

I. The Plan and Progress of the Work of the Task Force

Plan of Work

The plan the Task Force adopted for its work was in keeping with its broad mandate to help the church discern of its identity for the 21st century, as well as the specific charge to address four issues that have been the focus of controversy and conflict: Biblical authority and interpretation, Christology, ordination standards and power. It was the outworking of goals adopted at the Task Force's first meeting as a way to further the mandate:

1. to deepen our understanding of our Christian and catholic identity and clarify key themes of the Reformed theological and constitutional heritage;
2. to study and evaluate the sources of health and promise as well as the causes of dissension and unrest in the church;
3. to recommend ways for the church to move forward, furthering its peace, unity and purity.

The plan of work to achieve these goals called for

1. extensive study of theological issues, Presbyterian history and polity as well as the topics named in the mandate;
2. on-going reflective encounter with Scripture;
3. prayer and worship, including the celebration of the Lord's Supper at every meeting;
4. use of a variety of processes for communal discernment and careful listening to each other;
5. on-going consultation with governing bodies and other groups in the church.

Two features of the plan proved to be especially helpful. One was the decision to lay a ground work of general theological understanding and personal engagement before taking up the more sensitive and difficult specific topics. The other was the determination to approach those topics by studying some of the best written presentations of different perspectives by respected scholars and earlier committees and commissions of the church. We commend these practices to the whole church. Study and prayer together, as well as deliberate efforts to build community and time spent in informal conversation, proved to be an essential prologue to addressing difficult issues. And the focus on thoughtful written presentations of positions on issues seemed to contribute more to mutual understanding than the trading of personal opinions.

For those who may want to borrow or adapt our plan of work, we have appended a meeting-by-meeting narrative, which shows how the elements were interwoven. Here, however, by way of introduction to our report, we want to emphasize two facets of our spiritual progress as a group.

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Spiritual Progress

Over the last five years, we have had two remarkable experiences as a group.

First, in the course of our work, we have become increasingly aware of the conflict and pain in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and we have searched our hearts to determine how each of us may have contributed to the church's problems.

We knew when we first convened that the Task Force was created because the Presbyterian Church was struggling. We were asked to consider how the peace, unity and purity of the church might be built up because many had concluded that these elements of church life were compromised and in short supply. At that early point, we, the members of the Task Force, shared a tendency that is widespread in the church: to blame others, especially those with whom we disagree, for the church's troubles. Our process, however, and the Covenant we drafted to guide our work together emphasized careful listening as much as self-expression.⁷ In the course of our work we began to understand that our own actions as much as others' have offended God, wounded the body of Christ, and caused pain to other Presbyterians.

Some examples of what we learned from each other about the consequences of our attitudes and actions include the following.

- Those of us associated with the Anglo traditions that have dominated the PCUSA came to understand how much alienation and pain we have caused by past oppression of other racial and ethnic groups and by currently maintaining barriers to the full inclusion of those groups' members and cultural gifts.
- Those of us who identify our views as liberal or moderate came to understand how alienating it is for conservative evangelicals when their passionate commitment to holy living and upright conduct is labeled rigid and judgmental.
- Those of us who identify our views as conservative or evangelical came to understand how alienating it is for liberals and moderates when their passionate commitment to justice and compassion is labeled unbiblical.
- Many of us came to understand how alienating it is for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons to be so regularly identified as a major threat to the peace, unity and purity of the church.⁸
- Many of us also came to understand how alienating it is for those who support a ban on the ordination of sexually-active gays and lesbians to be accused of prejudice.

⁷ [FOOTNOTE TO COVENANT]

⁸ The Task Force did not discuss the issues raised by bisexual and transgender persons, but we did receive a number of communications from groups that include and represent such persons in which the pain of their situation was expressed.

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- All of us came to see that the Presbyterian Church, in its current factionalized state that we have all created together by our mutual stereotyping and misuse of power, fails to offer a suffering world a sign of the peace, unity and purity that is God’s gift to us in Jesus Christ.

We cannot claim that we have recognized all the ways we have damaged the church and hurt each other. Nor can we claim that we have amended our lives adequately to signal full repentance for the harm we have done. What we can report is that as we became more deeply acquainted with each others’ thinking and life situations, we were chastened and humbled by the recognition that insofar as the body of Christ in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) is broken, we have all played a part in betraying and denying our Savior and in inflicting the damage from which the church, as His body, is suffering today. The recognition that the travail of the church is our fault as much as it is others’ sobered and saddened our Task Force but also brought us closer together.

Second, in the course of our work, we have become increasingly grateful for the gift of the church and for the ways that other persons and perspectives make the whole body stronger.

As we observed the disciplines of listening and reflection that became foundational in the Task Force process, we heard more than the echoes of our sins of omission and commission. We also heard the gospel anew and felt the spirit of Christ in the words and deeds of our fellow Task Force members. Repeatedly, we found ourselves moved and impressed by the depth and truth of statements made by our colleagues, including those whose backgrounds and experiences are very different from our own. Most surprisingly, our faith was enriched and strengthened by the contributions of those whose views on contested issues we do not share.

The Task Force was not, of course, exempt from the strains and pressures that afflict most groups. There were edgy interchanges among us and moments of tension and misunderstanding. The disciplines of listening and discernment that we used regularly helped us at these junctures. On some occasions we made use of permission from the General Assembly to discuss sensitive theological issues in closed session, which relieved some of the pressure of intense press scrutiny. Like any other group that works hard together over time, however, our proceedings included moments of discomfort and difficult encounters.

Nor did we overcome all our differences and reach agreement on the issues about which the church continues to disagree. None of us has traded our basic commitments for a middle ground or compromise position. We still hold most of the views and perspectives we brought to the Task Force. From the beginning, some of us had ties to affinity groups in the church and have maintained those during the life of the Task Force.

But still it is a fact that all of us have been greatly enriched and changed by our work together. Our experience of Christian faith and life has been extended and expanded. Our trust in other Presbyterians and our respect for differing perspectives has deepened. Most of all, our joy in believing has been greatly increased by the work of the Holy Spirit. Our gratitude for the church has grown because of the honesty, humility and faithfulness of the other members of the Task Force. As a result, our hopes for the future of the church have been confirmed. In our

413 Preliminary Report, we affirmed the peace, unity and purity of the church that are God's gift in
414 Christ. We can give thanks with full hearts for the gift of the church we have already received
415 because we have so intensely experienced this gift in our encounters with each other. Over our
416 time together, a common conviction has grown among us: different as we are, God has called us
417 all to be part of the body of Christ as it is manifested in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
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419 The Structure of This Report

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421 This report is the result of both facets of our spiritual development as a group: the pain and
422 penitence, on the one hand, and the gratitude and joy on the other. It follows the outline of goals
423 for the Task Force's work that were adopted at its first meeting:
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425 The prologue that precedes this section sets forth our theological affirmations. It grew out
426 of the studies and discussions in which the Task Force engaged "to deepen our understanding of
427 our Christian and catholic identity and clarify key themes of the Reformed theological...heritage."
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429 This Section (I) gives an account of our plan of work and our progress in completing it.
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431 The following Section (II) summarizes how our thinking about the controversial issues
432 named in the Task Force mandate has developed in the course of our studies and discussions.
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434 Section III outlines resources we discovered for dealing with the issues assigned to us.
435 Some of these resources are found in the constitutional traditions of the church; others are drawn
436 from processes for discernment and decision-making that are unfamiliar to many Presbyterians.
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438 Section IV contains the Task Forces' practical recommendations for how the peace, unity
439 and purity of the church may be preserved and promoted.
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441 To complement these sections of our formal report, we have included teaching papers by
442 individual Task Force members. These are the work of their authors; other Task Force members
443 had an opportunity to make suggestions to the authors, but the documents have not been adopted
444 or approved by the whole Task Force. They are provided because they proved very useful in
445 stimulating the Task Force's thinking and may serve the wider church as a resource for study.