

Peace Unity Purity

Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church

What Presbyterians Should Know About the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church

The report of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, issued on August 25, 2005, has been in the news. Here are some facts that Presbyterians should know about the task force and its report.

What is the task force?

The task force is a group of twenty Presbyterians, chosen to represent the range of backgrounds and views in the PC(USA), formed by the 213th General Assembly (2001). They were asked to discern the church's "Christian identity in and for the 21st century" and to devise "a process and instrument" to help the church deal with issues that are causing conflict, including sexuality and ordination, interpretation of the Bible, questions about Jesus Christ and salvation, and the use of power in the church.

What does the task force report say?

- *The main message of the report and its first recommendation are that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) should stay together in one body.*

The report tells the story of the task force's four years of work. As the group worshiped, studied, and talked together, each member came to realize that the church's problems are not entirely someone else's "fault," but their own doing as well. All members came to recognize one another as faithful Christians whose views are grounded in the Bible and connected to Presbyterian theological traditions.

Task force members still do not agree on some controversial issues like sexuality and ordination. Yet the report contains a theological reflection in which the whole task force "speaks with one voice" about the core doctrines of Christian faith and Reformed tradition. The task force concluded that persons who can affirm the faith together and see that even views they disagree with have a biblical and theological basis are, indeed, *in Christ* together and should remain in the same denomination.

The task force also reports that they found more than two sides or positions on many of the controversial issues they studied. Therefore, the task force looked for ways that groups can discern God's will and set directions that do not always require yes/no, up/down votes.

The task force's other recommendations all focus on ways that might help the denomination to continue as one body while discerning God's will on matters about which Presbyterians don't yet agree. The task force recommends that:

- *Presbyterians with diverse views form discernment groups that meet for worship, community building, study, and theological reflection.*
- *governing bodies use methods of discernment, especially when facing difficult issues, before moving to debate and vote.*
- *the 217th General Assembly (2006) approve an "authoritative interpretation" of the PC(USA) Constitution that supports an approach to ordination that is both more flexible and more rigorous than current practice.* It reemphasizes principles that were adopted in 1729: the whole church sets standards, and the body that is ordaining or installing a minister, elder, or deacon applies those standards, deciding whether a candidate has departed from essentials of Reformed faith and practice. The process is more rigorous because essentials of the faith will be part of every examination. The process is more flexible because a governing body may determine, on a case-by-case basis, whether a particular candidate's departure from standards is also a departure from essentials. The process preserves the right of higher governing bodies to review the decisions of ordaining bodies to be sure they are fair and responsible.
- *the 217th General Assembly (2006) create a climate for discernment by not making any constitutional changes in the areas covered by the task force report if the recommended authoritative interpretation passes.*
- *all Presbyterians build up the church in love by seeking conciliation and mediation before taking formal action against one another.*

Why are the "peace, unity, and purity" of the church important?

The task force believes its report and recommendations offer the church ways to live together that may demonstrate to a violently divided world the peace, unity, and purity given through Jesus Christ. The Reverend Gary Demarest spoke for the whole task force: "The ultimate goal is not just to get along better, but to strengthen the mission of God to the world."

The complete report (with study guide) and accompanying resources are on the task force's Web site at www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity. A hard copy of the report will be mailed to every congregation in September.