

**Study of the Theological Task Force Report**  
**Session One of a four-week design**  
**Plan and Progress of the Work of the Task Force**

*Time needed: 60 minutes*

**Session Overview**

This session is designed to provide participants with an opportunity to begin a study of the final report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. This session will present a brief overview of the task force's mandate and process (Section II of the report), and of the issues with which they dealt (Section III).

All four of these sessions in general, and this session in particular, may present you with the challenge of not having enough time to cover the material and provide for important group discussions. The times given by each activity are estimates. Given your context, you will need to decide how best to divide the time without scrimping on the material or prematurely cutting off important conversation. If possible, you might consider adding an extra session or extending the time of each session.

**Resources Needed**

- A copy of the task force's final report for each participant
- Bibles
- Paper and pens or pencils

**The Session Plan**

1. (2 minutes) Begin the session with prayer. Welcome the group and share in a few words the overall outline for these four sessions.
2. (5-7 minutes) Ask participants to briefly answer the following question (if the group is large, divide into subgroups of five to seven participants in each small group):
  - What do you most appreciate about the congregation of which you are a part?
3. (10 minutes) Provide a few minutes for the leader to provide an overview of the purpose and plan of the task force based on Section II. Draw participants' attention to the mandate on the inside cover of the report; lines 267-282 of the report; and the covenant on the inside of the back cover. Share with them the following statement from the final report's study guide (p. 48):

Over our time together, a common conviction has grown among us: different as we are, God has called us to be part of the body of Christ as it is manifested in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

4. (10 minutes) Engage the group in the following questions, also taken from the final report's study guide. As you do so, consider using mutual invitation or prayerful listening as tools to foster dialogue. Divide into the same subgroups as before, if necessary. Encourage each group to name a spokesperson to report on highlights of the discussion later.

- Refer to lines 315-339 of the report. Do you find yourself in one of these descriptions of ways we have harmed one another in the body of Christ?
- Within your community of faith, how do you remain true to what you believe and who you are and hold together with those who are different from you?

5. (20 minutes) Next, turn to Section III of the final report. Either take a few minutes to provide an overview of this section, or provide a few minutes for participants to review the material. For time's sake, consider dividing into three small groups, with each group taking one of the three segments (A, B, and C) within Section III. Engage each group in one of the following questions from pages 48-49 of the final report's study guide.

- For segment A: *We were inspired by the power that the affirmation "Jesus is Lord" and other traditional Christological formulas have to shape faith and discipleship in our day* (lines 449-450). What does it mean to you that Jesus is Lord?
- For segment B: *...Scripture has the power to shape and transform us as the community of faith* (line 507). How has your understanding of Scripture been deepened through studying it with others?
- For segment C: *...We were all able to agree that perspectives on questions of sexuality, ordination, and same-gender covenantal relationships are rich and complex, and our fellow task force members who hold these views are sincere, faithful, and guided by Scripture. Therefore, we believe, the church should seek constructive, Christ-like alternatives to the "yes/no" forms in which questions about sexuality, ordination, and same-gender covenantal relationships have been put to the church in recent decades* (lines 602-607). How do you respond to this conclusion by the task force?

6. (5 minutes) If necessary, bring the participants back together in one group. Ask a spokesperson from each group to share the highlights of their discussion.

7. (3 minutes) Ask a volunteer to read Eph. 2:13-16. Invite the group to reflect silently on the verse. Provide them with paper and pens to jot down any thoughts they want to remember or share. Close with the Lord's Prayer or the passing of the peace of Christ.

8. Invite participants to read Section I of the final report for the next session.

**Study of the Theological Task Force Report**  
**Session Two of a four-week design**  
**Theological Prologue**

*Time needed: 60 minutes*

**Session Overview**

This session is designed to provide participants with an opportunity to study together Section I, “Theological Prologue,” of the final report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church.

**Resources Needed**

- A copy of the task force’s final report for each participant
- Bibles
- Paper and pens or pencils
- Newsprint and markers

**The Session Plan**

1. (2 *minutes*) Begin the session with prayer.
2. (5-7 *minutes*) Ask participants to briefly answer the following question (if the group is large, divide into subgroups of five to seven participants in each small group):
  - What is something new and something good that has happened since the group last met?
3. (5 *minutes*) Ask a volunteer to read 1 Cor. 3:10-11. Invite the group to reflect silently on the verse. Afterward, ask those who wish to do so to share their brief thoughts about the meanings of the verse.
4. (5 *minutes*) Provide a few minutes to offer an overview of Section I of the task force’s final report or for participants to review the material. Share with them the following statement from the final report’s study guide (p. 48):

The Theological Reflection in the prologue demonstrates that a group of Presbyterians, chosen for its diversity, can affirm with one voice the core theological convictions of Christian faith, the Reformed theology that the PC(USA) teaches, and the mission of the church to a rapidly changing world.

5. (25 *minutes*) Engage the group in the following questions, also taken from the final report’s study guide. As you do so, consider using mutual invitation or prayerful listening as tools to foster dialogue. Divide into the same subgroups as before if necessary.

- How does the Theological Reflection compare to your core convictions as a Presbyterian Christian?
- What is compelling about our Presbyterian identity?

Provide each small group with newsprint and markers to record the highlights of their discussions.

**6. (10 minutes)** If necessary, bring the participants back together in one group. Ask a spokesperson from each group to share the highlights of their discussion. Note similarities and differences among what the groups share.

**7. (2-3 minutes)** Close by asking participants to pray aloud as they feel led in a bidding prayer as you read the following subheadings of Section I of the final report, pausing between each one. Silence is also fine between each bidding.

God who loves us, hear our prayer....

God who saves us, hear our prayer....

God who empowers us to proclaim the gospel, hear our prayer...

**8.** Invite participants to read Section IV of the final report for the next session.

**Study of the Theological Task Force Report  
Session Three of a four-week design  
Resources for Peace, Unity, and Purity**

*Time needed: 60 minutes*

**Session Overview**

This session is designed to provide participants with an opportunity to study together Section IV, “Resources for Peace, Unity, and Purity” of the Theological Task Force’s final report.

**Resources Needed**

- A copy of the task force’s final report for each participant
- Bibles
- Paper and pens or pencils
- Newsprint and markers
- A copy of “Forms of Deliberation” (p. 8) for each participant

**The Session Plan**

1. (2 minutes) Begin the session with prayer.
2. (7-10 minutes) Read John 16:13-14. Invite the group to reflect silently on the verse. Afterward, using mutual invitation, ask participants to briefly answer the following question (if the group is large, divide into subgroups of five to seven participants in each small group):
  - Where have you seen the Spirit at work recently?
3. (5-7 minutes) Provide a few minutes to offer an overview of Section IV of the task force’s final report or for participants to review it.. Read the following portion of this section, which provides the focus for what will follow:

Are there alternatives to constant, often bitter, contention that creates factions and rivalries? The task force has searched Presbyterian tradition and other sources for models of constructive engagement for moments like the present, when the church is segmented into parties that are in almost constant conflict. We have discovered valuable resources that may allow those who hold different positions on important issues to maintain the bonds of Christian fellowship, respecting both the will of majorities and the conscience of minorities in a spirit of charity and mutual forbearance. Using these resources, conflict can be transformed into creative and constructive engagement in which those who disagree can seek together to know and follow the will of God. In this section, we share the results of our search for such resources in the theology, history, and polity of our church as well as in

certain practices we have incorporated into our life together that have strengthened us as a Christian community. (lines 620-630)

**4. (25 minutes)** Engage the group in the following questions, also taken from the final report's study guide. [If the group is large enough to do so, consider dividing into four small groups, with each group taking one of the four segments (A, B, C, and D) within Section IV.]

- For segment A: Refer to lines 658-666 for a list of items the task force found helpful in cultivating mutual forbearance and understanding. What helps you grow in mutual forbearance?
- For segment B: Refer to the points of balance in line 699. Look at each pair of themes. In each case, has the church today achieved balance between the two themes? If not, how might congregations, presbyteries, and the whole denomination achieve better balance?
- For segment C: Communal discernment involves corporate study of Scripture, gathering of information, prayerful reflection, mutual questioning, careful listening, and collective weighing of options (lines 856-858). Distribute copies of "Forms of Deliberation" for the group to review. Where do you imagine communal discernment to be most useful in the life of the church?
- For segment D: What is already happening in your congregation that is helping to build bridges and deepen mutual understanding?

Provide each small group with newsprint and markers to record the highlights of their discussions.

**5. (10 minutes)** If necessary, bring the participants back together in one group. Ask a spokesperson from each group to share the highlights of their discussion. If small groups were used, provide copies of "Forms of Deliberation" for every participant as a reference to the material studied for segment C.

**6. (2-3 minutes)** Ask a volunteer to read aloud lines 920-926, the closing sentences of Section IV, which follow:

Peace, unity, and purity are gifts of the Spirit to the church. They are also hard won virtues for any church, as our review of Presbyterian history reminds us.... How we deal with one another in controversy—especially how we accept judgment and reconciliation won for us in Christ—is a challenge to our discipleship, a test of our faith, and our most convincing witness to the truth and power of the gospel we proclaim.

Close with this prayer:

O God, you have sent us the Holy Spirit as our guide. We need your spirit of wisdom and truth. Help us to love with open hearts as we seek to meet particular concerns, and to listen as long as it takes to do what is right in your eyes. May the decisions we make be in alignment with your will. May the care we give to our tasks reflect the care you have for all your people and all your creation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

7. Invite participants to read Sections V and VI of the final report for the next session.

**Forms of Deliberation**  
Compiled by Victoria G. Curtiss

| <b>Debate</b>   | <b>Dialogue</b>   | <b>Discernment</b>  |
|---|---|---|
| One side knows “the truth” and seeks to persuade others to join its way of thinking   | Understanding or direction emerges through listening to many or all the voices in the group | A community of believers seeks guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer; reflection on Scripture, tradition, values, and current realities; dialogue; and finding places of agreement |
| Defends a viewpoint   | Suspends judgment   | Offers “holy indifference”  |
| Uses advocacy, persuasion   | Balances advocacy with inquiry; explores underlying assumptions, causes, rules              | Takes a “long loving look at the real” – contemplation  |
| Uses hard data to get to answers to problems; reasoning is made explicit              | Seeks to get to deeper questions and possibly new framing of issues                         | Uses intellect/reason and affect/intuition: mind and spirit experience  |
| Resolves by defeating or persuading opposing side; or may find synthesis of opposites | Invents unprecedented possibilities and new insights; produces a collective flow            | Uncovers a decision rather than making it; discovers what is most life-giving and loving as listen to wisdom of the Spirit and all voices   |
| Distinguishes and polarizes differences   | Looks for what exists between extremes of differences                                       | Seeks to hold polarities in balance   |
| Sees parts, may seek connection among them  | Looks for coherence first   | Builds on belief that all are part of one body of Christ  |
| Persons identify with positions or stay in fixed roles                                | Conversation uncovers concerns, needs, fears, hopes, interests                              | Options are weighed apart from being identified with particular persons   |
| Each side names strengths of its own position and weaknesses of the other             | Group members all work together to name strengths and weaknesses of options                 | Group members all name the negatives of an option, then the positives   |
| Either/or choices: binary   | Multiple options  | May generate multiple options, discover a “third way,” or discern yes or no   |
| Knower’s mind   | Learner’s mind  | Seeker’s mind   |

**Study of the Theological Task Force Report  
Session Four of a four-week design  
Implementation of Learning**

*Time needed: 60 minutes*

**Session Overview**

This session is designed to provide participants with an opportunity to study together Sections V and VI of the Theological Task Force's final report.

**Resources Needed**

- A copy of the task force's final report for each participant
- Bibles
- Paper and pens or pencils
- Newsprint and markers
- Copies of G-6.0108 (p. 12) or multiple copies of the *Book of Order*

**The Session Plan**

1. (2 minutes) Begin the session with prayer.
2. (7-8 minutes) Summarize the previous three sessions, highlighting in particular the insights that participants have had throughout their study together. Emphasize that all of the previous sessions, and Sections I through IV of the Theological Task Force's final report, are important to keep in mind as Section V, the task force's recommendations, is studied.

Provide a few minutes to offer an overview of Section V of the task force's final report or for participants to review it. Distribute copies of G-6.0108 or invite people to find it in the *Book of Order*, since this is the basis for Recommendation #5. For time's sake, below is a brief summary of the task force's recommendations. (*Please note: This summary does not replace the material in Section V. For the best, informed discussion, it is important for participants to have read Section V in its entirety.*)

*To promote the peace, unity, and purity of the church, the task force recommends:*

- *that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continue to worship and serve God together in one body;*
- *that with the goal of remaining together in one body:  
--Presbyterians across the church join in processes of study and discernment in the company of those with whom they disagree;*

*--the General Assembly and other governing bodies explore the use of alternative processes of discernment to complement parliamentary procedure;*

*--the 217th General Assembly adopt an authoritative interpretation of G-6.0108 (Book of Order) to clarify ordination procedures, emphasizing the long-standing traditions of churchwide standards and the application of those standards by the bodies that ordain and install Presbyterian church officers (ministers, elders, and deacons);*

- *that in order to create a climate in which these measures might build up the peace, unity, and purity of the church:*

*--the 217th General Assembly adopt no other authoritative interpretations or constitutional amendments in areas covered by this report;*

*--all Presbyterians seek conciliation and mediation before instituting formal proceedings against other Presbyterians.*

**3. (20 minutes)** Engage the group in the following questions, taken from the final report's study guide. (If the group is large, divide into subgroups of five to seven participants in each small group)

- Refer to the task force's recommendations (lines 927-1335). How do you think the recommendations flow from the conclusions of the report?
- The task force presented and voted on all seven recommendations together, rather than considering each recommendation separately. What difference(s) do you see between considering the recommendations together as opposed to separately?
- How might the recommendations contribute to the peace, unity, and purity of the church?

Provide each small group with newsprint and markers to record the highlights of their discussions.

**4. (10 minutes)** If necessary, bring the participants back together in one group. Ask a spokesperson from each group to share the highlights of their discussion.

**5. (15 minutes)** Read John 17:20-21; 13:34-35. After a few moments of silence, read (one or a few voices) the final two paragraphs of the task force's report (lines 1370-1386). Using mutual invitation for at least one round, ask participants to briefly answer the following questions from the study guide of the task force's report (if the group is large, divide into subgroups of five to seven participants in each small group):

- What do you make of the task force's conclusion?
- What will be your next steps toward a season of discernment in the PC(USA)?

**6.** (*5 minutes*) Brainstorm briefly with participants whether they would like to continue to meet and delve further into resources accompanying the task force's final report (on the congregational CD or the task force's Web site: [www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity](http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity)).

**7.** Close with the singing of the Doxology or the passing of the peace of Christ.

## ***Book of Order, G-6.0108***

### *Freedom of Conscience – Individual and Corporate*

a. It is necessary to the integrity and health of the church that the persons who serve as its officers shall adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity as expressed in *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government. So far as may be possible without serious departure from these standards, without infringing on the rights and views of others, and without obstructing the constitutional governance of the church, freedom of conscience with respect to the interpretation of Scripture is to be maintained.

### *Within Certain Bounds*

b. It is to be recognized, however, that in becoming a candidate or officer of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) one chooses to exercise freedom of conscience within certain bounds. His or her conscience is captive so long as he or she continues to seek or hold office in that body. The decision as to whether a person has departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity is made initially by the individual concerned but ultimately becomes the responsibility of the governing body in which he or she serves (G-1.0301, G-1.0502)

### *Candidates for Ministry*

c. Persons seeking to be received as candidates for ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall have their attention drawn to the constitutional documents of the church including its statement on freedom of conscience. (G-14.0304)