

## Item

### ***Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church Preliminary Report to the 216th General Assembly (2004)***

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 ...” (*Minutes*, 2001, Part I, p. 29). Meeting in Dallas, Texas, on February 18–20, 2004, the task force adopted the following preliminary report to the 216th General Assembly (2004) in anticipation of its final report to the 217th General Assembly (2006).

#### A. *Introduction*

The theological task force has now been at work for almost three years. During this time, we have been engaged in a wide range of activities.

##### 1. *Meetings*

The full task force has met eight times, for periods of two to four days. In addition, committees have met to plan meeting agendas and presentations. The task force has been guided by a detailed covenant that outlines the responsibilities of members to one another and to the work at hand. (A copy of the covenant is appended to this report.)

At these meetings, the task force has studied a number of theological topics to help it engage in a process of discerning the church’s Christian identity, as directed by the assembly, and to provide a sound basis for subsequent consideration of controversial issues. To begin our work, Milton J Coalter and Barbara Everitt Bryant helped us consider our social and religious context. Subsequent topics have included Christology, led by Mark Achtemeier; principles of biblical interpretation, led by Frances Taylor Gench; biblical and theological perspectives on human sexuality, led by Jack Haberer; Reformed understandings of the church, led by Mark Achtemeier and Barbara Wheeler; and the theology of ordination, led by Gary Demarest, Sarah Grace Sanderson-Doughty, and John B. (Mike) Loudon.

We have also studied Presbyterian history and Reformed traditions of church order, with specific attention to Presbyterian confessionalism, the development of the *Constitution* and principles of Presbyterian polity, and the current North American social and religious context. Milton J Coalter shared with the task force findings from the Presbyterian Presence series of studies of the denomination’s recent history. He and fellow historian, John Wilkinson, led studies of other historical periods. Lonnie Oliver, Martha Sadongei, and José Luis Torres-Milán led a session on the diversity of racial and ethnic decision-making traditions in the church.

Bible study has been part of each meeting, as has experimentation with a variety of processes for building community, discerning God’s will, and taking action. The task force has worshiped regularly, beginning and ending each day with a service of prayer, Scripture reading, reflection and hymn singing, and, with the assembly’s permission, we, together with members of the press and all others present, have celebrated the Lord’s Supper at every meeting.

Task force meetings have been conducted in accordance with the General Assembly Open Meeting Policy and have been extensively reported in the church press. The 215th General Assembly (2003) voted to allow the task force “to go into closed session solely for the purpose of exchanging views on sensitive theological issues... by two-thirds vote of the members of the task force present in a duly called and constituted meeting” (*Minutes*, 2003, Part I, p. 23). The task force is mindful of this provision but has not yet used it.

## 2. *Consultations*

The task force has sought the views of the church about the issues assigned to it. We have participated in numerous events (focus groups, workshops, and consultations) in conjunction with meetings of the General Assembly and various Presbyterian organizations across the church. In addition, task force members either alone or together with the Stated Clerk and the Executive Director of the General Assembly Council, have visited at least forty synods and presbyteries. Several phone interviews were also conducted with Presbyterians who expressed an interest in sharing effective experiences of building relationships across lines of division. Many individual Presbyterians have written to the task force. Much of this correspondence has been acknowledged and circulated to the whole task force. In addition, Barbara Everitt Bryant, a professional statistician, has analyzed Presbyterian opinion data gathered for other purposes and has reported to the task force what they indicate about the range and diversity of Presbyterians' convictions about critical issues.

## 3. *Resources*

The task force is charged with producing "a process and instrument" to promote the peace, unity, and purity of the church. To this end, and to share its own experiences and learning with the wider church, 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 one, three-part video. The first segment features Vicky Curtiss describing and demonstrating the use of tools to build a community of trust within the framework of worship, Bible study, and prayer. Frances Taylor Gench discusses biblical authority and interpretation in the second segment of the series, and, in the third, she leads viewers through a Bible study of Matthew 5. In a second video, scheduled for release at the 216th General Assembly (2004), Mark Achtemeier will focus on Christology, one of the themes assigned for the task force's consideration. The videos are available in English, Korean, and Spanish. In addition to the video series, outlines and texts of various presentations to the task force are available on the task force's web page [<http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/index.htm>]. Task force members (listed at the end of report) are also available for consultation.

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. We cannot predict whether this sense—that we are all Christians who stand on the same biblical and Reformed theological foundations—will survive the discussions of difficult issues yet to come. But 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.

### B. *Preliminary Affirmations About the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church*

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today longs for the spiritual blessings named in the task force's title. In the midst of strife and conflict, the church longs for *peace*; afflicted by quarrelling and division, it longs for *unity*; weighed down by sin and confusion over the nature of the Gospel, it longs for *purity* in word and deed.

Through study, prayer, and reflection, a conviction has grown among members of the task force that these longings for peace, unity, and purity, far from being reasons for frustration or despair, can actually be seen as Spirit-filled testimony to God's promise of redemption. "We ... who have the first fruits of the Spirit," Paul tells us, "groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23–24). These longings, painful though they may sometimes be, are also accompanied by profound good news. They give evidence that the peace, unity, and purity we desire so fervently are already at work within us. They have already been given to us in Jesus Christ, and the task before the church is to live into the fullness of that gift.

The themes of peace, unity, and purity are addressed at many points in Scripture. Our study of these themes began, but will by no means end, with the Epistle to the Ephesians. In one of our sessions, the task force spent many hours drawing out the implications of these words: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and

this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). This verse underscores that the destiny God has set before the church is a gift from God. The goals of peace, unity, and purity stand as tasks to be realized out in front of us only because in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection they are gifts that already belong to us.

Since we began focusing on this verse, a growing conviction has permeated our deliberations, namely, that our job—and the church’s—is to appropriate what has already been done for us by Jesus Christ. The only way forward, as the reformers long ago insisted, is the way that leads through grace.

Although it is premature at this stage of the task force’s work to present a comprehensive vision about how the peace, unity, and purity of the church might take form in our day, the task force does feel led to make three preliminary affirmations that we believe must guide our work over the next two years—affirmations rooted in our convictions about the church’s perennial need for grace. These three affirmations are a prologue to the hard work ahead of us. We members of the task force make these affirmations together, and we urge the whole church to make them with us.

### 1. *Jesus Christ Himself Is the Church’s Peace*

Scripture assures us, and we believe, that Jesus Christ is our peace (Eph. 2:14). Indeed, Ephesians can summarize what God has done in Jesus Christ as the “gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15). This is so, because those “who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13). Ephesians is speaking of Gentiles who have been brought into the covenant of grace, a covenant given first to the Jews. In his very flesh, Ephesians declares, Jesus Christ has “made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us,” (Eph. 2:14) in order to “reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross” (Eph. 2:16). Thus, for those who are in Christ, divisions and enmities are not the last word. To be sure, divisions and enmities are real, as the ongoing and often tortured history of the church attests; yet far more real is the bond of faith forged by Christ’s atoning action on behalf of all people.

The church’s peace flows from the work of Jesus Christ. The peace made real in Jesus Christ offers us more than a temporary halt to conflict; it is an enduring peace based on reconciliation achieved for us at great cost. Accordingly, the church must draw the strength it needs for peacemaking from beyond itself, from the one who invites us to a common witness and worship.

In short, the church has already been given the resources it needs for peacemaking. It has only to look to the Spirit of Christ, who empowers us to live out this new reality. Because faithful, just, and peaceful life together is the work of Jesus Christ, who kept company with sinners, this life draws strength from a common discipline that builds up the body through confession of sin, forgiveness, reconciliation, and self-giving service.

### 2. *Jesus Christ Himself Is the Church’s Unity*

Scripture further assures us, and we believe, that in Christ “the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord..., built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God” (Eph. 2:21–22). As God draws persons by the Holy Spirit into communion with Christ, God also unites them in baptismal and table fellowship with one another. The new life that is ours in Christ is corporate in nature, meaning that there is no unity with Christ that is not also a unity with other believers.

This is not, of course, a simple or easy process. There is rich diversity in the Body of Christ and there are deep disagreements among its members. The unity we seek cannot be reduced to either uniformity or unanimity. In particular, unity cannot be attained if the voices of some members of the body are ignored. It is especially important, when the mind of the church is significantly divided and its decisions are unlikely to be unanimous, that all voices be heard and respected. Moreover, in Reformed tradition, the achievement of unity is complicated by a long-standing tension between the call to exercise mutual accountability and the affirmation that “God alone is Lord of the conscience” [*Book of Order*, G-1.0301(1)(a)].

Notwithstanding this tension, it has become clear to the task force in its own life together that unity with one another is not an optional feature of life in Christ. It is a necessity: union with Christ means union with all the other members of Christ's body, including those with whom one would not ordinarily choose to associate. This New Testament understanding of the unity of the church undercuts attempts to pick and choose those to whom we are bound in Christ. "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11).

The implication of the biblical teaching is clear: Christians cannot even entertain the notion of severing their ties with sisters and brothers in Christ without also placing themselves in severe jeopardy of being severed from Christ himself. "Those who say 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 Jn. 4:20). Hence, we have no unity other than that which is given in Christ, the church's one foundation, who "gives to his Church its faith and life, its unity and mission ..." (*Book of Order*, G-1.0100c).

### 3. *Jesus Christ Himself Is the Church's Purity*

Scripture tells us, and we believe, that God "has blessed us in Christ ... to be holy and blameless before him in love" (Eph. 1:3-4). Christ "gave himself up for us" (Eph. 5:2, 25) so that the "breadth and length and height and depth" (Eph. 3:18) of his righteousness might become ours through grace. This is a blessing we celebrate as great, good news—Christ's grace is sufficient to make each one of us pure—sound in our beliefs, upright in our conduct, just in our dealings. Thus, in our doctrine, devotion, and deeds, we are all being made pure, until that day when together we, the church, are presented to Christ "in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle ... holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27).

This purity is not anything we bring to God on our own, for it comes to us through Christ by the power of the Spirit "at work within us" (Eph. 3:20). The Spirit's power makes itself real for us in baptism "with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5:26) and renews us continually until we attain "the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

It is often difficult to see how this goal of Christian purity can be squared with the equally important call to unity and peace. Yet in Christ all three are tied together, with no one elevated above the other two. Any effort to achieve peace and unity at the expense of purity cannot succeed, nor can we live "a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called" unless, "bearing with one another in love," we make "every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2-3).

Therefore, the quest for purity is first and foremost a call to self-examination, repentance, and mutual accountability in love. While those who fail to seek purity in any of its forms—truth, goodness, and justice—imperil the faithfulness of the church, purity must not become a pretext for division. Those who break the body of Christ on the grounds that some members do not meet a particular conception of righteousness risk putting fallible human judgment in place of Christ. Living into our baptism, we must always regard disputes over devotion, doctrine, or deeds as gracious invitations to further work together, relying on Christ's promise of the Spirit who will guide us "into all truth" (Jn. 16:13) and enable us to "find out what is pleasing to the Lord" (Eph. 5:10).

Christian striving here and now for truth, justice, and holiness matters—it matters greatly. The task force, which has a heavy assignment, feels keenly the pressure to teach truly, act justly, and maintain respectful and loving relationships within and beyond the church. We hope that our work will meet high standards of purity and faithfulness, yet we know it cannot unless we acknowledge a basic truth: the best the church can do is to live into what Jesus Christ has already perfectly accomplished for us.

### C. *Next Steps*

During the next year, we plan to continue extensive discussions of the issues the General Assembly put before us. Our working assumption is that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), shares "one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of [us] all" (Eph. 4:5-6). We are aware that some wonder whether the unity of this confession has been

jeopardized; whether, because of the theological differences in the denomination, the church is now divided; whether the unity of confession that exists in principle no longer exists in practice. We take this issue seriously and will continue to study it carefully. If we do find that the integrity of the church's confession is intact, then we hope to commend to the church ways of living together and moving into the future that are rooted in the peace, unity, and purity of Christ and that are more constructive and faithful than our current climate of hostile division.

We have heard many expressions of concern about the final results of our work. In response, we have committed ourselves to hold any "process" or "instrument" that we discover or devise to the following criteria:

1. *Faithfulness*

Some have warned against what they see as a lukewarm "compromise." The task force is not seeking any solution that compromises the gospel of Jesus Christ, but rather faithful, truthful, and just responses to the complex demands the gospel makes upon us.

2. *Theological Grounding*

Some have warned that resolutions of earlier conflicts in the church's history, based chiefly on polity or legal precedents, have often proved unstable. We have spent a large portion of our time in theological study of these past conflicts and intend that our report will not simply pose political solutions but a way of living together that has clear theological and scriptural integrity. The three affirmations grow out of our convictions that no differences among Reformed Christians can be settled without a firm theological basis.

3. *Clarity About the Relationship of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Larger Church of Jesus Christ*

One of the basic issues before the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is whether it is a church that is called to reflect the full integrity of Christ's body in a distinctive way or, is, rather, merely a denominational subdivision of the church whose peace, purity, and unity are immaterial and whose reason for being is more pragmatic than essential. Any report or process that we set before the church must address this question: does the well-being and witness of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) really matter?

4. *Continuity with Presbyterian Tradition*

Although polity alone cannot confer the peace, unity, and purity that the church is seeking, we do believe that the principles and practices of governance that Presbyterians have been developing for centuries, limited though they may be, will continue to serve us as we move into the future. Any proposals that we set before the church must be the outgrowth of Presbyterian ways of ordering church life and giving it direction.

A final word: The task force is both heartened and humbled by the many expressions of hope that we have heard for our work. Grateful as we are for the church's trust, however, we are also keenly aware that no measures the task force proposes will serve unless the whole church fervently wants to find different and better ways to express its identity as Christ's body in and for the world in the twenty-first century. We commend the videos and other resources the task force has provided. We strongly urge that, during the next two years, congregations and governing bodies use such resources to create occasions on which persons from all parts of the church, including those who deeply disagree with each other, can meet to discern God's will for the church. In these and other gatherings, Presbyterians must search their hearts during the critical next two years. Are the church's members prepared to work, pray, and sacrifice for a more faithful way of life together? If so, we are confident that God will show the way. Indeed, God has shown us the way, and the truth, and the life. God has given us Jesus Christ.

D. *Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church Membership Listing*

The membership listing includes: P. Mark Achtemeier; Scott D. Anderson; Barbara Everitt Bryant; Milton J Coalter;

## Assembly Committee on

Victoria G. Curtiss; Gary W. Demarest, co-chair; Frances Taylor Gench; Jack Haberer; William Stacy Johnson; Mary Ellen Lawson; Jong Hyeong Lee; John B. (Mike) Loudon; Joan Kelley Merritt; Lonnie J. Oliver; Martha D. Sadongei; Sarah Grace Sanderson-Doughty; Jean S. (Jenny) Stoner, co-chair; José Luis Torres-Milán; Barbara G. Wheeler; John Wilkinson.

### COVENANT

We, the members of the task force, covenant together that:

- we will be in prayer for each other and for our work that we may faithfully serve God, follow Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, and be guided by the Holy Spirit;
- we will seek to be guided by Scripture and will regularly study it together;
- we will worship whenever we gather, inviting all who are present at our meetings to worship with us. With authorization, we will celebrate the Lord's Supper at each meeting as a sign that the peace, unity and purity we seek is God's gift to us in Christ;
- we will speak the truth with love, expressing ourselves with candor and humility;
- we will listen, endeavoring to understand each other, especially those whose views seem to differ from our own, maintaining a spirit of openness and vulnerability;
- we will carry out our work among this community of believers, respecting confidences, showing faithfulness in our relationships, and trusting each other's motivations and dedication;
- we will model a respectful, loving process of discernment and dialogue, seeking to reach consensus whenever possible, ever mindful of our responsibilities to all the members of our beloved Church;
- we will communicate regularly and effectively with the whole church on the work of the task force in order to include them in the process;
- we will work in good faith within the open-meeting policy of the General Assembly and welcome the press and other observers present at our meetings, as we seek to discover new and challenging ways "to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century." We trust the press to perform its part of this responsibility by reporting on our work in accordance with the published ethical standards of the Associated Church Press and the Evangelical Press Association.

We will each commit our best, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to the task entrusted to us.