

**Presbytery Theological Reflection Groups
A Guide to Their Formation and Work**

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Preamble

The 216th General Assembly (2004) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted the following recommendation of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church:

That the 216th General Assembly encourage every presbytery to create intentional gatherings of Presbyterians of varied theological views to covenant together to discuss the affirmations in the task force's preliminary report, utilizing the resources being developed by the task force; and that sessions be encouraged to do the same.

Purposes

The primary purposes of theological reflection groups are to build relationships of trust among persons with differing viewpoints, and to deepen understanding through study and dialogue relating to significant theological issues.

This guide provides assistance to presbyteries to initiate intentional gatherings, specifically through the formation of theological reflection groups. It builds upon the work of task force member Victoria (Vicky) Curtiss, whose “Resources for Fostering Community and Dialogue” is available on the task force’s Web site (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity) and provides fuller descriptions of options.

Rationale

The mandate of the Theological Task Force is to “lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century....” The discernment process for members of the task force has been a positive and powerful experience. They speak of the process as a “new way of doing church” that holds promise not found through the more traditional legislative approach.

Discernment is an art, not a science. It is a spiritual discipline, not an action plan. It works in God’s time, not necessarily human time. For such reasons, the formation and work of theological reflection groups must be flexible and fluid, allowing for openness to the Holy Spirit. A theological reflection group of a particular presbytery may or may not resemble that of the task force or other presbyteries’ groups. Suggestions given here will include a variety of options, assuming that groups need latitude in creating their own covenants, approaches, and communal life.

First steps

In the creation of one or more theological reflection groups, the first step must be a commitment by the presbytery to form such groups, and a decision selecting a general framework to be followed.

Questions to consider include: Will there be one group for the presbytery? Would it be helpful to have several groups in different geographic sections of the presbytery to be able to involve more people in the process? Does it make sense to suggest that some existing groups, such as pastors' groups (to which lay members could be added) that already meet, become theological reflection groups for a set number of meetings?

Once these basic decisions are made, three main tasks face a presbytery:

1. deciding on the nature of the group (including number of sessions and time frame suggested) and recruiting its members;
2. planning the initial gathering and group formation process; and
3. developing a system for ongoing support and communicating the group's learning.

There may be a significant impact on the budget for this entire process. Costs of the initial gathering can be easily determined. Other costs will depend upon the duration, frequency, and location of gatherings. The presbytery needs to share with the reflection group's decisions relating to funding.

Membership recruitment—assuming an intentionally formed presbytery-wide group.

The members of the Theological Task Force were appointed by the Moderators of the 211th, 212th and 213th General Assemblies. A presbytery could use one of the following options in recruiting members for a theological reflection group:

1. The presbytery could authorize several presbytery leaders to appoint members of a theological reflection group. Such leaders are elected and usually know a broad base of presbyters. These leaders include the moderator of council, chair of the committee on ministry, president of the presbytery's trustees, the stated clerk, the presbytery executive, or a committee that works with denominational relations.
2. An existing group responsible for recruiting volunteers (such as the presbytery's nominations committee) could be asked by the presbytery or its council to nominate to the presbytery members for a theological reflection group. Members of such committees usually have served in other significant leadership roles and are often aware of interests, abilities, and availabilities of persons. They may also have means already at their disposal for input and nominations of interested individuals.
3. Interested parties could be invited by the presbytery or its council to nominate members for a theological reflection group to the presbytery for election. This may create a higher sense of ownership by those whose views are most divergent. This would work only where various organized interest groups exist that are respected by a fairly large constituency. Alternatively, such groups could be contacted for input in the selection process while using approaches one or two above.

Group qualities and size

Qualities that should be sought in members include the following:

Respect: In the account of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, which settled an early church dispute over requirements for belonging to the Christian community, it states that “Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to discuss this question with the apostles and elders” (Acts 15:2). Paul and Barnabas were held in such esteem that others entrusted them with a task and listened to their guidance. Members of a theological reflection group need to be persons who are respected from a wide range of viewpoints. Therefore, unless a presbytery has the resources to involve everyone in a theological reflection group, the goal should be to ensure that everyone in the presbytery can find at least one member of the theological reflection group with whose perspective they generally agree and whose word and opinions they value and trust.

Varied Expertise: Part of what has made the task force’s work so rewarding and potentially beneficial for the whole church is the extent to which various gifts of its members have been utilized. While resources already exist and more are being developed to assist reflection groups in their work, it would also be beneficial to select members with a wide range of gifts and areas of expertise.

Willingness to Engage in Dialogue: It is exceedingly important for all to understand that this dialogue is not about changing others’ minds on issues, but about building relationships of trust and respect, and finding ways to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church. Members must be willing to listen respectfully to one another as they engage in personal sharing, substantive study, and extended dialogue.

Diversity: The group needs intentionally to be composed of those whose views differ on some of the major issues facing our denomination, in fairly equal numbers for balance in perspectives. As noted in Curtiss’ resource, the group should also be representative in terms of ethnicities, laity-clergy parity, and gender.

The number of members recruited for a theological reflection group will necessarily depend on the qualities sought. In presbyteries that are larger and/or more diverse, for example, it will take more participants to ensure that the characteristics described above are fulfilled. In no case should a theological reflection group be smaller than six or seven members; this will help to ensure that an effective small group process can occur. If the group needs to be larger than eight to ten members, the presbytery should probably consider either creating more than one group or intentionally designing a process that allows for significant discussion and reflection in sub-groups within the larger group.

Inter-presbytery theological reflection groups

In addition to groups within the presbytery, an opportunity for two or more presbyteries to participate jointly in the formation of a theological reflection group may hold tremendous hope for fruitful dialogue. For example, two presbyteries within a synod may represent a significantly wider diversity of views than is present within a single presbytery. The presbyteries could partner with their synod to form such a group. Because a larger geographical territory would be involved, issues of funding, time commitment, and transportation need to be considered.

Since historically different geographical regions of our country represent various viewpoints, particular presbyteries from different regions may benefit from a joint project to form a trans-regional group. Though no resources are currently in place to facilitate such group formations, individual presbyteries may initiate such conversations and, if needed, seek funding assistance through grants from foundations or other governing bodies.

Initial gathering and process

The task force members believe their initial development of a covenant and the use of processes for group formation were key to their becoming a community that effectively works together. Suggestions for these are offered in the first segment of video one, *Seeking Peace, Unity, and Purity*, called “Fostering Community,” as well as in Curtiss’ paper. The initial gathering of the task force was planned by its co-moderators and a General Assembly staff person. In the case of the presbytery, the moderator(s) of the theological reflection group could work with the presbytery executive.

An initial gathering would be enhanced if it could be an overnight event at a place like a retreat facility. Elements to include in the initial gathering are suggested below.

1. Get acquainted. One good way to do this is for the group to interview each other in pairs using two to three specific questions, then introduce each other to the rest of the group.
2. Share expectations in a way that gives everyone voice. This is best done in writing, either prior to the gathering or near the start. These expectations then need to be shared, without naming who said what (see video one for a way to do this).
3. Look at all the expectations together as a group, then using them to create a covenant. The task force covenant can be used as model.
4. Worship.
5. Study Scripture together in a way that encourages sharing of understandings. One format could be a presentation of a passage by someone outside the group, who then gives time for each person to react to specific questions about the Scripture in writing first, then sharing insights with another group member.
6. Look together at suggested task force resources (which need to be reviewed prior to the meeting by meeting planners) and discuss sequence of topics to be considered.
7. Plan a general outline for the next few meetings and agree on a planning team of a least three members for the next meeting. Part of the group’s success will depend on shared leadership.
8. It is vital that the time together be planned to have a variety of activities; study interspersed with singing, time for breaks, meals and opportunities for people to move about, and to be paired with different group members.

Possible outline for ten-session group

- One session on community-building and creation of group covenant, using “Fostering Community” segment of video one as a guide
- Two sessions using remaining segments of video one (“Biblical Authority and Interpretation” and “Matthew 5”)
- Three sessions using video two (*Who is Jesus Christ?*)

- Three sessions using the Preliminary Report and discussion guide (a more extensive Bible study based on this will be available by the end of 2004)
- One session focusing on one of the other resources available on the task force Web site, or looking at possible further study for the group

Ongoing support and communication

The task force has a resource development team (of which this author is a member representing middle governing bodies). The team includes persons with expertise in communications, resource publication, videography, and Web site development. Its purpose is to ensure that the task force's work is preserved and communicated so that the larger church can participate in the process.

While a presbytery may not need such a team, it is critically important in this “new way of doing church” that attention be given to ensuring that a wider constituency is invited to participate in the process. The presbytery needs to comprehend that the theological reflection group is not doing the discernment on behalf of the presbytery, but leading the presbytery in its discernment process. The presbytery will need to commit time and resources to this process for there to be significant benefit or impact on the presbytery as a whole.

Sharing the process

Ideas of ways the process could be shared with the whole presbytery include:

- Reporting from the group or groups to presbytery about their work;
- Devoting a portion of a presbytery meeting to introduce one of the task force videos or other resources, followed by time in groups using the task force methods to experience this new way to approach issues;
- Using the task force's Preliminary Report for devotion and study at a presbytery meeting, coupled with time in small groups and discussion of how it could be used in congregations;
- Creating a page on the presbytery's Web site devoted to the groups' work. This Web page could include excerpts from presentations, publish press releases, provide links to other resources, and offer suggestions for additional ways to participate in the process.

I invite you to accept the challenge of exploring “a new way to do church” and help to set up theological reflection groups in your presbytery. An important step is to consult the Web site of the Theological Task Force (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity). If you have further questions, you may contact the Theological Task Force at TheoTaskForce@ctr.pcusa.org.