible, it can still
38 require over 60 hours of staff time.
- 39 • Assuring compliance with official policies and procedures is of critical importance in
40 Fitness Reviews. Assuring compliance when there are 11 distinct sets of official policies
41 and procedures – each lodged in a distinct Association - is challenging to say the least.

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43 **Some Rationales for a Unified Fitness Review Committee**

- 44 • A Unified Fitness Review Committee would identify the best volunteers who
45 would then offer concentrated focus and expertise.

- 46 • A Unified Fitness Review Committee would diminish the overall workload of
47 each Committee on Ministry. This is important because Committees on Ministry¹
48 now face an increasing work load due to the new discernment process.
- 49 • As the number of members in each Association has profoundly diminished, the
50 likelihood of conflicts of interest has dramatically increased. By establishing a
51 Unified Fitness Review Committee that is populated by volunteers from many
52 Associations, we sharply reduce the likelihood of conflicts of interest.
- 53 • While it is “good news” that the Conference has had fewer Fitness Reviews of
54 late, in our current arrangement this can mean that when a Fitness Review is
55 undertaken, the Committee on Ministry must relearn all the procedures. A Unified
56 Fitness Review Committee would assure that a capable group of authorized
57 volunteers would stand prepared to respond to a concern.
- 58 • A Unified Fitness Review Committee would make more effective use of staff
59 time. All regional ACMs would thus be familiar with a single set of procedures.
60 The magnitude of the staff time each Fitness Review requires makes this a very
61 important consideration.
- 62 • The UCC Nationwide Special Council, Don Clark, recommends a unified
63 approach to Fitness Reviews.
- 64 • Adopting a Unified Fitness Review Committee would be a return to a practice that
65 was present in the MA Conference as recently as in the mid-1980s.
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67

68 **Process and Polity:**

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

¹ For the sake of clarity, in this document Committee on Ministry refers to Association committees which are currently responsible for ministerial standing.

- 88 b. Will be the contact person for accessing expert advice, e.g. legal services from the
- 89 Conference attorney.
- 90 c. Will insure budgetary support for the work, training and support of the Unified
- 91 Fitness Review Committee and Fitness Review process.
- 92 d. Will serve as spokesperson for the Massachusetts Conference and provide advice to
- 93 spokespersons for the Local Church and other affected bodies.
- 94 • The Unified Fitness Review Committee would be specifically charged to move the
- 95 Fitness Review through the information gathering, support, deliberative and outcome
- 96 phases of the process as outlined in the Manual on Ministry and any additional processes
- 97 agreed upon by the Associations.
- 98 • The Unified Fitness Review Committee will inform the Committee on Ministry where the
- 99 Fitness Review originated of its progress and decisions.
- 100 • If the Unified Fitness Review Committee prescribes a program of growth, it will be
- 101 monitored and adjudicated by the Unified Fitness Review Committee. The Unified
- 102 Fitness Review Committee will provide informational updates to the Committee on
- 103 Ministry chairperson or designee of progress and outcomes of a program of growth.
- 104 • An Association - through its Committee on Ministry - will retain primary authority and
- 105 responsibility for those who are authorized for ministry and have been called to a setting
- 106 in that Association. These responsibilities include, but are not limited to:
- 107 • Information Reviews
- 108 • Periodic Support Consultations
- 109 • Situational Support Consultations
- 110 • Formation of Members in Discernment & Authorization of Ministers
- 111 • Ordination of Those Approved and Called
- 112 • Installation of Authorized Ministers
- 113 • Exit Interviews with Pastors/Congregational Leaders
- 114 ○ Participation in Farewell Service Liturgies
- 115 • The Unified Fitness Review Committee will be responsible to assure that the Executive
- 116 Committees of each association receive appropriate training from time to time so that
- 117 they would be prepared in case an appeal to a fitness review decision is made.
- 118

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

- 120 • Each participating Association will appoint one member.
- 121 • If all 11 Associations vote to participate, the committee will be composed of 16 members.
- 122 That size will be reduced by one for each non-participating Association.
- 123 • An additional five members will be appointed by the Conference Board of Directors in
- 124 consultation with staff, from a pool of candidates nominated by the Associations. In
- 125 making its choices the Board will consider the balance of gender, clergy, lay Committee
- 126 members, as well as the skills and experience needed for effective service on the Unified
- 127 Fitness Review Committee. Further, the Board will be mindful of guidance provided by
- 128 the Bylaws of the Conference with regard to diversity of nominees.
- 129 • The Unified Fitness Review Committee will be staffed by an Associate Conference
- 130 Minister.

- 131 • The Unified Fitness Review Committee will organize itself to carry out the Fitness
132 Review. Its organization may vary depending on the situation. It is also free to consult
133 with whomever it chooses, recognizing the necessity of maintaining strict confidentiality.
- 134 • Unified Fitness Review Committee members will have fulfilled a term on a Committee
135 on Ministry during some portion of the 6 years before their appointment to the Unified
136 Fitness Review Committee. This assures that they will bring to the Unified Fitness
137 Review Committee prior knowledge and expertise.
- 138 • All parties responsible for the composition of the Unified Fitness Review Committee will
139 seek a balance of women, men, clergy and lay persons on the Committee, as well as the
140 skills and experience needed for effective service. Further, all parties will be mindful of
141 guidance provided by the Bylaws of the Conference with regard to diversity of nominees.
- 142 • The term of service for each member will be three years. The Executive Committee of
143 the Association (or the Conference Board of Directors, if appointed by them) may choose
144 to renew a member of the Unified Fitness Review Committee for up to two more terms of
145 service. Prior to doing so, the appointing body must confirm the member's willingness to
146 continue to serve and must consult with staff.
- 147 • The Unified Fitness Review Committee will meet at least annually for training, support
148 and evaluation. The Unified Fitness Review Committee and Conference staff will be
149 responsible for scheduling these activities.
- 150 • Initially there would be a staggered term of service established. A portion of the first
151 class will hold one year, two year and three year terms. All those serving may renew
152 their membership for two full three year terms.

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154 **What needs to happen to implement this model in the MACUCC?**

- 155 • The Regional staff will introduce the general idea for discussion and feedback.
- 156 • A Steering Committee will be assembled to review this proposal, and to initiate and guide
157 the process of its implementation.
- 158 • A final draft of the proposal will be vetted by the UCC Nationwide Special Counsel prior
159 to being submitted to the Associations for approval.
- 160 • The Steering Committee will present a formal proposal to Association Committees on
161 Ministry and Association BODs and the Conference BOD for consideration.
- 162 • Adoption of the proposal and proposed Association by-law revisions by no fewer than
163 five (5) Associations will create the Unified Fitness Review Committee.
- 164 • Any Association not voting in the affirmative would not be represented on the Unified
165 Fitness Review Committee. The Conference would continue to provide staff support and
166 response team support to non-participating Associations, and this would be done through
167 the Unified Fitness Review Committee.
- 168 • The goal is to implement this model by having the Unified Fitness Review Committee in
169 place by fall 2012.

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172 **Association By-laws Suggestions:**

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- 174 ➤ When a complaint is brought against an authorized minister with standing in an
175 Association, it is the Association Committee on Ministry that is responsible for
176 determining whether the complaint raises the question of ministerial fitness in and on

- 177 behalf of the United Church of Christ. Upon voting in the affirmative to initiate a
178 Fitness Review for an authorized minister, the Committee on Ministry will refer such
179 review (except those where the subject is a Conference Minister, Associate Conference
180 Minister, or their family members) to the Unified Fitness Review Committee.
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- 182 ➤ The Unified Fitness Review Committee will follow the process for conducting a Fitness
183 Review as described in the then current Manual on Ministry of the United Church of
184 Christ. The Unified Fitness Review Committee will also follow any additional
185 processes agreed upon by all of the participating Associations so long as those processes
186 do not conflict with the then current Manual on Ministry of the United Church of Christ.
187
- 188 ➤ The particular Association’s Committee on Ministry will accept the outcome of the
189 Unified Fitness Review Committee as its own and report the same to the appropriate
190 settings of the United Church of Christ.
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- 192 ➤ Any appeal of the process by the subject of the review must be filed with the
193 Association Moderator within ten (10) days of notification of the outcome of the Fitness
194 Review.
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- 196 ➤ When an oversight decision of the Unified Fitness Review Committee is appealed, the
197 Executive Committee of the appropriate Association shall be convened as a Board of
198 Appeal. The grounds for appeal of oversight decisions shall be limited to questions of
199 process. The appeal will determine whether the approved process of the Committee on
200 Ministry and Unified Fitness Review Committee were adhered to. The outcomes of an
201 appeal are:
- 202 1. Affirmation that the process used was consistent with the Unified Fitness
203 Review Committee’s process and with the Association’s Committee on
204 Ministry’s process – in which case the decision of the Unified Fitness
205 Review Committee stands.
206 2. Recognition that the process used was not consistent with the Unified
207 Fitness Review Committee process and the Association’s Committee on
208 Ministry process. The Executive Committee will refer the case back to
209 the Unified Fitness Review Committee and the Association’s Committee
210 on Ministry to be completed pursuant to the adopted process.
211
- 212 ➤ The Executive Committee of each participating Association will appoint one (1) member
213 to the Unified Fitness Review Committee. The appointee must have been a member of
214 an Association’s Committee on Ministry within the last 6 years. The Executive
215 Committee of the Association may choose to renew the appointee for up to two more
216 terms of service. Prior to doing so, the Executive Committee of the Association must
217 confirm the appointee’s willingness to continue to serve on the Unified Fitness Review
218 Committee and must consult with Conference staff. Attention to the importance of
219 balancing gender, clergy, lay and the needed skills and experience on the Unified Fitness
220 Review Committee shall be considered by the Executive Committee of the Association in
221 making or renewing its appointments.
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223 **Related (but distinct) Association By-laws Suggestion:**

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

- 228 ➤ Any member of an Association board or committee or participant in an Association
229 oversight action who has a financial, personal, or official interest in, or conflict or
230 appearance of a conflict with any matter pending, of such nature that it prevents or may
231 prevent that member from acting in an impartial manner, will offer to voluntarily recuse
232 him/herself and refrain from discussion of, participation in and/or voting in the activity
233 where the conflict or appearance of a conflict exists. If there is a conflict either real or
234 perceived and the individual does not voluntarily recuse him/herself, the Association
235 board or committee may, by a super majority vote of 2/3 of the members then present and
236 voting, require involuntary recusal.

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238 **Proposed Operating Procedures for the Unified Fitness Review Committee:**

239 Here are the initial operating procedures:

- 240 ▪ When a Fitness Review is referred to the Unified Fitness Review Committee, the staff
241 person will consult with the Unified Fitness Review Committee to identify who from the
242 Unified Fitness Review Committee will serve as the interview team for that particular
243 Fitness Review. In any particular Fitness Review, once the interview phase is completed,
244 those serving on the interview team will participate in the deliberations of the Unified
245 Fitness Review Committee, but will not vote on that particular Fitness Review. Should
246 the outcome of the vote include a growth plan, the interview team will participate with
247 the other members of the Unified Fitness Review Committee in developing an
248 appropriate growth plan.
- 249 ▪ When a Fitness Review is referred to the Unified Fitness Review Committee, the Unified
250 Fitness Review Committee will identify one person (lay or clergy) to serve as Chaplain
251 and provide pastoral support to the UFRC itself for the duration of that case. The
252 Chaplain may not be a member of the interview team for that particular case.

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