CALL FOR AN OPEN MEETING POLICY FOR THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)

WHEREAS, in recent years, the General Board, the General Assembly, and leaders of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have heard from Disciples throughout the church about the need for greater transparency and accountability and have acknowledged this need; and

WHEREAS, after the Chapter 11 bankruptcy of the National Benevolent Association — a general ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) — the NBA Task Force appointed by the denomination’s General Board to review the bankruptcy called for “More frequent open and transparent communication among General Ministries, regions, and congregations” (NBA Task Force Report, May 8, 2006, p. 9); and

WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a member of the National Council of Churches of Christ (NCCC) USA, whose General Assembly adopted in 1990 an open meeting policy for its General Assembly, committees, and subcommittees, and is in a process of revising said policy; and

WHEREAS, mainline denominations and ecumenical partners including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Episcopal Church in America, and the United Methodist Church have similar open meeting policies; and

WHEREAS, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is organized on many democratic principles, and democracy relies on free access to the workings of government and to information, so much so that the federal government, as well as states and municipalities, have established “Sunshine Laws” and open meeting legislation that entitles the public and the press to attend government meetings and to obtain information about the operation of those entities; and

WHEREAS, the Disciples’ first moderator, Ronald E. Osborn, opposed the attempted closing of the 1969 General Board meeting in the face of controversy, writing later in The Disciple, “The ugly alternative to openness is getting our information from a grapevine of gossip that keeps a favored few ‘in the know’ and the vast majority in the dark”; and

WHEREAS, open and transparent communication has been essential to the building of trust and thereby essential to the health and faith of Christian communities for centuries, even as Jesus said in Luke 12:3, “there is nothing secret that will not become known.”;
THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) meeting in Indianapolis in 2009 — in the spirit of openness and accountability — call for the establishment and implementation of an Open Meeting Policy for the General Assembly, including its General Board, Administrative Committee, and the task forces, advisory groups, standing committees, councils, and working groups that these elected bodies may form; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Assembly, in making that call, direct the Moderator and the General Minister and President to work with the submitters of this resolution to convene a task force that would be accountable to the General Board to develop said Open Meeting Policy and return it to the General Assembly for approval in 2011; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that said task force develop and propose a policy according to the principles outlined herein and recommend a process for establishing and implementing the policy to the General Board in 2011, which would then forward the policy and recommendations to the General Assembly for approval in 2011; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that such a policy should be informed by the principles of open meeting policies established by other mainline denominations and the National Council of Churches, and by the basic premises of an open and democratic society, such as:

- “Open to the public” means that business is conducted in open session in a location that accommodates visitors and press, the location and date of meetings being made known prior to meetings, and material pertinent to the meeting being made available to visitors and press.

- Closed sessions should be permitted only when certain criteria are met, such as 1) the closed session is authorized by a vote of two-thirds of those present and eligible to vote; 2) the vote to authorize is taken during an open meeting and recorded in the minutes; 3) the reason for the closed session is stated publicly; 4) the closed session is limited to matters permitted to be exempt from an open meeting (suggested below); and 5) decisions made in closed session are publicly announced following the meeting.

- Subjects that may be considered in closed session should be limited to real estate matters; negotiations, when public announcements may be harmful to the negotiating process; personnel matters; pending or potential litigation or collective bargaining; deployment of security personnel or devices; presentations wherein real or apparent danger may jeopardize the life or liberty of the presenter; and the evaluation of clergy standing.

and;
BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the policy that is established be interpreted liberally by the General Assembly and its legislative bodies, i.e. restraint being used in closing meetings, closing them as seldom as possible; and

FINALLY, BE IT RESOLVED that the resulting policy be strongly recommended to all general and regional ministries, congregations and higher education institutions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and to recognized and “other” organizations that affiliate with the denomination.

Central Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) — Indianapolis, IN
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) — Tucson, AZ
DisciplesWorld, Inc. — Indianapolis, IN

The General Board recommends that the General Assembly ADOPT Business Item No. 0923. (Debate time: 12 minutes)