

Scripts from presentations
Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church
Pre-General Assembly Conference
216th General Assembly, Richmond, Virginia
June 26, 2004

[Click here for optional Power Point slides to accompany script]

[SLIDE #1]

Seeking Peace, Unity, and Purity: The Task Force at Mid-Point

[Click here for “Biblical Foundations for the Task Force’s Preliminary Report,” based on John 17:20-26. Presented by task force member Frances Taylor Gench]

[SLIDE #2]

Question to consider throughout our time together:

How can we continue to live together as a church in the face of our differences?

[SLIDE #3]

Overview of the Task Force’s Work
Jean S. (Jenny) Stoner

Jean S. (Jenny) Stoner is an elder in Craftsbury Common, VT.

Friends, I am Jenny Stoner, co-moderator with Gary Demarest, of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. Today, I bring you greetings from the whole task force and present to you our Preliminary Report.

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church was created by the 213th General Assembly (2001) ‘to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century.’ Since our first meeting in December, 2001, the twenty of us have met seven times, from two to four days each occasion, studying a wide range of topics. Some, like the state of the church and the history of doctrine and church policies, are background for our task. Others, such as Christology, biblical interpretation, and ordination, are written into our mandate. We have also studied Scripture intensively and experimented with a wide range of processes for discernment and decision-making. We have prayed, sung hymns, and celebrated the Lord’s Supper each time we met. Worship has been a regular and important part of our life together, helping to bind us into a strong, caring community of seekers and believers.

Our meetings have been open, as general church policy requires. We have not yet used the special permission for closed sessions granted us by the 215th General Assembly.

In addition to meeting, the task force has sought the views of the wider church about the issues assigned to it. We have participated in numerous events in conjunction with meetings of the General Assembly and various Presbyterian organizations across the church. In addition, various

members have visited over forty synods and presbyteries, and we have received and responded to a steady stream of correspondence.

As we have worked, we have tried to share what we are doing and learning. To this end, the task force has produced a preliminary series of resources for use by congregations, governing bodies, and other groups in the church. Prominent among these is a video series that currently includes two three-part videos. Over 1000 copies of our first video, released last September, have already been distributed throughout the church. The second in the series, on Christology, is being released at this assembly. Both videos are available in English, Korean, and Spanish. Other material used and produced by the task force is available at our Web site: <http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/index.htm>.

In the course of these activities, the task force has grown into a strong Christian fellowship. As we now move toward more sustained investigation of divisive issues, the diversity of perspectives deliberately built into the make-up of the task force is apparent. At the same time, however, we have discovered in our work together the same compelling sense of being in Christ with other Presbyterians that we have heard reported over and over in our consultations. Our prayerful study to date has convinced us that, if, despite our differences, we continue to recognize each other as sisters and brothers who are seeking together a Reformed way of being Christian, then our final report must incorporate and provide ways to act upon three, long-standing Presbyterian affirmations.

To bring you these affirmations, I call on task force member Mark Achtemeier. Then task force member Stacy Johnson will complete our report with a look ahead to the last two years of work.

[SLIDE #4]

**The Preliminary Report: Affirmations on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church
P. Mark Achtemeier and William Stacy Johnson**

Mark Achtemeier is associate professor of systematic theology and ethics at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary; William Stacy Johnson is Arthur M. Adams associate professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Achtemeier:

I want to talk to you today about the theology that is contained in the affirmations of the task force's interim report. This report represents a way station on a journey that has brought the task force members to some unexpected places. In particular, we have been surprised at the implications of the New Testament's witness for our thinking about the peace, unity, and purity of the church, and how we pursue those together in a biblical, faithful way.

The problem, as everyone knows, is that in situations of conflict and disagreement, these noble goals appear to stand in tension with one another [**SLIDE #5**]. In the situation our church is facing, we generally think of the peace and unity of the church as lined up on one end of a continuum, and the purity of the church standing over on the other end. And the question then becomes, "Where on this spectrum of trade-offs do we want to locate the church's life?"

Now to be accurate about this, we should probably fill out our diagram to include the trade-offs. If we come down absolutely on the peace and purity end of the spectrum [SLIDE #6], then the price of that is going to be a lot of compromises, and hence a lot of impurity. Unity at all costs is surely going to mean letting go of some principles we hold dear.

By the same token, if we take a totally uncompromising stand on the purity end of the scale, the result is going to be significant strife and division [SLIDE #7], not only against all the people whose understandings of purity differ from our own, but also against all the peace-loving compromisers over on the unity end of the spectrum.

Passions run high over where on the spectrum we should land, and the problem is that while you can find all sorts of Bible passages saying that each one is a good thing, it's hard to find much guidance when it comes to balancing them. I suspect where any of us comes out with that may have as much to do with our Myers-Briggs personality profiles as anything else.

So, the question facing our divided church is what spot we should aim for on this continuum in order to be most faithful in our life as a denomination, right? Wrong! [SLIDE #8]

Going back to the Scriptures, the task force has realized that this way of conceiving our work is a false one, because it assumes that the peace, unity, and purity of the church are all about us! The unity we achieve by compromise, the purity of our personal obedience and opposition to unrighteousness as we conceive it, the peace that results when we agree to disagree – the New Testament doesn't lend much support to these self-centered concepts.

Far more than the peace, unity, and purity we can achieve in the church, the New Testament is interested in the peace, unity, and purity that God has achieved through Christ and the Holy Spirit. The task force members first picked up on this in our work with Ephesians, but it is a theme that echoes throughout the New Testament.

The New Testament church was bitterly divided over purity issues, in particular whether the unclean and unholy Gentiles could be let in without cleaning up their act by obeying biblical law the way faithful Jews did. The issue was clearly peace-and-unity vs. purity. Do you compromise biblical fidelity in order to make one big united church family, or do you hold the line of obedience at the cost of a divided and fragmented church?

The letter to the Ephesians answers, "None of the above!" [SLIDE #9] "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Christ has completely short-circuited every attempt of ours to build ourselves up on the basis of our own supposed purity. He has done this by a complete leveling of the moral landscape, in which all the arguments over who is acceptable to God, all the conflicts over who is pure and who is obedient, have been nailed to the cross and put to death. God has vetoed the whole debate, in favor of Christ's perfect obedience offered for all of us, with the result that no one may set themselves over against their neighbors by boasting in their own self-perceived

righteousness. Jesus Christ is our purity! [SLIDE #10] Jesus Christ himself is the church's purity, and that purity becomes ours as we unite ourselves to him in faith.

Now, a word we need to add about that. That our purity comes to us as a gift through Jesus' obedience does not mean that it no longer matters how we live. Shall we go on sinning that Christ's grace may abound? "By no means!" says Paul (Romans 6:1-2). It does mean, however, that our own efforts at obedience are no longer entrance requirements that qualify us for membership in the church. Our obedience is rather our thankful response for what God has done for us in Christ. Now there is certainly room within that for correcting and upbuilding ourselves and one another. We can help each other to live more thankfully. But it doesn't make sense to say to a neighbor that you are cast out or disqualified from belonging to Christ because you haven't achieved a certain level of purity, because the purity that gets us qualified is Christ's own obedience credited to us. That means that our concern with purity in the church takes the form of self-examination and repentance and mutual support in living a life that says a clearer and more faithful, "Thank you."

Now, if Christ's sacrifice is God's end-run around all the conflicts surrounding our do-it-yourself attempts at purity, then by making his purity available to us in faith, Christ has also become our unity and peace! [SLIDE #11] The self-aggrandizing roots of our conflicts have all been nailed to the cross and put to death with him. That means as we become united with Jesus in faith, as the Spirit draws us to him and makes us part of his body, we are also joined to all the other people who are united with him in faith. Jesus' work on the cross is what makes us one. [SLIDE #12] In the words of Ephesians,

He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (Eph. 2:15-16)

In short, the task force has realized that drawing closer to Jesus is the key to holding peace, unity, and purity together in our life as a church. Because Jesus' obedience is the source of our purity, Jesus' sacrifice is the source of our peace, and Jesus' body is the source of our unity, and all three of these can be held together perfectly well because there is only one Jesus! [SLIDE #13]

So, the task force has come to believe that since Jesus Christ himself is the church's peace and unity and purity, the hope and possibility of our moving forward together as a united, faithful church lies in cleaving more closely to him and growing together into the reality that is given to us in him. That is what our report is saying, and that is the foundational affirmation we are inviting the church to make along with us.

Johnson:

[SLIDE #14] We are recommending that presbyteries and sessions be asked to study the task force's theological affirmations, together with biblical and theological resources we are providing. To understand the background of this recommendation, [SLIDE #15] it is necessary to recall the original mandate the General Assembly gave this task force three years ago, a

mandate that can be summarized in three directives: seek discernment, take ownership together, and find the way forward.

[**SLIDE #16**] First, seek discernment: Contrary to popular opinion, when this task force was commissioned three years ago, we were not asked by the GA to solve all the disputes going on in the PC(USA). Rather, we were commissioned to do something much more important. We were assigned a task of leading the church in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity, our identity as followers of Jesus Christ, that one who is, as “A Brief Statement of Faith” puts it, “fully human, fully God.” How is the church to live out this calling faithfully in and for a 21st-century world that longs for the peace, unity, and purity that only Christ can give?

[**SLIDE #17**] Second, take ownership together: There are some who say that the task force has met for three years with little to show for it. This criticism, understandable though it may be, misconstrues the task we were given. We were not asked to impose upon presbyteries and congregations a solution to the church’s problems from the top down. Instead, we were asked to help the whole church take ownership of the issues that concern us. With the recommendation that accompanies our preliminary report, we are inviting presbyteries to form groups composed of people with varying theological positions to pray together and study the affirmations in the task force’s Preliminary Report and other related issues. We are inviting sessions to do the same. It will be up to each governing body to decide what works best, using resources that we provide and others you think appropriate. The key point is this: the ownership of our work belongs to you.

[**SLIDE #18**] Third, find the way forward: Although we are convinced that the continuation of a churchwide dialogue is necessary, we also know that it is not sufficient. The task force is not recommending to the church the naive answer of “just a little more time and a little more talk.” Therefore, the task force is actively exploring workable proposals for how we can live together faithfully as a church, proposals that take all three of our concerns – peace, unity, and purity – seriously. At the 217th General Assembly two years from now, it is our intention to bring before the church practical, theologically-grounded suggestions for how to be Presbyterian in a way that allows our differences to edify us without dividing us. As you consider what we are recommending, ask yourself this question: Is the present climate of hostility and suspicion in the PC(USA) something you enjoy and want to continue; or are you willing to see if there might be a “still more excellent way”? [**SLIDE #19**] With the help of the Holy Spirit, I hope each one of you will join the task force in this endeavor, for God has indeed shown us the way forward. God has given us Jesus Christ.

[**SLIDE #20**]

Question for Discussion

How would the life of the PC(USA) change if we see the peace, unity, and purity of the church as a gift made available in Christ rather than something we create ourselves?

[**SLIDE #21**]

Future Directions: Moving Onward

Jack Haberer and John Wilkinson

Jack Haberer is pastor of Clear Lake Presbyterian Church, Houston, TX; John Wilkinson is pastor of Third Presbyterian Church, Rochester, NY.

Wilkinson: I am John Wilkinson, and I serve as pastor of the Third Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York.

Haberer: I am Jack Haberer, and I serve as pastor of the Clear Lake Presbyterian Church in Houston. Our task for the next several minutes is to seek to give us all a sense of where the task force is heading, both in terms of the process of our work and the topics we hope to cover. To do so will also involve a bit of looking back at where we've been and why we've set ourselves on the course we have.

[**SLIDE #22**] *Wilkinson:* When we first gathered in October 2001, I do think we realized the enormity of our task. What was not so clear, however, was how complex the task was to be. Like any significant project we face in the church – writing a sermon, organizing a potluck dinner, launching a building campaign – we had a fairly clear grasp of what the task was to be, and little clarity on how we would get there, let alone what “there” would look like once we arrived. Where to start, what questions to pursue, what questions *not* to pursue, what sources to consult? All of these questions faced us as we faced each other for the first time. In fact, we took several meetings to work these things out, and even until the last moment when we finish a report for the 2006 General Assembly in the fall of 2005, our work has been and will be intentionally fluid and dynamic.

[**SLIDE #23**] *Haberer:* Nonetheless, we had to begin somewhere, and the obvious place to begin was the mandate from the 2001 General Assembly. As has been mentioned earlier, the presenting issues of the conflict that caused us to be appointed have served as the organizing principles of our work. The Bible – how it is to have authority and how it is to be interpreted, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, ordination standards (including but not exclusively relating to issues of human sexuality) and the very intriguing concept of “power” – these four mandated issues have been kept at our forefront to provide clarity and focus. As interesting and important as many other theological and ecclesiological issues may be, they are not ours. There are many important topics that we will not consider. Further, as interesting as these four topics are, we have sought to consider them most fully through our primary lens, that of the peace, unity, and purity of the church.

[**SLIDE #24**] *Wilkinson:* The mandate from the 2001 General Assembly speaks a great deal about our “identity” as a church. That concept – who we are and who we are to be – has been our constant companion as well. It has suggested that we take seriously not only what we believe, but how we behave – behavior marked through our polity – and the ways we organize ourselves and how we make decisions. Perhaps that's why the topic of “power” has been so intriguing, and why we have invested so much time in considering alternative ways of doing our work and commending our work to the broader church. We have discovered, by the way, that for some, the question of “process” carries greater importance than it does for others. We all know that to be true in the life of our sessions and congregations and presbyteries, but it has been an important

learning as we have organized our work and envisioned how our work will be considered throughout the church. [SLIDE #25] One of our adopted phrases has become “doing church in a new way,” and people seem to resonate with that affirmation as we consult throughout the church. It has meant many things to us, including ways of including all voices in the discourse and experimenting with a variety of decision-making styles.

Haberer: We needed a plan, a roadmap, and after nearly a year’s worth of work, we were able to offer something to ourselves and the church. It is by no means perfect, but it has sought to organize our work deliberately and sequentially. We determined that some topics needed consideration before others could be considered. That has been frustrating at times, for us and for those watching us, but at the end of the day our plan has seemed to serve us well. Some of the fruits of our plan have been evidenced this morning already in the presentations led by our colleagues Frances Taylor Gench, Mark Achtemeier, and Stacy Johnson. Other manifestations of our work can be viewed at our Web site or through one of our videos.

[SLIDE #26] *Wilkinson:* We identified three sets of questions: What issues should we address, what theological topics need pursuing, and what themes of Presbyterian history and polity will help us? We further defined each broad area. In the end, we realized that though we named ourselves a theological task force (as if any task force would be intentionally UN-theological!), there was an inextricable link that reflected our constitutional reality. [SLIDE #27] That is to say, because our Constitution is comprised both of the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*, polity issues needed theological support and theological disputes carried governance implications.

Haberer: We therefore sought to couple questions of a theological nature with topics in polity and governance, and typically sought to address the polity topics through an event in the history of American Presbyterianism. [SLIDE #28] So that, for example, when we come to our August meeting and devote significant time to the issue of ordination and human sexuality, we will have prepared ourselves by doing biblical work, theological work, ecclesiological work, and historical work. We have hoped that the image of quilt or mosaic has been more operative than that of a puzzle! Sometimes the pieces have not fit together neatly. It has taken time, but the time we have invested has been worth it. It has allowed us to forge close and important relationships with one another. It has also allowed us to build as much of a “house on rock” as we possibly could have before heading into the thorniest issues we will face.

Wilkinson: A full recital of topics, beyond our touch points this morning, is available at our Web site. Here are a few reminders of what we’ve studied:

[SLIDE #29] *Haberer:*

- Changing demographics in the United States, based on the 2000 census and the changing landscape of U.S. religion
- Important polity moments in our history, including the Adopting Act of 1729 and the work of the Swearingen Commission in the 1920s
- What it means to be a confessional church
- The history of American Presbyterian schism, union, and reunion
- We have read sets of articles that have addressed the same topic from different perspectives – Richard Hays and William Placher on Romans 1, for example, and six

articles on the issue of homosexuality. We would commend that practice to you all, by the way, both in terms of an analytical exercise and community building experience.

- And we have heard firsthand about the experiences of racial and ethnic Presbyterians and diverse approaches to the issues of our mandate.

Wilkinson: Some of you – commissioners and other observers – have been familiar with our work; others are experiencing it for the first time this morning.

Haberer: The real question for all of us, for members of the task force and particularly this week for commissioners to this Richmond General Assembly, is where are we headed? We realized early on that though many issues are causing conflict in the church, the topic of ordination and human sexuality is most immediately pressing. That issue cannot be addressed in a vacuum, and we have sought to place it in the broadest possible context. The time is at hand, however, in our August 2004 meeting in Dallas, to focus fully on that topic. [SLIDE #30] We will do so with a combination of presentation and reflection, seeking – as we always have – to address the specific topic while considering broader polity implications. We will consider fully the broad topic of human sexuality, our own perceptions as well as biblical and theological insights. We will follow those discussions with further ecclesiastical considerations, how and why the issue of sexuality matters in the life of the church. And we will further consider polity issues by engaging in a kind of case study, possibly through a judicial case from our more distant past. The ordination dispute has theological and governance implications, and we would seek to consider every aspect fully as we move toward discerning what we will say and beginning the process of reporting to the General Assembly in 2006.

Wilkinson: Our deadline for completing our report to the General Assembly in 2006 is fall 2005. Time is flying! We will finish the hard work of background preparation this August, and then turn our sights to a final report. What it will look like is not clear at this moment. Equally unclear is the form that our recommendations will take. We have deliberately from the outset sought to avoid “just another” report, well written and thoughtfully conceived, but ultimately of little impact. Our offices and presbytery libraries are dotted with such reports. Because our task has seemed to be unique, so, too, do we hope our report to be unique. What it will look like is not clear – it may be lean, embracing the principle that “less is more.” It may involve a process as well as a set of recommendations. It may utilize varied forms of media. That is one of the reasons we sought to hold this pre-assembly conference in Richmond, to listen to the church and to hear not only what our report should include, but also what the most effective manner of communication may be. Please do not hesitate to share your insights, either today or in the next week.

Haberer: The form of the report is, of course, ultimately less important than its impact. If our work in any way contributes to the furthering of the church’s peace, unity, and purity, then the report itself will be irrelevant. We do hope, however, to produce something that will serve that cause. It is not “our” report, even as it is not “our” task force. It is the church’s. For us to succeed – and “success” is an elusive concept, perhaps the word “faithful” should be used – for us to be faithful to the task we have been given, our work cannot conclude with the publication of a report or an assembly action. It will happen in congregations and governing bodies, in seminaries and affinity groups, as the disagreements that have been with us always will continue to be with

us, [SLIDE #31] but will be addressed in such a way that our identity is affirmed, our mission enhanced, and our witness strengthened.

Wilkinson: We have been invited to enter into a season of theological clarification of our Presbyterian identity. We have been further invited to “lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity, in and for the 21st century, using a process which includes conferring with synods, presbyteries, and congregations seeking the peace, unity, and purity of the church.” With as much energy, imagination, intelligence, and love as we can muster, and leaning heavily on the promises of our baptism, we have sought to do those things, and will continue to do them. How well we do, however, will perhaps not be measured by any quantifiable criteria, but rather by a spirit and an ethos that take disagreement seriously and that ultimately seek to embody and make manifest that ordination vow – “do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?”

Haberer: We are grateful for many things. We are grateful for this task, and as much as we have wondered “Why us?” we have been grateful for the opportunity, even in the face of the enormity and complexity. We have come to be very grateful for one another. We have become dear and close friends in Christ through this process.

Wilkinson: We have come to be even more grateful for the church. Our affection for and appreciation of this great church has only grown – its history, its identity, its diversity of many forms, its polity and theology, its mission.

Haberer: And we have been grateful for the support of so many, and more so, grateful for your prayers. Please keep them coming.

[SLIDE #32]

Your Role in the Task Force’s Work Scott Anderson and John (Mike) Loudon

Scott Anderson is executive director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, Madison, WI; John (Mike) Loudon is pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Lakeland, FL.

You are an important part of the task force’s work. There are many ways in which you can be involved. Here are some of them.

[SLIDE #33] While at the General Assembly: attend committee hearings, attend breakfast and luncheon meetings, and visit the booths of organizations and affinity groups.

[SLIDE #34] Pray for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Use the *Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study*; pray for the peace, unity, and purity of the church; pray also for us.

[SLIDE #35] Organize a theological reflection group in your own congregation. You will find helpful tools for forming groups on our Web site. We commend especially to you our video series. There are also several other resources to consider, such as “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ,” approved by the General Assembly last year.

[**SLIDE #36**] Another way you can be involved is to organize a group with another congregation. Or, you could form a group with another presbytery or have a presbytery-wide retreat.

[**SLIDE #37**] Remember: We have no arms but your arms. We have no legs but your legs. We have no voice but your voice.

[**SLIDE #38**] Don't wait for someone else. Go home from this assembly and take action. Begin with a small step, and let God work through you.

[SLIDE #39]
Questions for Discussion

How can we continue to live together as a church in the face of our differences?

How do you see God already at work in your setting to help the church live together in the midst of differences?

What are the ways you can further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?