No. 9519

(Operational Business Item)

FORMAL ACTION OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)
IN RESPONSE TO CHURCHES IN COVENANT COMMUNION:
THE CHURCH OF CHRIST UNITING
(Consultation on Church Union, 1989)

ADOPTED by the General Assembly

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Introduction

Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting is a proposal adopted by the 17th Plenary meeting of the Consultation on Church Union, in New Orleans, December 5-9, 1988, for the nine member churches to share their common life as "The Church of Christ Uniting". The nine member churches of the Consultation on Church Union are: African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Episcopal Church, International Council of Community Churches, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church. They represent a rich diversity of God's gifts to the Church and the world.

Based on the conviction that God wills the unity of the Church, the proposal describes a covenantal form of visible unity. After three decades of working together, the partner churches have come to believe that such a form of unity bears the following characteristics:

[Covenant, Chapter I: 3]

(a) Celebration of God's grace will be central to our life together. (Eph. 2:12-21)
(b) Working together in Christ's mission of salvation for the whole world will mark our endeavors. (Matt. 28: 18-19a)
(c) Each member, by virtue of baptism, will be understood to be a member of the apostolic and priestly ministry (I Peter 2:9-10)
(d) The form of unity will mirror the diversity of its membership in every aspect of its fellowship and ministry. (I Cor. 12:12-27)
(e) In seeking God's justice in Church and world, the reconciled communions will embody the unity that is God's gift. (Lk. 2:46-55)
(f) Because of the mutual enrichment of our several communions, this covenantal form of unity will more faithfully reflect the universality of the Body of Christ and include the strengthening of our previous ecumenical commitments. (I Cor. 1:12-17)

(g) Covenant communion assumes a new kind of ecclesial reality, an organic life that includes, in Pauline language, those "joints and ligaments" which enable the
Church to act as one body knit together under Christ the head.
(Col. 2:19; Eph. 4:15-16)

When embraced by the churches, this "new ecclesial reality" will not involve institutional merger, nor will it create "a new denomination". It will mean for the churches approving the proposal "a new relationship of unity in all things which are essential to the church's life, namely: faith, sacraments, ministry, and mission." Rather than a "consolidation of forms and structures," it will embody what the early church described as a "communion in sacred things"

[**Covenant.** Foreword, 1, 5].

The proposal is based upon the conviction that "division in the life of the Church is a contradiction of its very nature" and "a stumbling block to the world. It is a scandal that calls into question the being of God and the resurrection of Christ, and so imperils the credibility of the gospel" [**The COCU Consensus,** I.1 and 10]. **Covenant Communion** seeks to provide a form of unity which is at once faithful to God's will, appropriate to the present circumstances, and open to the future for renewal and reformation. It is a proposal which calls for unity of heart and mind, for unity in faith, in prayer, in the breaking of bread, in the Word of the gospel, in ministry, in sharing, and in witness and service to the world. (Acts 2.42-22). Such unity will be visible witness to the world of God's saving power in Jesus Christ [**Covenant,** I.4]

**Churches in Covenant Communion** is composed of two parts: (1) The Covenanting Proposal, which includes definitions of unity and covenanting as understood in this context, description of the eight "elements of covenanting," and the proposed covenanting process; and (2) Liturgies for the Inauguration of Covenanting, including national, regional, and local services for celebrating the covenant, reconciling ministries, establishing local, regional, and national covenanting councils for common decision making, and regularly sharing the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

**DISCIPLES OF CHRIST INVOLVEMENT AND LEADERSHIP IN COCU**

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been an instrumental member church in the Consultation on Church Union since 1963. For Disciples COCU represents our yearning-rooted in the Gospel and the Scriptures - to be faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ by becoming one with the whole people of God. Disciples delegates have participated in all the plenaries and commissions that have shaped this journey of dialogue, consensus-building, and prayer for the unity of Christ's Church. This church responded constructively and positively to earlier COCU proposals: Principles of Church Union (1966), *A Plan of Union for the Church of Christ Uniting* (1970) and *The COCU Consensus* (1984). Throughout the U.S. our congregations have participated in countless services of Holy Communion with sisters and brothers in other churches, using the two COCU liturgies: *An Order of Worship for the Proclamation of the Word of God and the Celebration of the Lord's Supper* (1968) and *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper; a New Text* (1984).

Through COCU's brief history Disciples have given major leadership. Paul A. Crow, Jr. was the first General Secretary (1968-1974). George G. Beazley, Jr. was the first Disciples to serve as the President of COCU (1970-1972). Keith Watkins significantly shaped COCU's worship tradition. Others who played signal roles are William Jackson Jarman, Paul S. Stauffer, A. Dale
Fiers, Nancy Fowler, Lester B. Rickman, Ronald E. Osborn, Kenneth L. Teegarden, Colbert S. Cartwright, Dolores Highbaugh, Albert M. Pennybacker, Walter D. Bingham, James O. Duke, Mildred Slack, Michael Kinnamon, John Foulkes, Angel Bonilla. In their patient and faithful witness the ecumenical vision has become a reality that seeks to be responsive to the needs of the world.

The General Assembly gave the Council on Christian Unity the responsibility for developing a process of preparing this church to study and take action upon the proposal, Churches in Covenant Communion (1988). Our four-year strategic plan has involved (i) an invitation to all congregations, regions, constituencies, and institutions of higher education to reflect upon the proposal; (ii) the preparation of study resources, e.g., a study guide Singing Amen...from the Heart, videotapes, articles in Mid-Stream (July, 1995), The Disciple and Vanguard; (iii) regional COCU Enabling Conferences that trained interpreters for the congregations; (iv) special dialogues with Disciples constituency groups, such as the International CWF Quadrennial, the National Hispanic Planning Conference, the Black Ministers Retreat, et al. These efforts produced extensive reflections upon the calling and possibilities of covenant communion.

In its deepest expression this churchwide process has helped build confidence and hope for the proposal of covenant communion, even as we acknowledge there continue to be misinformation, anxieties, and concerns about the ecumenical calling of this church. Yet we believe Disciples have been brought to this moment of decision by God, the Holy Spirit and our memory of our particular calling to be a people of unity.

There is a complementary reality that needs to be understood by Disciples in the U.S. and Canada. As we survey the variety of united churches throughout the world, it is revealing to discover that former Disciples of Christ participate in many of them. Our tradition therefore lives in unity with Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists within united and uniting churches in the Philippines, Japan, Thailand, Zaire, North India, Argentina/Paraguay, Southern Africa, Jamaica, et al. Our Disciples tradition cannot be defined or defended apart from the witness of these united communions.

WHAT IS COVENANT COMMUNION?

"Covenanting is understood to be both an act and a process. It is an act by which "the churches will commit themselves, before God and each other, to live henceforth in one covenantal communion even though they continue to exist in distinct ecclesiastical systems" [Covenant II.1]. Covenant communion is not a merger of church structures and organizations. This act will "inaugurate a process of deepening commitment by these churches to one another...as the covenanting churches jointly identify and take such mutually agreed actions as may serve to deepen their communion in faith, sacrament, ministry, and mission". [Covenant II.3]. Covenant Communion does not require uniformity in structure or worship or theology or definition of mission.

In covenant communion the churches maintain, for so long as each may determine, their own church structures and traditions, including present forms of worship, systems of ministerial selection, training, and placement, their international, confessional, and communion relationships, and their mission..."
programs. [Covenant II.5]

Because the unity proposed in covenant communion is not "chiefly organizational," there are eight "elements" of covenanting identified that are basic to the proposed relationship of unity between the churches. These elements are:

* claiming unity in faith
* commitment to seek unity with wholeness
* mutual recognition of members in one baptism
* mutual recognition of each other as churches
* mutual recognition and reconciliation of ordained ministry
* celebrating the Eucharist together
* engaging together in Christ's mission
* formation of covenanting councils

The goal of covenant communion is a unity that will bring renewal in every setting of the church's life, but particularly to the faith, life, and witness of local churches. For this reason, the most important question before each of the member churches of the Consultation is not whether this proposal is compatible with its own historic faith, polity, and traditions. Rather the crucial question before the churches is whether covenant communion is a faithful instrument of renewal, not only for the member churches, but also for the Church Universal and for the "whole inhabited earth." "Covenant communion is intended to be a sign and foretaste of the community God wills for the world. In its ultimate intent, it is for the salvation of each and all. It is for the redemption of the world". [Covenant II.9].

The following is a brief summary of each of the eight elements as presented in Churches in Covenant Communion (See Chapter IV.)

1. **Claiming Our Unity in Faith.** The "one faith" which the church proclaims is the faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. Though there may be differences of emphasis and interpretation, the COCU member churches after two decades of theological study affirmed their essential unity in matters of faith, worship, sacrament, membership, ministry, and mission in The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting. This vision was affirmed by the 1989 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Indianapolis "with gratitude and hope" and as "a beginning toward 'eventual communion' of the participating churches" and "a sufficient theological basis to proceed with the covenanting acts and the uniting process proposed by the COCU Churches".

2. **Commitment to Seek Unity With Wholeness.** Covenant communion seeks a unity that is inclusive of all who are baptized into Christ, while rejoicing in the diversity of persons and gifts which the Spirit has given to the Church." [Covenant IV.7]. Covenant communion will call the churches to a "new community in Christ in which differences are affirmed, accepted, and celebrated as the gifts of God for the common good" [Covenant IV,12].

3. **Mutual Recognition of Members in One Baptism.** Covenant communion is based, in part, on formal actions of the member churches between 1974 and 1979 to recognize that "all who are baptized into Christ are members of Christ's Universal Church and belong to and share in Christ's
ministry through the people of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Creator, Christ, and Spirit). Disciples took this action toward mutual recognition of Baptism at the 1975 San Antonio General Assembly (No. 7560). Diverse baptismal practices among the churches are not regarded as "different baptisms, but different facets of the one baptism into the one body of the one Lord" [Covenant IV.14].

4. Mutual Recognition of Each Other as Churches. While membership in the Consultation implies some recognition of the other member churches as part of the one church of Jesus Christ, "covenanting provides the occasion and the means whereby that which is implicit in the relationship among the churches may become explicit, that which is privately and unofficially acknowledged may be openly and joyfully declared before God and many witnesses" [Covenant, IV.17]. This concept is confirmed in the Preamble to The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ): "Through baptism into Christ we enter into newness of life and are made one with the whole people of God," and in paragraph 2, "Within the whole family of God, the church appears wherever believers in Jesus Christ are gathered in his name." Disciples and the United Church of Christ took action in 1989 affirming a Declaration of Full Communion.

5. Mutual Recognition and Reconciliation of Ordained Ministry. Within the Church of Christ Uniting all previously ordained ministers will be recognized as having valid ordinations, and future ordinations would not be "carried out in denominational isolation from the other covenanting churches" [Covenant IV 20,27]. It is clearly acknowledged that the ministers of these churches are blessed by God and rooted in the apostolic tradition. The reconciliation of ministries would mean that, with the prescribed liturgical steps and with appropriate invitation, "the ordained ministries of each covenanting church [will] become one ministry of Jesus Christ in relation to all" [Covenant IV 20, 27]. In regional services of worship ministers who exercise pastoral oversight (episkope) will liturgically acknowledge "the reconciliation of bishops" by offering "words of mutual commitment to one another" and by "mutually laying hands upon each other" [Covenant IV, 23]. These "authorized minister[s] of oversight" will then "in silence" lay hands on all other ministers in a "liturgy for the reconciliation of presbyters and welcoming of deacons." It is expressly stated that "these are not liturgies of ordination or reordination, but of reconciliation among those whose ordained ministry has been mutually recognized" [Covenant IV, 23-24]. If the church is to be truly "catholic", as well as "evangelical and reformed", it is believed that the laying on of hands by the reconciled bishops will express this catholicity in such a way as to invite the broadest possible recognition in the Universal Church [Covenant IV, 25].

Recognizing that not all churches have a personalized ministry of episkope or the office of deacon (a minister of service), this proposal allows "each participating church, prior to the COCU liturgy in which the covenant is declared and ministries are reconciled, to determine how its present categories of ordained ministry relate to the historic categories" to be embodied in The Church of Christ Uniting [Covenant IV, 28]. In covenant communion the threefold pattern of ministry offers the opportunity for the ministries of these nine churches to be reconciled with the ministries of the Church Universal. Clearly the COCU churches understand there is no single pattern of ministry in the New Testament and that all forms of the ordained ministry have been blessed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Yet many times when the Church has needed to adapt its ministries to new contextual situations and when there is a yearning for a ministry that is
broadly accepted in the Church Universal, the ministry of bishops, presbyter (pastor), and deacon has expressed the unity and mission of the Church. In the Church of Christ Uniting the three fold ministry will be shaped by the spiritual gifts of all these traditions. The Covenant Communion proposal allows considerable flexibility in this process:

Each covenating church may find these ministerial offices already existing within its polity, or may make amendment of existing offices,...or may create a new office within the integrity of its continuing polity but in a manner conformable to the intention of ministry reconciliation through covenating. Each church may assign or continue to use such names for these offices as it may desire; however, in the shared life of the churches they commonly will be identified as deacons, presbyters, and bishops of the Church of Christ Uniting.  [Covenant IV, 30].

6. Celebrating the Eucharist Together. Because the Consultation believes the Lord's Supper is "the sacred feast of the people of God in communion with Christ" and "at the heart of the church's life," the regular celebration of the Eucharist together is at the heart of covenanting. [Covenant IV, 32]. Shared celebration among congregations and elsewhere are seen as both a "sign and a means of unity in Christ", and a "powerful centering reality for the church's mission". Therefore, common celebrations should be planned with "intentional regularity", although the "frequency of such occasions is left to the discretion of the covenating partners in each place" [Covenant IV 35-37].

7. Engaging Together in Christ's Mission. Because "mission is essential to the life of the church", it will be "essential to life in covenant communion among the churches" [Covenant IV,38]. In covenant communion, the churches will engage together in mission through worship, proclamation of the gospel, and action which embodies God's justice, peace, and love.

8. Formation of Covenant Councils. In the Church of Christ Uniting covenating councils at every level and location of church life - local, regional, and national - will give life to the communion. These covenating councils, composed of elected representatives of the member churches, will "enable the communion of churches in covenant". Among the functions of covenating councils are: planning common celebrations of the Eucharist, enabling "joint ordinations among all the covenanting churches", providing "joint spiritual oversight" in common areas of church life, enabling common witness for justice, and providing opportunity for shared decision-making. The list of functions makes clear that "the primary focus of the covenanting process is the local worshiping community, gathered around the Word and sacraments, and giving expression to the church's missionary vocation in the world. It is the local covenating council, more than the regional or national, on which primary attention falls in the covenanting process."  [Covenant IV. 46-47]

THE PROCESS OF COVENANTING

The "process of covenanting" will be implemented through a series of steps and stages. The first formal step is "claiming the theological consensus" as found in The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting. This affirmation was made by the General Assembly in 1989 at Indianapolis. The second act of covenanting is approving the covenanting proposal
(considered in 1995 at Pittsburgh). Third, after all the member churches of the Consultation have acted on the proposal, a plenary meeting of the Consultation will be called (currently planned for 1998) to "carefully examine the actions of the churches, . . . and determine next steps accordingly" [Covenant V, 4]. A fourth step will involve each church determining what it must do to prepare to participate in the inaugurating liturgies of covenanting. In particular, this will involve determining how it will choose to "put forward" appropriate persons for reconciliation as bishops, presbyters, and deacons in The Church of Christ Uniting, as well as electing and authorizing delegates to covenanting councils. A fifth step will be participation in national, regional, and local liturgies for inaugurating covenant. The process anticipates that following these services there will be some "unevenness" in the way covenanting is developed in different places. "Even after the regional judicatories of the churches have entered into covenanting, groups of congregations within the region will celebrate the covenant and where desirable form a local covenanting council when they are prepared so to do". [Covenant V.12] The development of covenanting councils and the living out of other marks of "covenant communion" will take place at local initiative and in those places where the churches have determined to manifest their unity more visibly.

WHAT DIFFERENCE WILL COVENANT COMMUNION MAKE?

Since 1988 the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and other churches have been considering whether to receive Churches in Covenant Communion. An obvious question to ask, if the General Assembly approves to commit the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is, "What difference will it make?" Some are concerned that covenanting will make little or no difference. Others are worried that it will take away energy and resources needed in other areas of our church life. Still others wonder if it will take away cherished practices.

Again, it is important to remember that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been a member of the Consultation on Church Union since 1963 and has participated in the writing of Churches in Covenant Communion. This proposal to the nine COCU churches therefore carries specific aspects of the Disciples vision of the Church such as "unity in diversity". Covenanting calls for the renewal of the Church that is truly catholic, evangelical and reformed. It also allows for diversity so that each church may keep its own polity, name, property and decision-making powers. Some sections of the covenanting proposal may not be the way we would write them. However, Disciples do recognize in the proposal our own tradition and our hope for unity and renewal of the church's life, faith, witness and service.

(1) The proposal takes seriously the biblical and theological concept of covenant as that which binds God's people together and also claims the Tradition of the Universal Church, including the use of the Apostles' and Nicene/Constantinopolitan creeds as worshipping and teaching documents. There is no intention of making creeds a test of fellowship. Nevertheless all churches acknowledge that these confessions of faith are ancient ecumenical witnesses of Tradition to the revelation of God in Scripture.

(2) Covenanting overcomes the scandal of a divided Lord's Table. The common understanding in COCU of how the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is celebrated should be acceptable to Disciples. The document says, "Regular celebration of the Eucharist together is at the heart of
covenanting... and that the "shared celebration of the Eucharist is both a sign and a means of unity in Christ" (Covenant IV, 32 and 35). From the time that churches decide to participate in covenanting, common celebrations of the Eucharist will be planned with intentional regularity.

(3) The proposal clearly ties Christian unity to the church's mission by seeking to overcome the issues that divide the human community - racism, sexism, and handicapism. It calls the rich and poor together in worship in order that together we may seek to proclaim the gospel and to participate in Christ's justice, peace and love for all people. Covenanting finds expression in worship, witness and mission for the sake of the world. This unity draws us together so the churches "may be a sign to all people of God's redemptive will to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth". (Covenant IV,44). This tie between unity and mission moves the covenanting churches beyond cooperation in service projects or efforts to conserve human and material resources - all good but partial efforts - to a visible expression of the unity of the Church that grows out of a common witness to the one faith and a shared celebration of the sacraments. Covenanting churches will not only be able to do mission together, but will understand that mission as gathering together around the Lord's Table.

(4) Churches in Covenant Communion provides Disciples with the opportunity to consider the nature of leadership in the life of the Church. There are questions among Disciples about the office of bishop and the three-fold ordering of ministry. Yet, our church has expressed the need for the functions of a ministry and oversight (episkope) that witnesses to the faith and unity of the Church. Already, we invest some offices in our church with a sense of corporate ministry of episcopate. Our participation in the covenanting process may help us to find our own version of the ministry of oversight that is not hierarchical and that has less to do with administration and management and more to do with being a servant of Christ, a teacher of the faith and a spiritual leader of the Church.

(5) Also, the covenanting process will cause us to be clear about the role of Disciples elders and deacons as congregational leaders. Specifically, we normally understand the eldership as lay leaders set apart for a sacramental office in the life of the congregation. These leaders are partners with the ordained minister in giving oversight to the congregation. Because the covenanting process includes the office of deacon as an office of ordained ministry, Disciples will find this a major challenge. For us the term deacon is a lay office for leadership in a congregation. Nevertheless, receiving the order of ministry of oversight and deacon as a sign of unity and a means of renewal, while maintaining our own polity, will require disciplined biblical and theological reflection and an openness to the gifts of other traditions.

(6) Covenanting councils recognize that some ongoing form of organization is necessary if Christian unity is to be visible. Concern has been expressed by some that this is a new form of "bureaucracy". However, it is through the covenanting councils that Christian unity takes shape in local settings. Local ecumenism will have the opportunity to provide the energy and interaction to give the churches a new vision of God's unity.

(7) The most important difference for all COCU churches is that participation in Churches in Covenant Communion will link the work for Christian unity at national and international levels to local congregations involved in making real their unity in Christ. Congregations will begin to
understand themselves as connected to the uniting church through regularly coming together to witness to the one faith, to celebrate the Lord's Supper, to participate in the ordination of persons for ministry, to be intentional about a common mission, and to experience the diversity of worship traditions.

So the difference Covenant Communion will make in the lives of the churches depends upon us. Whatever happens will start because faithful Christians in congregations, regions, and other expressions of the Church believe deeply that Covenant Communion can bring spiritual renewal to those who confess Jesus Christ. COCU's proposal for Covenant Communion does not impose requirements on Disciples congregations. Yet it does call us to make a solemn promise to live out our common faith more fully with our partner COCU churches in towns, cities, and communities. Some of the ways Disciples and other COCU churches may live in Covenant Communion are:

* praying regularly for each other by name;
* inviting to each baptismal service representatives of other COCU communions (a sign that all are baptized not into a denomination but into the one Church of Jesus Christ);
* celebrating the Lord's Supper (Eucharist) with other COCU congregations at least three times a year;
* including the presence and participation of representatives from the covenanting churches in each other's ordinations and installations (a sign of the one ministry of Christ in which each church partakes);
* engaging in joint mission projects each year in our local communities;
* working together against prejudice and bias which leads to injustice against all people and denies the unity in wholeness where differences are affirmed and celebrates all gifts of God for the common good;
* inviting a representative of another congregation to serve on the board or committees of our congregations;
* teaching the meaning of unity through Covenant Communion as well as the history and gifts of all the COCU Churches in membership classes, church school classes, and seminary classes.

These simple and practical acts will draw these churches closer together and knit us into one people so that the world will believe in Christ.

Resolution

WHEREAS, the Church is one, and its unity is sealed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our common Lord and Savior;

WHEREAS, this unity is required for the Church's credibility and faithfulness to Christ's mission and the justice of the Reign of God;

WHEREAS, the Disciples of Christ were born as a church to be an instrument of God's reconciling love for the world and to live in visible unity with Christians;

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WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been an active member of the Consultation on Church Union since 1963, as authorized by the 1962 Assembly of the International Convention in Los Angeles; and

WHEREAS, the 1989 General Assembly in Indianapolis affirmed *The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting* as providing a theological basis for covenant communion among the member churches; and

WHEREAS, the 1988 New Orleans Seventeenth Plenary of the Consultation on Church Union has approved the document *Churches in Covenant Communion: The Church of Christ Uniting* as a plan for the formation under God of a covenant communion of churches, and commended it to the participating churches for formal action; and

WHEREAS, *The Design for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* states in III, A, 14 (f) that "The General Assembly shall determine the basis of cooperative relationships of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) with other religious bodies, organizations and agencies, and be responsible for authorizing unity and union conversations, consultations and negotiations with other Christian communions;"

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, October 20-24, 1995, hereby commits the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to continuing in "the process of covenanting" as presented in Chapter V of *Churches in Covenant Communion*; and

1. Approves this text as the definitive agreement for joining with other participating churches in covenant communion, including the acts sufficient to enable it;

2. Declares its willingness to enter into a relationship of covenant communion with the member churches of the Consultation on Church Union and other churches which similarly approve this agreement and *The COCU Consensus* which is its theological basis, sealed by the proposed inaugural liturgies; and

3. Begins to identify for itself such steps and procedures as may be necessary to prepare for the reconciliation of ordained ministries and for entering into covenant communion as set forth in this document.