

III. Resources for Peace, Unity and Purity

Recent debates about sexuality, ordination, Christology and other controversial topics have been especially contentious, but the dilemma these issues pose is not unique. Most of the debates that have threatened to break the church apart in the past have followed a similar pattern: there are a range of possible positions on the issue, but pressure to make decisions, especially about eligibility for church office, forces the choices into a binary format that divides governing bodies into two parties, each substantial in size, that struggle long and hard for control of the policy of the whole church. The result is a church both preoccupied with and weary of conflict.

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 now finds itself, 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.

Resources for understanding our situation: Reformed theology of church governance

The foundational claim that Presbyterians make about the governance of the church is that Jesus Christ is its head (G-1.0100). Christ's rule over the church takes concrete form as we hear and obey his voice speaking through the Word of Scripture as illumined by the Holy Spirit. The connectional system established by Presbyterian polity is our best human attempt to create structures and procedures for attending to the Spirit of Christ speaking through the Scriptures, in accordance with the confession that Jesus Christ is head of the church. "Presbyters are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ."¹

Potential church conflicts arise at times when sincere efforts to attend to God's Word and Spirit lead various segments of the church to differing conclusions over contested issues. In finding this to be the case among ourselves, the experience of the Task Force has mirrored that of the church at large.

The Task Force is convinced that differences represented within its membership result from attempts on all sides to be faithful to the Word of God given in Scripture. These differences are serious because they revolve around important topics. The differences are difficult to settle, because each of the divergent conclusions attracts substantial numbers of faithful adherents who are persons of sound qualification, good character and strong faith. Such situations are not

¹ BOO G-4.0300d.

46 uncommon in the history of the church. They require disciplines of patience, mutual
47 forbearance and dedicated communal discernment to reach faithful resolution as we trust Jesus'
48 promise that the Holy Spirit will eventually lead the church into all truth,
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50 The Task Force in its own life has drawn from Reformed tradition in cultivating these
51 disciplines of patience, forbearance and communal discernment that characterize the church as a
52 community governed by Christ through Word and Spirit. Among the practices that have drawn
53 us closer to God and one another are:
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- 55 1. Sincere self-examination, mutual confession and repentance of ways in which all of us
56 have undermined the church's calling and faithfulness.
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- 58 2. Joint participation in worship and in the sacrament of unity, the Lord's Supper.
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- 60 3. Communal study of the Bible that seeks common and mutually enriching understanding
61 across dividing lines.
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- 63 4. Honest dialogue that seeks first to understand differing viewpoints before criticizing
64 them.
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- 66 5. Careful study of foundational aspects of church history, theology, confessions and polity
67 that bind us together as Presbyterians.
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69 Having considered in Section I the theological and confessional links in our tradition that
70 unify our communion, we now turn to those elements of our history and polity that can foster
71 constructive engagement in times of conflict.
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74 Resources for constructive engagement: Presbyterian polity
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76 Presbyterian polity is an expression of deep theological convictions about the church's...
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- 78 • Unity: Christ is not divided. We give witness to our oneness under Christ, the head of the
79 church, by good-faith participation in a disciplined and ordered life together.
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- 81 • Purity: Truth, holiness and righteousness matter as pathways to discipleship, in both the
82 life of the church as a body and the lives of its members. Ultimately, the church cannot
83 simply agree to disagree on important matters of faith and practice. Church polity must
84 provide ways for serious disagreements to be resolved. But resolution by merely
85 technical or legal means will not endure because it does not address the conflict of
86 convictions that gave rise to the disagreements in the first place. Only a resolution with
87 theological integrity can be sustained.
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- 89 • Peace: The pursuit of truth takes place in a community where differing voices are not
90 only respectfully engaged but also honored as full partners in our common pursuit of
91 God's will for the church.

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 93 Historically, Presbyterian polity has been neither static nor singular. The denominational
 94 traditions that have formed the current PC(USA) placed different emphases on the particular
 95 dimensions of polity that they viewed as most distinctively “Presbyterian.” Yet they all sought
 96 to maintain equilibrium between certain principles of governance that theologically distinguish
 97 Presbyterian church life and discipline from other Christian communions.

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 99 Four pairs of principles or “points of balance” have been particularly important in shaping
 100 the polity of the PC(USA). A full account of these points of balance, with historical illustrations,
 101 is provided in the paper “Principles of Polity” in Section 2 of this report. Here it is enough to
 102 note that when held in constructive tension, these points of balance have allowed Presbyterians
 103 to live in relative concord while engaged in vigorous debate and faithful ministry. When
 104 equilibrium between these shared theological commitments collapses, however, disagreements
 105 have been difficult to resolve, and ruptures in our communion have sometimes resulted.

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 107 Presbyterians have regularly sought
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- to honor communal discernment of God’s will and the Spirit’s leading *while also* recognizing that God alone is Lord of the conscience under the authority of scripture
- to adhere to essential and necessary beliefs and practices that bind the faithful into the body of Christ *while also* respecting freedom in non-essential matters of belief, worship, piety, witness and service
- to maintain a distinctive Presbyterian and Reformed witness to the world *while also* engaging in mission with Christians of other traditions
and
- to uphold the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that have original jurisdiction in church governance *while also* sustaining the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that have the power of oversight and review

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 111 **I.**
 112 ***To honor communal discernment of God’s will and the Spirit’s leading***
 113 ***while also***
 114 ***Recognizing that God alone is Lord of the conscience under the authority of scripture***
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116 During the earliest days of American Presbyterianism, the need arose to find ways to
 117 connect these two basic principles. The standard of faith to which the church adhered, the

118 Westminster Confession, acknowledged that councils of the church may err.² Therefore,
 119 throughout its history the church has affirmed that “the rights of private judgment in all matters
 120 that respect religion are universal and unalienable.”³ At the same time, Reformed Christians
 121 have always insisted that Christ’s way is not a solitary one. The first Presbyterian courts and
 122 councils recognized that faithful witness to the unity of the body requires mutual accountability
 123 and communal discernment of the working of the Spirit. These are strenuous disciplines. They
 124 require both forbearance in love and respect for the will of the body in one of two forms, either
 125 acquiescence to its decisions or, if that is not possible, peaceful withdrawal.⁴

126 II.

127 *To adhere to essential and necessary beliefs and practices that bind*
 128 *the faithful into the body of Christ*
 129 *while also*
 130 *Respecting freedom in non-essential matters of belief,*
 131 *worship, piety, witness and service*

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 134 The tension between conscience and forbearance, on the one hand, and respect for the will of
 135 the whole body, on the other, has naturally occasioned the questions: What matters of belief and
 136 discipline are “essential and necessary” and, thus, require strict conformity, and where in such
 137 matters can latitude be permitted? As early as 1729, American Presbyterians faced these
 138 questions in relation to ministerial ordination. The then highest judicatory of the church, the
 139 Synod, adopted the Westminster standards as its basis of faith and required all ministers to
 140 subscribe to them. This firmly established the American Presbyterian church as a confessional
 141 body with a single set of standards for faith and practice.

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 143 The question of freedom of conscience under scripture emerged immediately, however,
 144 because some ministers of the Synod considered certain articles in the standards to be at variance
 145 with, or at least not explicitly enjoined by, scripture. The Synod resolved this conflict of
 146 conscience by permitting these ministers and, later, candidates for the ministry to declare their
 147 disagreements (“scruples”) with particular articles of the Westminster standards. It then
 148 delegated to the examining body the responsibility for determining whether the candidate’s
 149 disagreement concerned an essential article of the church’s “doctrine, worship or government.”⁵
 150 Although the Adopting Act was later modified, it established a precedent that has heavily
 151 influenced American Presbyterians’ understanding of their confessional commitments to this
 152 day. Therefore, the church has consistently maintained that certain beliefs and practices are

² “All synods or councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith and practice, but to be used as a help in both.” Westminster Confession of Faith (6.175), in *The Book of Confessions*.

³ Historic principles of church order in *Book of Order*, G-1.0301 (b)

⁴ Historic principles of church order in *Book of Order* (G-1.0302) This principle was established early in the church’s history: “When any Matter is determined by a Major vote, every Member Shall either actively concur with, or passively Submit to Such Determination; or, if his Conscience permit him to do neither, he Shall, after sufficient Liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceable withdraw from our Communion, without attempting to make any Schism: Provided always, that this Shall be understood to extend only to Such Determinations, as the Body Shall judge indispensable in Doctrine or Presbyterian Government” (Plan of Union, 1758, Synod of New York and Philadelphia, p. 3).

⁵ Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706-1788, Guy S. Klett, ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976), 103-104.

153 indispensable for the church’s theological integrity. At the same time, “differences have always
 154 existed and been allowed ... as to [the] modes of explaining and theorizing within the metes and
 155 bounds of one accepted system.”⁶

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 157 **III.**

158 ***To maintain a distinctive Presbyterian and Reformed witness to the world***
 159 ***while also***
 160 ***Engaging in mission with other Christians of other traditions***
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162 American Presbyterians throughout their history have been remarkably united in their
 163 commitment to witness to the world. Presbyterian opinion has diverged, however, over the best
 164 means for achieving this witness. One stream of opinion has insisted that the full articulation of
 165 the gospel required for a transforming witness to the world must include the distinctives of the
 166 Reformed and Presbyterian heritage. A second, equally prominent stream has held that faithful
 167 and effective engagement with the "messiness" of a sinful and suffering world requires a broad-
 168 based, cooperative witness in partnership with other Christian communions.

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 170 One dramatic instance of early cooperation and later division between representatives of
 171 these two viewpoints was the Plan of Union contracted between Congregationalists and the
 172 PCUSA in the 1800s. Initially, the General Assembly supported this plan, but the hybrid
 173 character of the churches and presbyteries formed under the plan alarmed traditional Calvinist
 174 Presbyterians. In 1837, this group, which had come to be called the “Old School,” declared the
 175 synods, presbyteries and churches formed under the Plan of Union no longer part of the church.
 176 The “excinded” delegates withdrew and regrouped as a church with the same legal name, but
 177 popularly known as the “New School.”

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 179 In 1870, the northern Old School and New School churches reunited in a spirit of “mutual
 180 confidence and love.” The reunion agreement carefully integrated themes of both “schools” by
 181 seeking “guarantees for orthodoxy...and Christian liberty” combined in a spirit of “diversity and
 182 harmony, liberty and love.”⁷

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 184 **IV.**

185 ***To uphold the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that have***
 186 ***original jurisdiction in church governance***
 187 ***while also***
 188 ***Sustaining the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that have***
 189 ***the power of oversight and review***
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191 Another disagreement that dates from the church’s earliest days concerns the powers of
 192 governing bodies. The first gathering of an American presbytery (1706) was composed of
 193 ordained officers with differing views of what constituted faithful church governance. One
 194 group from New England, led by Jonathan Dickinson, favored limiting the power of all
 195 governing bodies. Scripture alone, they believed, provided all that was necessary for the whole
 196 work of ministry. Another group, from Scotland and Ireland, also acknowledged scripture as an

⁶ Cite the Plan of Reunion of 1870.

⁷ Need citation here

197 “infallible rule” and the possibility that church councils would err. They insisted, however, that
 198 the “bare letter” of scripture must be interpreted by widely representative assemblies that could
 199 be trusted to guide the church by devising creeds, by adopting statements of confession and by
 200 ordering the church’s common life.⁸ This view prevailed in 1797, when the General Assembly
 201 of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was organized.
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203 This high view of the General Assembly’s authority was reinforced when the United
 204 Presbyterian Church in North America united with the PCUSA in 1958. The authority of
 205 “higher” governing bodies in American Presbyterian tradition has been balanced, however, by an
 206 equally strong emphasis on the rights of those governing bodies (sessions and presbyteries)
 207 where pivotal decisions in the church’s polity originate. This view has deep roots in the
 208 denomination’s history, because presbyteries existed long before the General Assembly was
 209 formed and the Constitution adopted. It was most pronounced, however, in the PCUS tradition
 210 where the powers of all governing bodies—especially those above the presbytery level—were
 211 severely limited. The PCUS recognized the General Assembly as the court of final appeal in
 212 specific cases. Yet its General Assembly was circumspect in offering general deliverances, and
 213 when it did provide them, it regarded them as “didactic, advisory, and monitoring.”⁹ The
 214 reunion in 1983 of the PCUS and the UPCUSA reinforced those elements in both streams that
 215 had upheld the rights of presbyteries over against the General Assembly.
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217 Presbyteries and sessions have the right and responsibility to examine and ordain their
 218 officers and to decide who may be admitted to membership in congregations and presbyteries. In
 219 addition, lower governing bodies may petition higher ones by overture to take action.
 220 Presbyteries have the additional right to confirm (or veto) changes in the church’s constitution.
 221 In turn, the General Assembly, synods and presbyteries, acting as “higher” governing bodies,
 222 have the duty of oversight and the right to review lower governing bodies’ decisions in specific
 223 cases. Such rulings have the power of precedent for lower governing bodies that are deciding
 224 similar matters.
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226 The Task Force has concluded from its study of polity that:
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⁸Is it “the bare letter [of scripture] that is the church’s rule or is it the letter together with its true and proper sense and meaning, intended by the Holy ghost that is the rule?” (John Thomson), *An Overture Presented to the Reverend Synod of Dissenting Ministers, Sitting in Philadelphia, in the Month of September 1728* ([Philadelphia]: printed for the author, 1729), 15-16.

⁹(Presbyterian Church in the United States, *Minutes of the General Assembly 1879* (Wilmington, NC: Jackson and Bell, 1879), pp. 23-24. An illustration of the restraint with which the PCUS General Assembly spoke of its authority may be found in its 1965 Digest of the acts and proceedings of previous General Assemblies. There the Digest characterizes the 1898 General Assembly’s reaction to a proposal that it set forth the “fundamentals” of the system of doctrine in the Westminster standards. The PCUS General Assembly declined to adopt binding fundamentals. But according to the Digest, it affirmed that the General Assembly “can, of course, declare what it conceives to be the fundamentals of this system [of doctrine]. But it cannot determine abstractly, apart from regular judicial process, how the presbytery, which under our Constitution is charged with the duty of ordaining candidates, is to interpret this requirement in the regular discharge of its own functions....” *A Digest of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1861-1965* (Atlanta, GA: Office of the General Assembly, 1966), p. 117.

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- The discipleship of maintaining a healthy tension within the four sets of complementary commitments discussed thus far has always been a strenuous and complex exercise. The Presbyterian church has consistently looked to the Holy Spirit speaking through scripture for its compass in navigating a faithful course to God’s kingdom. But simply charting a course has never been sufficient. The opportunities and temptations of the culture that the church inhabits, discord over controversial issues, and other factors internal and external to the church can push the church to one side of the polity balance or the other. In certain situations they can even threaten to capsize the ship of faith by collapsing the necessary tension between its guiding principles. The church’s calling in the face of such a challenge has been to seek an equilibrium rather than perfect and equal balance by weighting its polity for a time in favor of those principles neglected by current trends in culture, controversy, theology or practice.
 - The church, as Reformed traditions are acutely aware, is situated in human culture. This has both positive and negative implications:
 - The inclusion of Christians from different cultural backgrounds has already and can again open new vistas of faithfulness that strengthen the fabric of Presbyterian polity and the vibrancy of Presbyterian life together. In the colonial period, a vigorous, uniquely American form of Presbyterian life in community was spawned from the mix of its earliest members’ differing convictions about church government, which were derived from their various cultural backgrounds in the British Isles. Similarly, today, the inclusion of non-Anglo communities’ traditions is expanding and revitalizing the church’s vision of faithfulness for the era ahead.
 - Because the church is composed of fallen human beings, it remains susceptible to sin. Sin has the power to disrupt the balance between principles of polity that the church has long felt called by scripture to maintain. Any contemporary polity is, inevitably, only an approximation of its ideals and is, therefore, a candidate for reform. But at its best, the church’s maintenance of a faithful equilibrium between its polity principles keeps the ship of faith righted and progressing towards the full reign of God on this earth.
 - Church government, with the help of the Spirit then, can aspire to be a visible embodiment of a communion’s understanding of Christian life in community.
 - Obedience to Presbyterian church polity is a condition of ordained leadership, even as church members acknowledge the necessity of the ongoing reform of church structures, disciplines and policies.
 - A church’s polity cannot live up to its calling unless it provides ways for conflicts within the church to be addressed theologically. Technical or merely political solutions to serious controversies rooted in sincere theological differences will not hold for long. In our denomination, this integral relationship of theology and polity has been strained in recent history.

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Resources for constructive engagement: communal discernment

Presbyterian polity and traditional patterns of decision-making have great strengths. History and experience have shown, however, that not all situations faced by the church are most effectively addressed by the parliamentary procedures on which Presbyterian church law relies. In particular, decision-making by up-or-down vote, in which the winning majority takes all, may be ill-suited to situations in which there is a sizable minority or a persistent, substantial division on important aspects of its common life. In such situations, parliamentary methods may exacerbate political in-fighting and escalate conflicts rather than resolve them. Adversarial debate tends to set positions in opposition to one another and to mask the needs, values, interests, and concerns that underlie those positions. Participants in a debate are tempted to defend their positions at all costs and to resist attentiveness to other views, mutual submission in love, and the leading of the Holy Spirit through collaborative exploration.

For decisions that have a significant impact on the life of the church, particularly those that are complex or potentially divisive, time is needed for corporate study of Scripture, gathering of information, prayerful reflection, mutual questioning, careful listening, and collective weighing of options. For clearer discernment of the mind of Christ, and for the sake of the unity of the church, all voices should be heard, including those who may be affected by the potential outcome of a decision.

The Task Force has made use of a variety of approaches for discernment. It has deliberated as a “committee of the whole” and employed disciplines such as mutual invitation, polarity management, consensus building and other tools for structured communal discernment. These tools, plus approaches used by some other bodies within the church, are discussed in more depth in the resource, “Discernment and Decision Making.” The Task Force has come to believe that the whole church at every level, including the General Assembly, would be well-served by more regular use of communal efforts to discern the mind of Christ through the Scriptures, nurturing communal attitudes and practices that allow us to live faithfully with difference while we seriously engage in the quest for common understanding.

A Concluding Word on Polity and Process

In this section we have looked back into Presbyterian history and then beyond Reformed traditions for resources that might help the church in its current difficulties. In order for these resources to point the way to resolutions of problems and to promising future directions, we as a communion must learn how to pass along more than the simple storyline of our tradition’s biography or the legal codes of its discipline. We must also school ourselves in the foundational theological commitments and the practical wisdom that flows from them— what we have called “points of balance” – that gave rise to that storyline and discipline in the first place. It is these points of balance that have allowed Presbyterian churches at their best to remain grounded and, at the same time, flexible and open to alternative means within and beyond their history and

323 practice. This “balanced” posture is not easy to achieve, but it is essential if a Presbyterian
324 church is to maintain the faithful equilibrium to which Reformed understanding aspires.

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326 There is a third source of help and renewal for the church today, one that has impressed the
327 Task Force again and again: the church’s own members and organizations, many of which are
328 pioneering new ways of working together that build bridges among parties and factions, deepen
329 mutual understanding, and build up the body in love. One of the goals adopted by Task Force
330 was to study the health and promise of the church. In the midst of the difficulties and challenges
331 that the denomination faces, we have found much health and strength to celebrate.

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333 Some projects seeking the ends of increased understanding and stronger bonds among
334 Presbyterians were begun in response to the General Assembly’s call in 2004 for theological
335 reflection groups, but many of them were already underway and, indeed, pre-existed the Task
336 Force itself. Many congregations have sought to educate themselves in disciplined and
337 thoughtful ways about the issues troubling the church. Presbyteries have created dialogue groups
338 and drawn presbyteries together in mission. Ministers have organized diverse groups of
339 colleagues who offer each other insight and support. The entities and offices of the General
340 Assembly have launched innovative efforts to draw diverse Presbyterians together for study,
341 reflection, dialogue and service. Even the affinity groups, which have distinct theological
342 positions and political goals, have contributed to this effort. Most of them host educational
343 events that attract members of organizations that take different stands on controversial questions.
344 On one recent occasion, two very different groups co-sponsored a meeting for prayer and
345 repentance.

346
347 In addition to these deliberate efforts to bridge differences, there is significant change in the
348 structures and practices of church life. There are many signs that, on a changing cultural
349 landscape, old models are breaking down and new forms of denominationalism in the United
350 States are developing at local, regional and national levels. There is, for instance, new emphasis
351 on congregations, on local denominational structures, on mission, and on forms of worship and
352 program that might attract people with little experience of church life. Some of these changes
353 create anxiety, but others bring a heightened sense that God may be doing new things with the
354 church.

355
356 Task Force members have read communications from those engaged in this wide range of
357 efforts and learned from presbyteries, congregations and other groups that are already promoting
358 the church’s unity, purity and peace.¹⁰ These experiences are heartening. They demonstrate that
359 the progress that the Task Force seeks to foster by this report and its recommendations will not
360 be a new experience for the church but an extension of attitudes and practices into which the
361 church is already living. This report is not a new or different word to the church, but a summary
362 of the longings and aspirations that many Presbyterians have already expressed and acted upon.

363
364 One concluding word: Peace, unity and purity are gifts of the Spirit to the church. They are
365 also hard won virtues for any church, as our review of Presbyterian history reminds us.
366 Presbyterians have regularly and sometimes vehemently disagreed about fundamental features of
367 our confession, order and discipline. How we deal with one another in controversy —

¹⁰ Reference to recent issue of the Outlook that describes some of these efforts.

368 especially how we accept judgment and reconciliation won for us in Christ — is a challenge to
369 our discipleship, a test of our faith, and our most convincing witness to the truth and power of the
370 gospel we proclaim.

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[NOTE: READERS WILL NEED A GLOSSARY OF DENOMINATIONAL
NAMES AND PERHAPS AN ORGANIZATION CHART THAT SHOWS THE
RELATIONSHIP OF GA, SYNODS, PRESBYTERIES, AND SESSIONS.]

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