RESOLUTION

Throughout its history, the United Church of Christ has faithfully lifted up our call to respond to the needs of the poor and the marginalized. Because of this faithful awareness, significant ministries developed responding to the needs of brothers and sisters who have been overlooked because of cultural, ethnic, orientation or racial reasons. There is, however, a growing distress in Rural America, with its small towns and small congregations, as its communities fade from the landscape. This diminishing of the rural population and with it the very sense of community that has been a source of strength leaves those who remain spiritually, physically and emotionally vulnerable. Inherent with our faith is a belief that God is the source of our hope. We in the United Church of Christ acknowledge that God is experienced most fully when we are in community. Nevertheless, when that sense of community is threatened by forces beyond the reach of the residents, then the experience of God and the hope which God enables for us all is also threatened. While the United Church of Christ has sought in the past to address the predicament of the small rural congregation, its members and pastors, today there is a vast gulf between the needs of rural America and the ability of the United Church of Christ in all its settings to respond. Therefore the following resolution is offered:

WHEREAS, over 60% of the Churches in the United Church of Christ are located in rural areas of our country, and
WHEREAS, many of these congregations have memberships that are near or below 50, with an average attendance of less than 35, and
WHEREAS, Rural America is central in our basic faith about God's economy which recognizes that through the cycle of planting and harvesting, God's rich and abundant Spirit is manifested, and
WHEREAS, the health and vitality of the rural congregations, with their historic, covenantal presence, within the body of the United Church of Christ, is as vital to the health of the entire church as any other group of congregations, (Ephesians 4:5), and
WHEREAS, many of these small rural congregations are in communities that suffer from out-migration with declining populations that offer little or no prospect at present for numerical growth, though there are signs of a rural renaissance to which these congregations are similarly ill equipped to respond, and
WHEREAS, many of these congregations have few young folk who can help to carry the financial or duty burden, and
WHEREAS, these congregations frequently find themselves unable to support the usual patterns of worship, Christian Education and other activities so necessary for healthy church life, and
WHEREAS, these congregations struggle to secure pastoral leadership, and
WHEREAS, many of these rural congregations are located in areas so isolated they provide little or no opportunity for yoking with other congregations, and
WHEREAS, these rural congregations struggle to provide the basic components of church life, and
WHEREAS, having received, as fully as any other, the call to discipleship and the vision of faith filled church life, many rural congregations face their inability to fulfill their call to discipleship, because of lack of resources:
THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Twenty-sixth General Synod recognizes the critical importance of rural ministry within the United Church of Christ.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Synod recognizes the special needs of the significant number of churches in the United Church of Christ that are rural including the need for resources for Christian Education, small membership Sunday Schools, meaningful worship even when the numbers are very small, outreach in the midst of isolation, networking to build support, attracting pastoral leadership, and developing a vision that will guide congregations into the future; and therefore:

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Synod recognizes the need to provide leadership that will empower small membership rural congregations to address the justice issues that often go unnoticed such as rural poverty, human rights, domestic violence, youth guidance and development, economic injustice and drug and alcohol abuse; and therefore:

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Collegium of Officers will organize a task force with representation including national staff, conferences, seminaries, other educational institutions and rural churches; and therefore:

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Task Force will establish goals and strategies to address the needs and challenges of rural churches and to identify and develop a strategy for disseminating existing resources for rural churches; and therefore:

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Task Force report to the Executive Council at each of its meetings and that the Task Force will present its recommendations for implementation including staffing resources at the Fall 2008 Executive Council; and therefore:

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Collegium will report to the Twenty-seventh General Synod on how the Collegium is responding to the needs and challenges of the Rural Churches; and therefore:

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that through these programmatic and resource avenues the United Church of Christ will become a center for information sharing, support, and guidance for the rural congregations and the small isolated communities they serve.

FUNDING

Funding and implementation of this resolution is to be made in accordance with the mandates and available funding of the affected agencies.