A Season of Discernment

The Final Report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church

as approved by the 217th General Assembly (2006)

with Study Guide
The 213th General Assembly (2001) approved the formation of a Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. Its mandate is as follows:

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church is directed 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. This discernment shall include but not be limited to issues of Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power.

The task force is to develop a process and an instrument by which congregations and governing bodies throughout our church may reflect on and discern the matters that unite and divide us, praying that the Holy Spirit will promote the purity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
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A Season of Discernment
The Final Report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church

I. Prologue: The Theological Basis of This Report

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church was created by the 213th General Assembly (2001) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The assembly set before twenty of us—selected not because we are wiser than others but rather because we are typical of the range and variety of backgrounds, views, and values of contemporary Presbyterians—the opportunity of discovering ways that the church can live more faithfully in the face of deep disagreements.¹

The General Assembly charged the task force to set all its deliberations and conclusions in a theological frame. Therefore an ongoing process of biblical study, theological reflection, and spiritual discernment has been threaded through our years of meetings. We have also examined in-depth the issues named in our mandate that are the focus of conflict and disagreement in the church: biblical authority and interpretation, Christology, ordination standards, and power. Serious as these difficulties are, we have still found it possible to discern in our life together the outlines of Christian identity to which, we fervently believe, the church is called.²

This identity rests on three bedrock convictions that have long sustained peace, unity, and purity in Christ’s body and will in the future. We believe that the triune God:

¹ A roster of the task force can be found on the inside front cover. Brief biographies of each member can be found on the Web site: www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity.

² We have been encouraged in our work of theological discernment by recent experiences of church bodies voicing theological convictions for the church, notably the statement “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ,” which was published by the Office of Theology and Worship and affirmed by the 214th General Assembly (2002), and generally lauded for its clarifying and unifying power. (See Minutes, 2002, Part I, p. 423.)
Theological Reflection: Discerning Our Christian Identity in and for the Twenty-first Century

A. God Loves Us: The Ground of Our Faith

What do we know about the identity of God? And what is the Christian identity that flows from this saving knowledge that we receive through faith?

1. As Presbyterians, we are a people whose identity is centered in the love of the triune God—the God of all times and all peoples, the God of grace whose love and judgment extend to every creature. God our Savior has pursued us in our waywardness like a shepherd who ventures into the wilderness to recover the sheep that is lost, like a woman who searches for a lost coin and rejoices upon finding it, like a waiting father who longs to welcome a prodigal child home (Luke 15).

As the Nicene Creed teaches, this one God is the triune God: eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Belief in the Triune God runs throughout the confessional tradition of the church, and the renewal of Trinitarian conviction has been a major theme of theology in our time. Presbyterians look to the church’s historic confessions to nourish that conviction. The task force urges the church to continue to renew this core commitment of the faith.

1 Throughout this process of theological discernment, we have reminded ourselves that we were not asked to draft a new confession of faith. We do believe, though, that the recommendations we are making should be based upon strong theological convictions. The following theological reflections are an account of conclusions we have drawn from our studies and basic convictions that we recognize as significant. They do not include every topic of theological importance or full developments of the themes we lift up. The language in which they are expressed is a mixture of terms that various task force members have introduced. Each of us might have chosen some different wording if we were making individual statements. These affirmations have, however, been endorsed by every member of the task force as important ingredients of “Christian identity in and for the twenty-first century.”
Our faith is in the God of Israel who raised Jesus Christ bodily from the dead. This is the one faith confessed by the people of God: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:5–6). This one faith is diverse but not divided. The Reformed family of churches believes that there is no teacher but Jesus Christ. Therefore, unlike other communions that have a single teaching office or a single confession, Reformed churches have embraced across the centuries many confessions as a cloud of witnesses to one true faith. All creeds and confessions are subordinate to and grounded in Scripture, which speaks afresh in every age. It is by following Jesus Christ, as attested for us in Scripture, that the unity of our faith will be made visible today as it has been in the past. It is this one historic faith that will carry the church into the missional future that God is setting before us.

The church’s mission flows from God’s gracious act of reaching out to welcome, redeem, and recreate us in Jesus Christ through the work of the Spirit. It is in sharing this good news with all the world that we grow into our identity as the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Fellowship of the Spirit. Because God has welcomed us in the power of the gospel, we in turn share that gracious and transforming welcome with a suffering world in need of the gospel. We are not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who have faith (Rom. 1:16).

As the church works together to discern the particular shape of its mission in the 21st century, many questions are being raised about religious pluralism, about the nature of religious truth, and about the reach of salvation in Jesus Christ. In responding to these questions, we must remember that the truth of the gospel rests on the power of God, not on the power of the church. Therefore, in addressing questions of pluralism, truth, and salvation, we must emphasize both the necessity and sufficiency of the grace by which God is for and with the world in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. With confidence in this divine grace, we affirm: “[Jesus is] the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through [him]” (John 14:6, emphasis added) and “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). At the same time, as Reformed Christians, we must remind ourselves and others that salvation rests not in any merit of our own but in the sovereign love of God that has been made known to us in Jesus Christ.

2. **We are a people whose identity is rooted in God who adopts us through grace.**

Through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit we have been adopted into God’s family (Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5–6). We worship and serve a covenant-making God, the God of...
Israel, whose unbreakable covenant with Abraham, Sarah, and their progeny is now, by the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead, extended to the Gentiles. The Gentiles are grafted into the covenant by God’s mercy and made to be children of Abraham only by God’s grace. In this covenant we have a new vision of what the human family is called to be. Because of the obedience of Jesus Christ, even unto death, we no longer define power as domination over others, for we experience strength made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9; 1 Cor. 1:18–2:13). In the light of the cross, we can no longer accept a hierarchical or patriarchal view of how divine power makes itself felt among us. Our relations to others are transformed and reoriented, because the love of God is not confined to the people of one religious perspective, or of one social or economic class, or of one race or ethnicity, or of one gender or gender orientation. Such is the love of God that for those who are in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

3. We are a people whose identity is expressed through the proclamation of the Word. As Reformed Christians, “we believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of [human beings]” (The Book of Confessions, The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.001). The Scriptures, inspired and illumined by the Holy Spirit, form our identity and teach us who we are, whom we worship, and how we exist in the world as the body of believers.

We acknowledge that there is heated debate over biblical interpretation among Presbyterians who honor the authority of Scripture. In the midst of these debates it is important to remember that the consciences of us all are bound by the witness of Scripture to Jesus Christ. Even as it is important to preserve freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture, such freedom is subject to standards (Book of Order, G-6.0108a) and must be exercised within constitutional bounds (Book of Order, G-6.0108b).^5

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^5 “G-6.0108 Freedom of Conscience—Individual and Corporate

^a. It is necessary to the integrity and health of the church that the persons who serve in it as officers shall adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity as expressed in The Book of Confessions and the Form of Government. So far as may be possible without serious departure from these standards, without infringing on the rights and views of others, and without obstructing the constitutional governance of the church, freedom of conscience with respect to the interpretation of Scripture is to be maintained.

^b. It is to be recognized, however, that in becoming a candidate or officer of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) one chooses to exercise freedom of conscience within certain bounds. His or her conscience is captive to the Word of God as interpreted in the standards of the church so long as he or she continues to seek or hold office in that body. The decision as to whether a person has departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity is made initially
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4. **We are a people whose identity is sealed in the waters of baptism.** Baptism “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19) initiates us into the community of faith and attests to a God-given identity that can never be erased. This is an identity more enduring than all other identities we ourselves or others may give us. Our relationship to one another in the household of God is grounded in this identity alone.

5. **We are a people whose identity is nurtured in the sharing of bread and cup.** Just as we have been baptized into Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, so also are we sustained in our life together through Christ’s presence in the sharing of the Lord’s Supper. This meal of thanksgiving is a place where we receive the grace of God and confess our sins before God and one another. At this table we continually embrace the reconciliation that is ours through the death of Christ, enact our unity in Christ’s body, and anticipate the great feast to which people shall come from north and south and east and west to be welcomed and to sit at one table with Jesus Christ as host (Luke 13:29). The ultimate consummation proclaimed in this meal dignifies our diversity, seals our unity, and even reverses our assumptions about our own and others’ acceptability, for in that day “some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last” (Luke 13:30; cf. Matt. 8:11–12).

6. **We are a people whose identity is strengthened through discernment and service.** God created us all in God’s very image, and though we are sinners, God’s Spirit is restoring us in the image of Christ. To that end, God has firmly established our Christian identity in election. We are not elected to an elevated status but to a special service—to embody God’s purposes in and for the world. Our given Christian identity, however, requires ongoing discernment. Although God knows us fully, we do not always think and act as though we know God. Embodying God’s purposes in our time and place requires that we rely on God’s grace and cultivate wisdom, committing ourselves to faithful prayer, study, worship, and works of mercy and justice. We must seek the will of God revealed in the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit as we discern our unique calling in these unique times.

by the individual concerned but ultimately becomes the responsibility of the governing body in which he or she serves. (G-1.0301; G-1.0302)

“Candidates for Ministry

“c. Persons seeking to be received as candidates for ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall have their attention drawn to the constitutional documents of the church including its statement on freedom of conscience. (G-14.0304)”

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B. God Saves Us: *The Object of Our Hope*

What is our hope? That while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). And our hope is alive through the power of Christ’s resurrection. “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10). We confess that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord, who has broken the power of sin, death, and evil.

Holding firm to this confession, we commit ourselves to the core convictions of Christian faith in the church’s traditional teaching documents: the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. Guided by Chapter II of the *Book of Order*, we embrace the faith of the church catholic (universal), the faith of the Protestant Reformation, and the faith of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition (*Book of Order*, G-2.0300–.0500), as witnessed in our historic confessions.

1. *We confess the faith of “the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.”* We receive its canonical Scriptures. We accept its ecumenical creeds. We embrace the mystery of the triune God and the truth of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. He was fully human and fully divine, shared the exposed and vulnerable condition of all humankind, and gave himself, once and for all, to redeem us from sin and restore us to righteousness.

2. *We confess the faith of the Protestant reformation,* including the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, “so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). From this doctrine, we know that all things, including peace, unity, and purity, are gifts that the church receives by faith in the saving work of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. As heirs of the Protestant reformation, we also acknowledge that the Bible gives us the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ (*Book of Order*, G-14.0801g(2)), divine Word mediated and spoken through inspired human words. These writings are our rule of faith and life (*The Book of Confessions*, Westminster Confession, 6.002)—our reliable guide in matters pertaining to salvation, our light in a world of moral obscurity, our measure of what is theologically truthful and spiritually life-giving. These words also reflect the social, cultural, and intellectual conditions of their times, so the church approaches Scripture with historical and literary understanding as it engages in interpretation.

3. *We confess the faith of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition,* with its core vision of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God. From this tradition flow the themes of election, covenant, stewardship, and the recognition of the human tendency to idolatry. This

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For this reason, in our preliminary report we were bold to claim that Jesus Christ is the source of our peace with God and with one another; that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the church’s unity; and Jesus Christ is the source of purity and righteousness to which we aspire, individually and corporately.

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vision impels us to resist the temptation to substitute our own ideologies and forms of thought for the reality of God (Book of Order, G-2.0500a(4)). Guided by the ancient creeds and confessions, we are a church continually being reformed in accordance with God’s Word. Instructed by the confessions of more recent years, we seek to be a church that pays attention to what God is continually doing in our midst. Living in expectation of God’s reign, we not only look to Jesus Christ as our Lord and the Lord of the church but proclaim him the Lord of all. As a pilgrim people, we await the day when “every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth . . . , and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10–11).

4. God calls us, in light of our confession, to embrace “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13:13). Too often, we deny the gift of the grace of God. In conflicts among nations and peoples, in strategies that offer win-lose options only, in the separations by color and class, we alienate ourselves from one another. We do this even as we worship on the Lord’s Day. God refuses to live on one side or the other of these humanly conceived boundaries. Instead, God works in and through our differences to bring us into the promise of reconciliation, healing, liberation, and redemption.

Through grace we are also enabled to recognize and to confess our fallibility and our capacity for distorting truth. Christians and churches have too often authored or endorsed false and damaging teachings. The humility this engenders should lead us to step back from controversies that threaten the peace, unity, and purity of the church and to take time to seek the truth together. In so doing, we make room for the living God to lead us and guide us by the Spirit. This can occur every time we meet for worship, study, and service.

C. God Empowers Us to Proclaim the Gospel: The Source of Christian Love and Witness

What does the Spirit of Christ empower us to do? Christian identity and confessional witness call us to proclaim and bear witness to the gospel throughout the world.


2 In its deliberations, the task force paid special attention to several instances of such distortions of truth. We were reminded that many who perpetrated the slaughter of Native Americans in this country were worshiping, believing Christians. We also were reminded that more than half of the tracts and treatises defending the institution of slavery in America were written by Christian ministers, armed with what they thought were sure readings of Scripture and convinced that their side was entirely in the right and the other side entirely in the wrong. We made each other aware of these historical facts not to score ideological points in our current debates but to engender the humility that leads to forbearance and repentance.

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1. *We proclaim the gospel by preaching, teaching, and serving.* Just as God sent Jesus Christ into the world for us and for our salvation, so also God sends the church into the world to bear witness to God’s judgment and grace. God entrusts us with the privilege of participating in God’s mission to carry out the great ends of the church: the proclamation of the gospel, the preservation of truth, the nurture of God’s people, the worship of God, the promotion of social righteousness, and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world (*Book of Order*, G-1.0200). Through our faithful response to the blessing that God has given us in Jesus Christ, God may in turn use us to become a blessing to others.

2. *We proclaim the gospel by leading holy and disciplined lives.* The true church is constituted not only by proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments, but also by discipline that builds up the body and maintains its integrity. Regular and loving discipline encourages every member of the body to die to sin and live humbly unto righteousness (*The Book of Confessions*, Scots Confession, 3.18; Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 35, 7.035). Through the abundance of sanctifying grace, we are freed from selfishness, self-indulgence, and self-righteousness for a life that is growing in obedience to God and sacrificial service and fidelity to others. Through the death of Christ we are invited to a life of piety, simplicity, and self-discipline. Through the ongoing, transforming work of the Spirit, we give ourselves, our bodies, and all that we are to a life that brings glory to God.

3. *We proclaim the gospel by our commitment to peace and reconciliation.* We are living in a war-torn world. The church acknowledges diverse traditions on the morality of war, but all these traditions recognize a just peace as the ultimate will of God and contain a presumption against violence. We also live in a world where many are afflicted by poverty and injustice. As a North American church, many of whose members are among the most affluent even while many others are not, we recognize that the blessings of prosperity bring with them a sacred obligation to care for the needy both at home and abroad. This can be done not only by acting charitably but also by working for justice. Having been forgiven by God, we are committed to forgive those who have wronged us and seek the forgiveness of those we have wronged. Because controversies over sexuality and ordination have been a special focus of the task force’s work, the task force has become aware of how much alienation and contempt many have experienced. The task force has heard a call to seek God’s forgiveness for our sin and our hurtful attitudes and actions. In gratitude for the good news of the gospel, the task force prays that God will grant the whole church the grace of reconciliation, especially with those who have been wronged.

4. *We proclaim the gospel by seeking the righteousness and justice of God.* The terrible crises of the twentieth century provide a framework and direction for our mission in the

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*The two most prominent are pacifism and the just war tradition.*

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twenty-first. With the church at Barmen we believe that “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death” (The Book of Confessions, 8.11). Members of the church in Korea resolved “that we will follow the footsteps of our Lord, living among our oppressed and poor people, standing against political oppression, and participating in the transformation of history, for this is the only way to the messianic kingdom.” (Text for the Theological Declaration of Korean Christians can be found at the World Alliance of Reformed Churches Web site: www.warc.ch/pc/20th/01.html.) The church at Belhar affirmed “that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others” (Minutes, 2004, Part I, p. 704). We stand with these churches in confessing a gospel that looks to God alone for salvation, that upholds justice and promotes righteousness, and that excludes no one from the offer of God’s judgment and grace.10

Our love and concern for the church are deeply connected to our love and concern for the world. During the years the task force has met, the world, like the church, has experienced intense conflict.11 Conflict forms the context in which our discernment of Christian identity now takes place. How can the church bear witness to the conviction that our future lies in God and not in our own efforts to secure our lives? In a world of divisiveness and violence, it is essential for those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord to show the reason for the hope that is within us by dealing differently with one another (1 Pet. 3:15), for in Jesus Christ, the church has been called to a transformed way of living. Today especially, as Jews, Christians, and Muslims—the children of Abraham—are as much enmeshed as any other people in ongoing conflict in the world, our prayer to the God of Abraham is to hasten the promised days of messianic peace and to enable the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in faith, hope, and love, to be an instrument to that end.

10 The framers of the Theological Declaration of Barmen were responding to German Christians, who were allied with the State and who were dictating who could belong to and lead the church based on their degree of Jewish ancestry. The Theological Declaration of Korean Christians was issued by an anonymous group of Christian democrats and civil rights activists in resistance to Park Chung Hee’s “renewal” regime. The Confession of Belhar was written in 1982 and adopted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa. It spoke to the racist policy of Apartheid, which placed the very meaning of the gospel at risk. It was commended for study by the 216th General Assembly (2004). (The text of the Confession of Belhar can be found in Minutes, 2004, Part I, pp. 702–704; cf. p. 704.) These documents can be found at www.warc.ch/pc/20th.

11 In our own country, we have experienced the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001, a war in Afghanistan, another war in Iraq, polarizing presidential elections, controversies over the nature and scope of democracy in both the United States and abroad, and ongoing racial tension and cultural division over moral and social issues.
Gracious God, may we look back upon this time of trouble, in repentance and hope, and see that in coming together to confront our differences, we found a new measure of the peace, unity, and purity that were already ours in our loving Savior, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

A. Plan of Work

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

- to deepen our understanding of our Christian and catholic identity and clarify key themes of the Reformed theological and constitutional heritage;
- to study and evaluate the sources of health and promise as well as the causes of dissension and unrest in the church;
- to recommend ways for the church to move forward, furthering its peace, unity, and purity.
- The plan of work to achieve these goals called for extensive study of theological issues, Presbyterian history and polity, as well as the topics named in the mandate;
- ongoing reflective encounter with Scripture;
- prayer and worship, including the celebration of the Lord’s Supper at every meeting;
- use of a variety of processes for communal discernment and careful listening to one another;
- ongoing consultation with governing bodies and other groups in the church.

Two features of the plan proved to be especially helpful. One was the decision to lay groundwork of general theological understanding and engagement before taking up the more sensitive and difficult specific topics. The other was the determination to seek to understand positions other than our own by studying some of the best written presentations of different perspectives by respected scholars and earlier committees and commissions of the church. We commend these practices to the whole church. Study and prayer together, deliberate efforts to build community, and time spent in informal conversation proved to be essential to addressing
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difficult issues. Analysis of thoughtful published presentations of positions on issues contributed a great deal to mutual understanding.

For those who may want to borrow or adapt our plan of work, we have posted a meeting-by-meeting narrative on our Web site (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/), which shows how the elements were interwoven. Here, however, by way of introduction to our report, we want to emphasize two facets of our spiritual progress as a group.

B. Spiritual Progress

Over the last five years, we have had two remarkable experiences as a group, one of pain and penitence, the other of gratitude and joy.

1. Pain and Penitence

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

  We knew when we first convened that the task force was created because the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was struggling. We were asked to consider how the peace, unity, and purity of the church might be built up because many had concluded that these elements of church life were compromised and in short supply. At that early point, we, the members of the task force, shared a tendency that is widespread in the church: to blame others, especially those with whom we disagree, for the church’s troubles. Our process and the covenant we adopted to guide our work together, however, emphasized careful listening as much as self-expression.\(^\text{12}\) In the course of our work we began to understand that our own actions as much as others’ have offended God, wounded the body of Christ, and caused pain to other Presbyterians.

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

  • Those of us associated with the Anglo traditions that have dominated the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) came to understand how much alienation and pain we have caused by past oppression of other racial and ethnic groups and by currently maintaining barriers to the full inclusion of those groups’ members, cultures, and gifts.

\(^\text{12}\) See inside back cover for text of covenant.

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Those of us who identify our views as liberal came to understand how alienating it is for conservatives and evangelicals when their passionate commitment to holy living and upright conduct are labeled rigid and judgmental.

Those of us who identify our views as conservative came to understand how alienating it is for liberals when their passionate commitment to justice and compassion are labeled unbiblical.

Those of us who identify our views as moderate came to understand how alienating it is when those with passionate concerns on either end of the theological spectrum are labeled extreme and divisive.

Many of us came to understand how alienating it is for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons to be so regularly identified as a major threat to the peace, unity, and purity of the church.13

Many of us also came to understand how alienating it is for those who support a ban on the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian persons to be accused of prejudice, and how alienating it is for those who oppose such a ban to be accused of moral laxity.

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

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

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

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2. Gratitude and Joy

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

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

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

Nor did we overcome all our differences and reach agreement on all the issues about which the church continues to disagree. We have not compromised our basic convictions or commitments. We still hold most of the views and perspectives we brought to the task force.

From the beginning, some of us had ties to affinity groups (groups in the church that have specific stands on some task force issues) and have maintained those ties during the life of the task force.

But still it is a fact that all of us have been greatly enriched and changed by our work together. This has been a season of intense discernment for every member of the task force. Our experience of Christian faith and life has been extended and expanded. Our trust in other Presbyterians and our respect for differing perspectives has deepened. Most of all, our joy in believing has been greatly increased by the work of the Holy Spirit. Our gratitude for the church has grown because of the honesty, humility, and faithfulness of the other members of the task force. As a result, our hopes for the future of the church have been confirmed. In our preliminary report, we affirmed the peace, unity, and purity of the church that are God’s gift in Christ. We can give thanks with full hearts for the gift of the church we have already received because we have so intensely experienced this gift in our encounters with one another.

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Over our time together, a common conviction has grown among us: different as we are, God has called us all to be part of the body of Christ as it is manifested in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

C. The Structure of This Report

This report is the result of both facets of our spiritual development as a group: the pain and penitence, on the one hand, and the gratitude and joy on the other. It follows the outline of goals for the task force’s work that were adopted at its first meeting:

The prologue (Section I) sets forth our theological affirmations. It grew out of the studies and discussions in which the task force engaged “to deepen our understanding of our Christian and catholic identity and clarify key themes of the Reformed theological…heritage.”

This section (II) gives an account of our plan of work and our progress in completing it.

The following section (III) summarizes how our thinking about the controversial issues named in the task force mandate has developed in the course of our studies and discussions.

Section IV outlines resources we discovered for dealing with the issues assigned to us. Some of these resources are found in the constitutional traditions of the church; others are drawn from processes for discernment and decision-making that are unfamiliar to many Presbyterians.

Section V contains the task force’s practical recommendations for how the peace, unity, and purity of the church may be preserved and promoted.

Section VI offers a final word from the task force.

To complement these sections of our formal report, we have included discussion resources by individual task force members. These are the work of their authors. Other task force members had an opportunity to make suggestions to the authors, but the documents have not been adopted or approved by the whole task force. They are provided because they proved very useful in stimulating the task force’s thinking and may serve the wider church as a resource for study.

III. The Issues Before the Task Force

The task force was charged to lead the church “in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century.” Four issues were named for specific attention: Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination, and power. The task force was

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not asked to resolve all the controversial issues in the church or to relieve the church of all
conflict. Rather, the task force was asked to help the church deal with current and future
conflicts more faithfully.

To this end, the task force has studied the assigned topics, reading relevant documents
and engaging in discussion under the guidance of task force members who are skilled in
teaching and group leadership. Drawing on these sessions, we have produced a variety of
resources. We also sent to the 216th General Assembly (2004) a preliminary report that
expressed our shared conviction that the church’s peace, unity, and purity are the results not of
human efforts but rather of what God has given in Jesus Christ through the gracious work of
the Spirit. (See Minutes, 2004, Part I, pp. 617–18, 638–43.) The task of the church is to live
into the fullness of that gift. The General Assembly received that report and commended it to
the church for study. Now, in this final report, we address the specific issues in our mandate,
building on the theological affirmations in the first section. Below we outline our points of
agreement about three issues in our mandate. These points of agreement, given the range of
our differences, may provide help for the church to work toward shared positions on the
topics of Christology, biblical interpretation, and ordination standards and human sexuality.
The fourth issue, the broad topic of power, required multiple approaches. We address it in the
next section on ecclesiology, polity, discernment, and decision-making processes.

A. Christology

The term “Christology” points to a vast theological territory of teachings on the person
and work of Jesus Christ. No doubt it was included in the task force mandate as an issue
because there have been strenuous arguments in recent General Assemblies about how to talk
about the saving power of Jesus Christ in a pluralistic age. The task force decided to approach
Christology first from the standpoint of historical tradition. We studied classic creeds and
contemporary confessions, with special attention to what they teach about the person and
saving work of Jesus Christ.14 This study included several sessions on the Nicene Creed, the
work of the Council of Chalcedon, and the doctrine of the atonement,15 as well as a review of
three twentieth century confessional statements that are anchored in Christological
affirmations.16

14 We were greatly aided in our preliminary work by the document “The Confessional Nature of the Church,”
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly, Minutes, 1986, Part I, pp. 516–27. The text can also be found in
The Book of Confessions, pp. xi–xxx.
15 Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. Who Is Jesus Christ, video, produced by
the Office of the General Assembly (OGA-04-069), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
16 Refer to footnote 10.
We, the members of the task force, were shaped by our study together of the affirmations that the church has made through its history about Jesus Christ, in whom we receive life and salvation. Our understanding of him was expanded and deepened in the following ways:

- We were inspired by the power that the affirmation “Jesus is Lord” and other traditional Christological formulas have to shape faith and discipleship in our day.
- We were instructed by a breadth and variety of Christological affirmations that have been accepted as Christian and Reformed doctrine and chastened about our own tendencies to oversimplify our claims about Jesus Christ in contemporary debates.
- We were encouraged by the witness of Reformed Christians in Germany, South Africa, Korea, and other parts of the world who risked their lives in the twentieth century to confess that Christ is alive in contemporary events. We were equally encouraged by Christians who continue today to witness to Christ’s work in the world.

We found wide and deep common ground in our study of the church’s confessional tradition concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. We have given voice to our shared convictions in the theological reflection that heads this report. We have seen the reflection of Christ’s glory in one another. Our growing awareness of this common faith in Christ has become the basis of our unity and of our fear of the consequences of losing one another. This faith gives us hope, indeed, assurance that we should hold on to one another and bear with one another as we grapple with the other difficult issues before the church.

B. Biblical Authority and Interpretation

The task force addressed differences about biblical interpretation and authority, which many Presbyterians believe are a root cause of other disagreements, in three ways. First, we engaged in Bible study throughout every meeting—indeed, on almost every day of every meeting, focusing on texts pertinent to our other discussions. Second, we reviewed different models of biblical authority and interpretation that our Presbyterian forbears employed to read the Bible faithfully and that continue to coexist to this day. We also reviewed classic guidelines for interpretation that Presbyterians share despite diversity of perspective on the nature and authority of Scripture. These include:

- The centrality of Jesus Christ
- The priority of the plain sense of the text
- Interpretation of Scripture by Scripture

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• The rule of love
479
• The rule of faith17

Last, we analyzed in detail two essays by scholars that offered biblical perspectives on
human sexuality, in order to understand how the Bible is used in making theological
arguments and why different interpreters come to different conclusions from their study of
it.18 The articles led us to examine Romans 1 and other texts that have played significant parts
in the debate over human sexuality.

These exercises have led the task force to agree on four points:

• In order to allow the Scriptures to speak to us clearly and fully, the Reformed
approach continues to embrace a variety of models of biblical authority and
interpretation, each highlighting values that Presbyterians have historically held to be
important.
• There is a surprising measure of agreement about guidelines, methods, and resources
for biblical interpretation. Often church members agree on what Scripture says and
many points of interpretive detail. Some of the most serious disagreements focus on
what constitutes faithful pastoral application of scriptural teaching or on which
passages of Scripture are relevant to a particular question.
• Studying the Scriptures together enriches our understandings, corrects our
misunderstandings, and helps us wrestle with God’s Word more deeply and honestly.
• Because God alone is Lord of the conscience, and because conscience is bound by
the witness of Scripture, it is important within these bounds to respect one another’s
deep convictions of conscience and to exercise mutual forbearance, as together we
seek to discern God’s will.

Each of us became firmly convinced that all the members of the task force honor the
authority of Scripture, embrace it as “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in
the Church universal” (Book of Order; G-14.0207b), and seek earnestly to be faithful to that

17“A summary of these guidelines was presented in the task force video, Seeking Peace, Unity, and Purity,
produced by the Office of the General Assembly (OGA-03-069), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). That summary was
based on two significant resources adopted by the General Assembly at the time of Reunion in 1983: “Presbyterian
Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture,” Presbyterian Church in the United States, General Assembly, 1983; and
“Biblical Authority and Interpretation,” United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, General
Assembly, 1982.

Blount, Struggling with Scripture (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), pp. 32–50; and Richard B. Hays, The

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witness. We who disagree on some matters can learn much from one another as we mine
together the Scriptures we love. This is further reason for Presbyterians, who share such rich
traditions of biblical interpretation, to continue together in fellowship. The task force is
convinced that Scripture has the power to shape and transform us as the community of faith.

C. Sexuality and Ordination

The task force gave sustained attention to two interconnected issues that have generated
more disagreement and conflict in recent years than any others: (1) the church’s teaching on
human sexuality; (2) the theology and practice of ordination.

We explored a range of opinions on issues of human sexuality. Though we have shared
some of our personal opinions and positions, we focused our studies primarily on the written
work of Christian scholars and denominational commissions and assemblies. We read and
discussed a diverse collection of theological and biblical writings on these topics.19 We
benefited greatly from this way of grappling with issues and we commend it to the church.
Before articulating personal perspectives, groups that find themselves in conflict over issues
might attempt what we did: close and careful reading, in a group setting, of carefully selected
texts that represent a variety of perspectives.

Our study of human sexuality yielded several major insights:

• The theological and biblical literature on human sexuality in general and same-gender sexuality in particular is diverse, subtle, and complex. It could not readily be divided into the two categories—either approval or disapproval of same-gender relationships and practices—that are assumed to anchor much of the conflict in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today. In one session, a member of the task force offered a typology of six positions. Each position conveyed a distinctive view of sin, reconciliation, and redemption. We acknowledged that other analysts might approach the material differently and provide alternative interpretations.20

• Methods of biblical interpretation, theological traditions, and policy conclusions did not line up neatly in the work we studied. As the resource, “Same-Gender Relationships in the Church: Six Theological Viewpoints,” demonstrates, scholars

19 For a bibliography of materials the task force studied, see the Web site: www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity.
20 The forthcoming paper, “Same-Gender Relationships in the Church: Six Theological Viewpoints,” will be posted on the Web: www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity.
and writers who reached different conclusions often based their work on similar theological premises. Further, opinions about ordination and sexuality did not always correlate precisely with particular theological positions. Writers associated with a particular theological perspective sometimes reached conclusions different from what is often assumed to be their party’s “line” on the witness of Scripture; the morality of covenantal, same-gender relationships; and the permissibility of ordination. For instance, some writers who believe that same-gender relationships are wrong nevertheless believe pastoral acceptance should be extended to gay and lesbian couples; some writers who believe that the full witness of Scripture supports the possibility of covenantal relationships between persons of the same gender nevertheless acknowledge that where Scripture speaks explicitly of same-gender acts it disapproves them. These were only two of a number of combinations and permutations of theological, biblical, and polity perspectives on the broad topic of sexuality and the narrower one of same-gender relationships.

Amid all the rich complexity of these studies, all of us deepened our understanding of our own perspectives as well as those of others. Perhaps most important, all of us found gospel themes and biblical witness in the work of scholars and writers whose theological and polity conclusions on the subject are different from our own.

We also studied ordination. This study, which also involved analysis of the work of others as well as the sharing of personal views, yielded the following key insights:

- One model of Christian leadership that is consistently offered throughout the New Testament is servant leadership. Christians are to imitate Christ in a posture of self-giving and service, and to “outdo one another in showing honor” to others (Rom. 12:10) by respectful attention and loving care.

- Reformed theological tradition emphasizes —the common Christian vocation of the entire body, the “priesthood of all believers,” in which all members are called by God to promote the ongoing health and maturation of the body of Christ. —that certain members of the body of Christ are called by God through the voice of the church to lead and nurture the body in its spiritual growth and in mission.

21 One surprise was how often writers on all sides of the questions bolstered their arguments with appeals to natural law (theological reasoning based on the orders of nature), which is not traditionally a central theme in Protestant theology.
These ordained officers must adhere to confessional, governance, and
disciplinary standards not required for membership.

- Beyond these themes, Scripture does not provide a thoroughly developed theology of ordination, and a theology of ordination has not been clearly and consistently articulated in the development of Reformed and Presbyterian doctrine. As one might expect, then, ordination has been a source of some confusion and a matter of controversy in our history. From the outset of American Presbyterianism to the present, denominational conflicts have often centered on matters of fitness for ordination. The current controversy regarding issues of human sexuality and ordination is the latest example of this recurring pattern.

The task force was not asked to take a position on human sexuality or ordination and we have not attempted to do so. We did invest considerable time and energy in conversation, seeking to understand one another’s points of view. We did not try to convince fellow task force members of our own perspectives or to decide whether the church’s current position should be changed.

At the same time, we found we could reach ready agreement on several points:

- It is a grave error to deny baptism or church membership to gay and lesbian persons or to withhold pastoral care to them and their families.
- Those who aspire to ordination must lead faithful lives. Those who demonstrate licentious behavior should not be ordained.
- Sexual behavior is integral to Christian discipleship, leadership, and community life. It is not a purely personal matter.
- Sexual orientation is, in itself, no barrier to ordination.

The foregoing agreements left the task force with a wide range of theological views and positions before it, all of which seemed to have some grounding in the theological affirmations that head this report. Members of the task force reflect this range of views personally. Some strongly support the church’s current position; others strongly question it or want to change it; others are still forming their thinking about sexuality and ordination.

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22 See the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit Proposal of the Task Force on Theology and Practice of Ordination to Office in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Minutes, 1992, Part I, pp. 1021–1092.

23 Presbyterians have fought over such issues as doctrinal adherence as a requirement of ordination, the spiritual fitness of those seeking ordination, the transfer of ministerial status from region to region or from another denomination, the ordination of African American Presbyterians, and the ordination of women.

24 These points of agreement emerged during our theological and biblical studies and other discussions rather than from an assessment of current teachings of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but all our agreements do accord with previous statements approved by the General Assembly.
Having heard a presentation to the task force by member Stacy Johnson on a spectrum of theological viewpoints on same-gender relationships in the church, many believe that, instead of beginning with the question of ordination, it would be more profitable first to explore a more basic theological question: How does God’s gracious drama of creation, reconciliation, and redemption work itself out in the lives of baptized gay and lesbian persons who are committed to exclusive, covenanted relationships?

We all were able to recognize in the views on sexuality and ordination held by other task force members concerns for the peace, unity, and purity of the church and the integrity of the gospel. The differences on these matters are strenuous and serious, but precisely because they are so important, we have been encouraged to stay together, speaking the truth in love, learning from one another, and building up the body.

Further, we were all able to agree that perspectives on questions of sexuality, ordination, and same-gender covenantal relationships are rich and complex, and our fellow task force members who hold these views are sincere, faithful, and guided by Scripture. Therefore, we believe, the church should seek constructive, Christ-like alternatives to the “yes/no” forms in which questions about sexuality, ordination, and same-gender covenantal relationships have been put to the church in recent decades. In the next section of this report, we recount our search for models of constructive engagement in the history and polity traditions of the Presbyterian church and in the practices of decision-making of other communities that seek peaceful and righteous life together.

IV. 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: A range of possible positions exist on the issue at hand, but pressure to make decisions, especially about eligibility for church office, forces the choice into a binary format that divides governing bodies into two parties. Each party, often substantial in size, struggles long and hard for control of the policy of the whole church. The result is a church both preoccupied with and weary of conflict.

25 Johnson’s presentation demonstrated the wide range of responses to the question in current biblical scholarship and theological writing. Johnson says the question arises because the church’s current standards specifically address heterosexual persons who are married and all single persons, but have no specific word for gay or lesbian persons in partnership.

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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 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.

A. Resources for Understanding Our Situation: Reformed Theology of Church Governance

The foundational claim Presbyterians make about the governance of the church is that Jesus Christ is its head (Book of Order, 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. “Presbyterians are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ.”

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 own 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 uncommon in the history of the church. They require disciplines of patience, mutual forbearance, and dedicated communal discernment to reach faithful

26 Book of Order, G-4.0301d.
resolution as we trust Jesus’ promise that the Holy Spirit will ultimately lead the church into all truth.

The task force in its own life has drawn from Reformed tradition in cultivating these disciplines of patience, forbearance, and communal discernment that characterize the church as a community governed by Christ through Word and Spirit. Among the practices that have drawn us closer to God and one another are:

- Sincere self-examination, mutual confession, and repentance of ways in which all of us have undermined the church’s calling and faithfulness.
- Joint participation in worship and in the sacrament of unity, the Lord’s Supper.
- Communal study of the Bible that seeks common and mutually enriching understanding across dividing lines.
- Honest dialogue that seeks first to understand differing viewpoints before criticizing them.
- Careful study of foundational aspects of church history, theology, confessions, and polity that bind us together as Presbyterians.

Having considered in Section I the theological and confessional links in our tradition that unify our communion, we now turn to those elements of our history and polity that can foster constructive engagement in times of conflict.

B. Resources for Constructive Engagement: Presbyterian Polity

Presbyterian polity is an expression of deep theological convictions about the church’s . . .

- Unity: Christ is not divided. We give witness to our oneness under Christ, the head of the church, by good-faith participation in a disciplined and ordered life together.
- Purity: Truth, holiness, and righteousness matter as pathways to discipleship, in both the life of the church as a body and the lives of its members. Ultimately, the church cannot simply agree to disagree on important matters of faith and practice. Church polity must provide ways for serious disagreements to be resolved. But resolution by merely technical or legal means will not endure because it does not address the conflict of convictions that gave rise to the disagreements in the first place. Only a resolution with theological integrity can be sustained.
- Peace: The pursuit of truth takes place in a community where differing voices are not only respectfully engaged but also honored as full partners in our common pursuit of God’s will for the church.

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

Four pairs of principles or “points of balance” have been particularly important in shaping the polity of the PC(USA). A full account of these points of balance, with historical illustrations, is provided in the paper “Principles of Polity: Their Contribution to the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Presbyterian Church,” available on the task force’s Web site, under Resources. Here it is enough to note that when held in constructive tension, these points of balance have allowed Presbyterians to live in relative concord while engaged in vigorous debate and faithful ministry. When equilibrium between these shared theological commitments collapses, however, disagreements have been difficult to resolve, and ruptures in our communion have sometimes resulted.

Presbyterians have regularly sought

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1. 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.

During the earliest days of American Presbyterianism, the need arose to find ways to connect these two basic principles. The standard of faith to which the church adhered, the Westminster Confession, acknowledged that councils of the church may err. Therefore, throughout its history the church has affirmed “the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable.” At the same time, Reformed Christians have always insisted that Christ’s way is not a solitary one. The first Presbyterian courts and councils recognized that faithful witness to the unity of the body requires mutual accountability and communal discernment of the working of the Spirit. These are strenuous disciplines. They require both forbearance in love and respect for the will of the body in one of two forms, either acquiescence to its decisions or, if that is not possible, peaceful withdrawal.

2. To adhere to essential and necessary beliefs and practices that bind the faithful into the body of Christ while also respecting freedom in nonessential matters of belief, worship, piety, witness, and service.

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

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27 “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 or practice, but to be used as a help in both.” The Westminster Confession of Faith (6.175), in _The Book of Confessions_.

28 Historic principles of church order in _Book of Order_, G-1.0301(1)(b).

29 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, peaceably 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; see also _Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America_, Minutes of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia 1758, p. 286; also _The Presbyterian Digest, 1907_, William E. Moore, compiler (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work), p. 28.)
The question of freedom of conscience under Scripture emerged immediately, however, because some ministers of the synod considered certain articles in the standards to be at variance with, or at least not explicitly enjoined by, Scripture. The synod resolved this conflict of conscience by permitting these ministers and, later, candidates for the ministry to declare their disagreements ("scruples") with particular articles of the Westminster standards. It then delegated to the examining body the responsibility for determining whether the candidate’s disagreement concerned an essential article of the church’s "doctrine, worship or government." Although the Adopting Act was later modified, it established a precedent that has heavily influenced American Presbyterians' understanding of their confessional commitments to this day. Therefore, the church has consistently maintained that certain beliefs and practices are indispensable for the church’s theological integrity. At the same time, "differences always have existed and been allowed … as to [the] modes of explaining and theorizing within the metes and bounds of the one accepted system."  

3. To maintain a distinctive Presbyterian and Reformed witness to the world while also engaging in mission with Christians of other traditions. 

American Presbyterians throughout their history have been remarkably united in their commitment to witness to the world. Presbyterian opinion has diverged, however, over the best means for achieving this witness. One stream of opinion has insisted that the full articulation of the gospel required for a transforming witness to the world must include the distinctives of the Reformed and Presbyterian heritage. A second, equally prominent stream has held that faithful and effective engagement with the "messiness" of a sinful and suffering world requires a broad-based, cooperative witness in partnership with other Christian communions. 

One dramatic instance of early cooperation and later division between representatives of these two viewpoints was the Plan of Union contracted between Congregationalists and the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) in the 1800s. Initially, the General Assembly supported this plan, but the hybrid character of the churches and presbyteries formed under the plan alarmed traditional Calvinist Presbyterians. In 1837, this group, which had come to be called the "Old School," declared the synods, presbyteries, and churches formed under the Plan of Union no longer part of the church. The "exscinded" 


31 Minutes, PCUSA, 1868, "Proposed Terms of Reunion Between the Two Branches of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America," p. 33. For Plan of Reunion of 1869, see Digest, 1886, pp. 99–106; also Minutes, PCUSA, 1865–1869, p. 276ff.
delegates withdrew and regrouped as a church with the same legal name, but popularly known as the “New School.”

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

4. 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.

Another disagreement that dates from the church’s earliest days concerns the powers of governing bodies. The first gathering of an American presbytery (1706) was composed of ordained officers with differing views of what constituted faithful church governance. One group from New England, led by Jonathan Dickinson, favored limiting the power of all governing bodies. Scripture alone, they believed, provided all that was necessary for the whole work of ministry. Another group, from Scotland and Ireland, also acknowledged Scripture as an “infallible rule” and the possibility that church councils would err. They insisted, however, that the “bare letter” of Scripture must be interpreted by widely representative assemblies that could be trusted to guide the church by devising creeds, by adopting statements of confession, and by ordering the church’s common life. This view prevailed in 1797, when the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was organized.

This high view of the General Assembly’s authority was reinforced when the United Presbyterian Church in North America united with the PCUSA in 1958. The authority of “higher” governing bodies in American Presbyterian tradition has been balanced, however, by an equally strong emphasis on the rights of those governing bodies (sessions and presbyteries) where pivotal decisions in the church’s polity originate. This view has deep roots in the denomination’s history as well, because presbyteries existed long before the General Assembly was formed and the Constitution adopted. It was most pronounced, however, in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) tradition where the powers of all governing bodies—especially those above the presbytery level—were severely limited. The PCUS

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32Minutes, PCUSA, 1869, pp. 26−41, esp. 36−37; For Plan of Reunion 1869, see Digest, 1886, pp. 99−106; also Minutes, PCUSA, 1865−1869, Minutes and Reports, p. 276ff.

33Is 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, intendent 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, 18−19.
recognized the General Assembly as the court of final appeal in specific cases. Yet its General Assembly was circumspect in offering general deliverances, and when it did provide them, it regarded them as “didactic, advisory, and monitoring.” The reunion in 1983 of the PCUS and the UPCUSA reinforced those elements in both streams that had upheld the rights of presbyteries over against the General Assembly.

Presbyteries and sessions have the right and responsibility to examine and ordain their officers and to decide who may be admitted to membership in congregations and presbyteries.

In addition, lower governing bodies may petition higher ones by overture to take action. Presbyteries have the additional right to confirm (or veto) changes in the church’s constitution. In turn, the General Assembly, synods, and presbyteries, acting as “higher” governing bodies, have the duty of oversight and the right to review lower governing bodies’ decisions in specific cases. Such rulings have the power of precedent for lower governing bodies that are deciding similar matters.

The task force has concluded from its study of polity that:

- The discipleship of maintaining a healthy tension within these four sets of complementary commitments 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 flexible equilibrium rather than static and perfect balance. It achieves this goal by weighting its polity for a time in favor of those principles neglected by current trends in culture, controversy, theology, or practice. Such temporary maneuvers are essential to right the ship, but they too can endanger its faithful forward course if

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34 [Presbyterian Church in the United States, Minutes of the General Assembly 1879 (Wilmington, N.C.: 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.
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 toward 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.

C. 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 infighting 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,” one of the discussion resources that can be found on our Web site (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/). 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.

D. 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 practice. This “balanced” posture is not easy to achieve, but it is essential if a Presbyterian church is to maintain the faithful equilibrium to which Reformed understanding aspires.
There is a third source of help and renewal for the church today, one that has impressed the task force again and again: the church’s own members and organizations, many of which are pioneering new ways of working together that build bridges among parties and factions, deepen mutual understanding, and build up the body in love. One of the goals adopted by the task force was to study the health and promise of the church. In the midst of the difficulties and challenges that the denomination faces, we have found much health and strength to celebrate.

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

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

Task force members have read communications from those engaged in this wide range of efforts and learned from presbyteries, congregations, and other groups that are already promoting the church’s unity, purity, and peace. These experiences are heartening. They demonstrate that the progress the task force seeks to foster by this report and its recommendations will not be a new experience for the church, but an extension of attitudes and practices into which the church is already living. This report is not a new or different

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word to the church, but a summary of the longings and aspirations that many Presbyterians
have already expressed and acted upon.

Peace, unity, and purity are gifts of the Spirit to the church. They are also hard won
virtues for any church, as our review of Presbyterian history reminds us. Presbyterians have
regularly and sometimes vehemently disagreed about fundamental features of our confession,
order, and discipline. How we deal with one another in controversy—especially how we
accept judgment and reconciliation won for us in Christ—is a challenge to our discipleship, a
test of our faith, and our most convincing witness to the truth and power of the gospel we
proclaim.

V. Recommendations
[As amended by the 207th General Assembly (2006)]
Seeking the peace, unity, and purity that God offers us in the work of our loving Savior,
the task force offers the following seven recommendations.

1. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends that the
217th General Assembly (2006) strongly encourage
   a. every member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to witness to the
      church’s visible oneness, to avoid division into separate denominations that obscure our
      community in Christ, and to live in harmony with other members of this denomination,
      so that we may with one voice together glorify God in Jesus Christ, by the power of the
      Holy Spirit; and
   b. all sessions, congregations, presbyteries, and synods to renew and
      strengthen their covenanted partnership with one another and with the General
      Assembly.

Rationale
The task force believes that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to hold together in
one body. We do not deny that differences in the church are deep and important. Even in our
small task force, we are far apart on some issues despite intense engagement together in
discernment over nearly four years. At the same time, both in our own fellowship and in the
church whose diversity we were chosen to represent, we have discovered more agreement
than disagreement. Core convictions about the gospel draw Presbyterians together. The task
force found it possible to state these core convictions in one voice. Our gratitude and joy for
the privilege of confessing the faith together convince us that the Presbyterian Church

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(U.S.A.) must not let its differences pull it apart. Each of us on the task force still thinks that some positions others among us hold are incorrect, even damaging to the church and the clarity of its message. Yet we have come to respect the integrity with which theological views different from our own are held, and we have seen that many others in the church have the same capacity to perceive the biblical basis and Christian credibility of other perspectives. Therefore, the task force has concluded that, despite disagreements, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) should make every effort to prevent schism. What protections are there against bitter division? The task force, diverse in its makeup, has gained some practical wisdom about what it required for unity while important differences remain. Our pattern of life together, our experiences of the results of sustained study and regular worship, and our review of history and the principles of polity have convinced us that there are Presbyterian traditions and habits, some of which have been underutilized, that may enable the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) not only to avoid a division, but to grow closer in Christ as its members struggle together to live out the gospel. The following recommendations, which are means to this end, commend the use of the resources we have discovered to the whole church.

2. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends that the 217th General Assembly (2006) urge governing bodies, congregations, and other groups of Presbyterians to follow the example of the task force and other groups that, in the face of difficult issues, have engaged in processes of intensive discernment through worship, community building, study, and collaborative work.

**Rationale**

The task force was directed to devise “an instrument and a process” by which means the church can discern and discuss matters that unite and divide it. By the grace of God and with the Spirit’s help, the task force grew into a Christian community. We also discovered that we were not unique, that numerous groups in the church were also seeking mutual understanding, using the disciplines of study, sharing of joys and sorrows, and prayer that paved the way. We commend to the church the methods that the task force and others have used to pave the way to discernment: deep reflection on Scripture; serious study of basic theological doctrines; intensive review of the history of the church, the currents of conviction that created and resolved conflicts, and the practical wisdom it has gained from its experience over time; regular prayer and worship; use of texts written from a variety of perspectives as an introduction to the discussion of potentially divisive issues; and work together toward important goals. Taken together, these disciplines form part of the “instrument and process” the task force commends to the church.
To assist other groups that want to use methods the task force employed, discussion resources that helped us shape our thinking are on our Web site: www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/. In addition to educational resources produced by the task force, a complete bibliography of materials we have read is available (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/, look under Resources). Before June 2006, we will publish curricular materials that help church leaders, members, and groups make use of the educational resources we have prepared or used ourselves.

The intent of this recommendation, however, is to invite the whole church to participate in a season of discernment, not to mandate any particular format or approach. The task force resources may be helpful starting points. We urge others to share the plans and materials they have used, and we encourage all who decide to pursue mutual understanding to bring all the imagination and creativity they can muster to the process.

3. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends that the 217th General Assembly (2006) commend for study the Theological Reflection that heads the task force report (see lines 35–260).

Rationale

The task force was directed to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in “spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century.” We began our discernment process by studying core doctrines of the Christian faith. Toward the end of our time together, as we began to draft this report, we summarized what we have come together to believe about who we are called to be as Presbyterian Christians facing an uncertain, challenging future. That summary, the Theological Reflection that begins this report, affirms biblical faith, foundational Christian and Reformed teachings, and helpful ways that contemporary believers express the faith in a world hungering for meaning and truth.

The Theological Reflection is not, however, intended to be an official doctrinal statement of the church, much less a new confession of faith. It is the work of one group whose members were chosen, as we have said, not because we are experts but because we are typical of the range of backgrounds and views of church leaders and members. The fact that the task force, in all its diversity, has been able to agree on so much will, we hope, be an encouragement to the church. What we hold in common is far greater than those things that divide us. Many readers of the Theological Reflection will want to restate portions of it or add to it. We encourage them to do so. We urge that the Theological Reflection be studied, not as a finished or perfect product, but as a starting point for other groups that seek the experience, which we have found so valuable, of grappling with basic theological issues in the company of those who bring different perspectives. Listening to how our presumed opponents...
understand God, Jesus Christ, the work of the Spirit, the mission of the church, and other centrally important features of the faith has done more to deepen our discernment and mutual understanding than any other activity. Such theological searching, we believe, should be an early step in any process of discernment meant to foster purity, unity, and peace.

4. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends that the 217th General Assembly (2006) direct the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly, and urge those who plan and moderate meetings of other governing bodies, to explore the use of alternative forms of discernment preliminary to decision-making, especially in dealing with potentially divisive issues.

Rationale

The other element of “an instrument and process” the task force commends to the church is the wide variety of processes of discernment and communal decision-making the task force used in its deliberations. These processes are alternatives to the mode of debate, in which opposing sides emphasize the strength of their own position and the weaknesses of the other. In discernment, members of the body work together to generate and weigh options. Advocacy is complemented by inquiry. This can lead to cohesion in the body as well as discernment of the will of Christ. These methods can be used under Robert’s Rules of Order [the primary framework for decision-making in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)] in modes such as “committee of the whole” before proceeding to a vote. The alternative approaches that were most effective for the task force as it sought insight, understanding, and cohesion in Christ are described in detail in “Discernment and Decision-Making,” one of the discussion resources that can be found on our Web site (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/), in video resources the task force produced, and in additional resources posted on our Web site.

The task force, having gained so much from these approaches and methods, strongly commends them to the church. Such methods are easily integrated into the proceedings of small groups like the task force. They also can be used by larger decision-making groups. In the resources noted above, examples are provided of how all deliberative bodies, including large assemblies, can integrate some of these alternative means of discernment into their life and work.

5. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends that the 217th General Assembly (2006) approve the following authoritative interpretation of section G-6.0108 of the Book of Order:

b. These standards are determined by the whole church, after the careful study of Scripture and theology, solely by the constitutional process of approval by the General Assembly with the approval of the presbyteries. These standards may be interpreted by the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission.

c. Ordaining and installing bodies, acting as corporate expressions of the church, have the responsibility to determine their membership by applying these standards to those elected to office. These determinations include:

(1) Whether a candidate being examined for ordination and/or installation as elder, deacon, or minister of Word and Sacrament has departed from scriptural and constitutional standards for fitness for office,

(2) Whether any departure constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity under G-6.0108 of the Book of Order, thus barring the candidate from ordination and/or installation.

d. Whether the examination and ordination and installation decision comply with the Constitution of the PC(USA), and whether the ordaining/installing body has conducted its examination reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately in deciding to ordain a candidate for church office is subject to review by higher governing bodies.

e. All parties should endeavor to outdo one another in honoring one another’s decisions, according the presumption of wisdom to ordaining/installing bodies in examining candidates and to the General Assembly, with presbyteries’ approval, in setting standards.

Rationale

The most intractable conflicts in the Presbyterian church often result in disputes over ordination. Therefore, the task force recommends this authoritative interpretation, which clarifies ordination procedures by emphasizing principles that are, we believe, closer to Presbyterian tradition than some of our current practices.

If adopted, this authoritative interpretation would restore a greater degree of both rigor and flexibility in ordination decisions. The authoritative interpretation would accomplish this by clarifying provisions of G-6.0108 that stem from long-established principles of Presbyterian polity:

1. Standards for ordination are determined by the whole church by constitutional process. Acting on their own, local governing bodies cannot set their own standards or set aside the church’s standards.
2. Ordaining and installing bodies are empowered and duty-bound to apply the church’s standards and to determine the fitness for office of those elected to office. This responsibility includes determining, on a case-by-case basis, whether officers-elect adhere to essential and necessary articles of doctrine, discipline, and government.

3. Ordaining/installing bodies and higher governing bodies are partners in the ordination process. Higher governing bodies oversee the decisions of lower ones. Ordaining and installing bodies determine fitness for office. Partnership requires mutual respect of each other’s decisions.

*Why is an authoritative interpretation needed?*

The function of an authoritative interpretation is to clarify potentially ambiguous words or phrases in the *Book of Order*. (See line 1243.)

Section G-6.0108 was added to the *Book of Order* in 1983. It requires that all candidates for office adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity (G-6.0108a, sentence one) as expressed in *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government. Ordaining bodies may not dispense with the church’s standards or promulgate their own. Section G-6.0108 also requires the application of the standards with integrity. It ensures freedom of conscience in interpretation of Scripture within certain bounds, requires ordaining/installing bodies to determine whether there is a “serious departure” from standards (G-6.0108a, sentence two), and makes an important distinction between “standards” and “essentials.”

Standards are aspirational in character. No one lives up to them perfectly (for this reason, G-6.0108 permits “departures” from standards that are not deemed essential). Essentials, by the terms of G-6.0108b (third sentence), are those matters of faith and polity that the officer-elect’s governing body discerns are indispensable for ordained service. Essential doctrines are those that are required for a person’s beliefs to fall within the bounds of Reformed understandings of Christian faith. Essentials of polity are those that are required for a person’s ordained service to fall within the bounds of Reformed understandings of church governance. Essential practices are those that are required for a person’s life to fall within the bounds of Reformed understandings of Christian discipleship.

In recent years, the relationship between G-6.0108 and other *Book of Order* sections on ordination has become unclear. Some ordaining/installing bodies have maintained that the *Constitution* gives them the right to overlook or dispense with certain churchwide standards. Others have considered adopting their own version or distillation of essential standards, to be applied to all officers-elect. Some interpreters have insisted that some provisions of the *Constitution*, such as those that govern sexual behavior, supersede the right of ordaining and installing bodies to determine fitness for ordination in all cases.
This authoritative interpretation addresses all these points of confusion, by reaffirming the wisdom in G-6.0108, as it holds together key historical and theological principles—the need for the establishment of standards by the whole church and the duty of ordaining and installing bodies to apply those standards in determining fitness for office and compliance with essentials. If the authoritative interpretation clarifies current confusions about ordination and installation, it will, we believe, contribute to the peace, unity, and purity of the church.

What is new or different about the proposed authoritative interpretation?

No elements of the proposed authoritative interpretation are new. In fact, both G-6.0108 and this interpretation represent a reemphasis of traditional principles that, as we demonstrated in the previous section, have been held in constructive balance and tension in the past.

- **The power of the whole church to set standards is affirmed.** This power was first conferred in 1729, when the General Synod adopted the Westminster standards as the confessional basis for all ministers. The principle established then and confirmed in this authoritative interpretation do not permit the kind of “local option” arrangements that some have proposed, in which each ordaining and installing body sets its own standards. Such a procedure would be new, and it would be un-Presbyterian.

- **The authoritative interpretation also emphasizes the traditional respective responsibilities of various persons and bodies.** Officers-elect have the duty to conform to essentials of faith and polity and the right to freedom of conscience within bounds. Ordaining and installing bodies have the duty to apply standards and the right to discern which are essential for ordained service. These two principles were also established in 1729, when ministers were given the opportunity to dissent from articles of the Westminster standards (“declare a scruple” was the language of the time) and ordaining bodies were given the right to determine whether the “scrupled” article was an essential tenet.

- **The authoritative interpretation emphasizes as well the power of higher governing bodies to review ordination and installation decisions if they are challenged,** determining whether examinations were lawfully and fairly conducted and whether the matter of essentials was adequately grappled with. This, too, is a tradition of Presbyterian polity, dating from the adoption of a constitution and the establishment of the General Assembly in 1789.

By emphasizing traditional principles, the authoritative interpretation might, however, introduce at least two changes in current practices of ordination.
Though current practices vary from session to session and presbytery to presbytery, it is often reported that examinations lack rigor by not fully investigating the scope of each officer-elect’s beliefs, practices, gifts, willingness to uphold the governance of the church, and scruples. The authoritative interpretation lifts up the obligation of the ordaining or installing body to gain the broadest visions of each officer-elect’s faith, manner of life, and promise as it applies standards and makes determinations about essentials.

The authoritative interpretation also lifts up a feature of G-6.0108 that is grounded in history but has fallen out of current practice. Section G-6.0108 puts “faith and polity”—belief and behavior—on an equal footing, as they were in 1729, when scruples were permitted in matters of “doctrine, discipline and government.” Over time, an imbalance has developed, with flexibility afforded in matters of doctrine and strict compliance required on all points of conduct and polity. By implication, this confers greater authority on the Form of Government than on the confessions and the Scripture they interpret. The proposed authoritative interpretation restores the balance, grounded firmly in the Reformed theological insight that faith and action are inextricably related. Faith is not only mental assent but also a pattern of life lived in the presence of God. The test and fruit of faith are change of heart and amendment of life. Therefore, officers-elect must comply with essentials of polity and practice as well as faith. Ordaining and installing bodies may exercise judgment in the application of standards of both belief and practice that are deemed by those bodies to be nonessential.

In a word, the proposed authoritative interpretation introduces no innovations, but it does seek to retrieve and clarify long-established Presbyterian principles of decision-making in matters of ordination to and installation in church offices.

How would the authoritative interpretation address current critical issues in the church?

The authoritative interpretation we have proposed is intended to clarify constitutional principles and decision-making procedures in any church controversy that affects ordination standards, as so many Presbyterian disputes have done in the past. It is not designed to settle a particular issue but to clarify the common framework within which all ordination decisions are made. The problem on which it focuses is a perennial one. Because Presbyterian standards for office are ideals, including the highest ideal—perfect obedience to Scripture—all candidates for office will depart from them in some ways, in both belief and practice. There never have been or will be perfect officers-elect. Thus every ordaining/installing body, in every case, must decide what departures can be tolerated and which are so serious that
essential matters of faith and practice are compromised. The interpretation proposed here makes clear that standards may not be compromised merely because they are unpopular in a particular locale. At the same time, ordaining/installing bodies, which have the most direct connection and responsibility for people seeking to enter their membership, have the responsibility for making judgments about whether these actual, fallible human beings have the self-awareness, commitment, and capacity to exercise faithful ministry.

At the present moment, however, many will ask how the proposed interpretation may affect several issues that have been the focus of recent conflicts about ordination, including the use of theological standards in the ordination process, the application of G-6.0106b, the respective powers of governing bodies, and the status of authoritative interpretations.

- **Theological standards**: The proposed authoritative interpretation emphasizes what the Constitution already requires: the examination of officers-elect according to the standards of Scripture, the confessions, and the Form of Government. Ordaining/installing bodies may not ignore any existing churchwide standards or adopt additional standards to be imposed on all candidates. The proposed authoritative interpretation further emphasizes the duty of ordaining/installing bodies to determine whether the officer-elect accepts the essentials of faith and polity. If the candidate cannot accept the essentials of Reformed faith and polity as determined by the examining body, the ordination cannot proceed.

- **G-6.0106b**: It is not the intention of this proposed authoritative interpretation of G-6.0108 to change existing ordination standards, including the standards of G-6.0106b, which was added to the Constitution in 1997, and authoritative interpretations addressing its concerns. The task force was not asked to adjudicate the issues named in its mandate, including the questions about sexuality and ordination that are the focus of G-6.0106b. Rather, the task force was instructed to propose ways for the church to live faithfully while dealing with those issues. The

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36 "G-6.0106 Gifts and Requirements

"a. To those called to exercise special functions in the church—deacons, elders, and ministers of Word and Sacrament—God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world. They must have the approval of God’s people and the concurring judgment of a governing body of the church.

“b. Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament."
task force recognizes that the debate over G-6.0106b may continue for many years.

The authoritative interpretation the task force proposes is designed to help the church maintain peace, unity, and faithfulness to scriptural and theological principles while that debate continues.

The proposed interpretation requires ordaining and installing bodies to examine carefully both the doctrinal views and the manner of life of those elected to office. If an ordaining or installing body determines that an officer-elect has departed from G-6.0106b, a manner-of-life standard, the ordaining/installing body must then determine whether this departure violates essentials of faith or polity. If so, the candidate may not be ordained. If the departure is judged not to violate the essentials of Reformed faith and polity, after the ordaining/installing body has weighed the departure in the full context of a candidate’s statement of faith and manner of life, then there is no barrier to ordination (though there also is no requirement that the person be ordained). As at present, the ordaining/installing body would make the decision, with the help of the Spirit, about whether to ordain and/or install and based on all the evidence before it.

**Review of decisions:** The interpretation reaffirms long-standing principles of review of lower governing bodies by higher ones. Decisions about who meets standards of fitness and whether those elected to office are in compliance with essentials of faith and polity belong to the ordaining/installing body, but whether the ordaining body has adequately exercised its duties, including whether it has adequately grappled with the question of what constitutes essentials for ordination, is subject to review. Prior judicial commission rulings have specified that examination of candidates must be reasonable, responsible, and deliberate and that it must be thorough enough to ensure compliance with essentials. This interpretation conforms to the letter as well as spirit of those earlier judgments.

**The status of authoritative interpretations:** The proposed authoritative interpretation would clarify an issue that has caused considerable confusion: how authoritative interpretations of ordination standards function. The Constitution gives the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission the power to issue authoritative interpretations of constitutional provisions and stipulates that such interpretations are binding on lower governing bodies (Book of Order, G-13.0112 and G-13.0103r). Ordination standards are constitutional provisions, and thus are subject to authoritative interpretation. At the same time, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission has established that higher governing bodies may not prevent lower bodies from carrying out their constitutionally mandated responsibilities. The conjunction of these two principles means that, if an ordination standard has been authoritatively interpreted, (1) ordaining/installing bodies must interpret the standard as the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission have
authority directed, and (2) ordaining/installing bodies have the power to
determine whether any officer-elect’s departure from the interpreted standard
compromises essentials of Reformed faith and polity and thus should constitute a
barrier to ordination. In short, an authoritative interpretation binds how an
ordaining/installing body interprets a standard, but it does not override that body’s
power to judge which matters are essential and whether any departure from
nonessentials is sufficiently serious that a candidate will not be ordained or installed.

We believe the practical effects of the implementation of the proposed authoritative
interpretation can be positive. Confirming the standard-setting role of the whole church
will contribute to the church’s unity and purity. Affirming the right of ordaining/installing
bodies to make judgments about standards and fitness for office will, we believe, ultimately
contribute to the church’s peace. These measures will not be effective, however, unless
subsection (5) of the proposed authoritative interpretation is taken with utmost seriousness:
All parties must outdo one another in honoring the decisions of other bodies, presuming
that other governing bodies have employed their best wisdom and sincerely sought the
Spirit’s guidance in all their deliberations. The proposed authoritative interpretation is not
a license either to disregard standards or to override judgments of the fitness of persons
elected to office.

Admittedly, this measure will stimulate some vigorous debates and possibly dissension in
sessions and presbyteries about critical issues. Groups that meet together regularly have,
however, many more opportunities to engage conflicts constructively than do large national
bodies like the General Assembly whose membership changes from meeting to meeting and
often finds itself under sustained pressure from opposing interest groups. And what about
purity? Some will object that the approach we propose will lead to variations in the actual
judgments made by ordaining bodies and will permit persons to be ordained who do not meet
the church’s standards. There is already considerable variation in the judgments of ordaining
and installing bodies; and no candidate perfectly conforms to the church’s standards. We
predict that the authoritative interpretation, by bringing renewed emphasis to the process of
examination and application of standards, will in fact lead to more careful and balanced
decisions about fitness for ordination, thereby promoting the purity of the church and the
quality of its leadership.

Finally, it is essential to note that the proposed authoritative interpretation is meant to
serve these purposes—peace, unity, and purity—no matter what standards are in place in the
future. Some current standards, particularly G-6.0106b, are controversial. If that provision
were to be removed, or others were to be added, the authoritative interpretation, with its
emphasis on the right of ordaining/installing bodies to apply the standards in a given case,
would continue to ensure that an ordaining body could not be forced to ordain a person
whose faith or manner of life it deems to constitute a departure from essentials of Reformed
faith and practice established in *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government in the
*Book of Order*.

We submit that the authoritative interpretation proposed here answers many pressing
needs of the church and will continue to do so in years to come. At the same time, we
acknowledge that there are no perfect solutions to the challenge of living with a common
confession of faith and deep difference about particular issues. Some will be disappointed that
we have not adjudicated the controversial issues of the moment, making recommendations on
behalf of one side or another. We have understood our mandate to be broader and farther
reaching: to seek ways for the church to live the gospel joyfully and productively amid
inevitable disagreement. We believe that the recommendations we have put forward,
including this authoritative interpretation, will facilitate that.

6. If the 217th General Assembly (2006) approves Recommendation 5, the Task
Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church strongly encourages

a. the 217th General Assembly (2006) to approve no additional authoritative
interpretations, to remove no existing authoritative interpretations, and to send to the
presbyteries no proposed constitutional amendments that would have the effect of
changing denominational policy on any of the major issues in the task force’s report,
including Christology, biblical interpretation, essential tenets, and sexuality and
ordination.

b. all church members to acknowledge their traditional biblical obligation, as
set forth in Matthew 18:15–17, Matthew 5:23-25, and in the Rules of Discipline in the
*Book of Order*, “to conciliate, mediate, and adjust differences without strife” prayerfully
and deliberately (D-1.0103) and to institute administrative or judicial proceedings only
when other efforts fail to preserve the purposes and purity of the church.

**Rationale**

In order to assess whether the ways forward we have proposed are effective in promoting
peace, unity, and purity, it seems advisable to all members of the task force, whatever their
personal positions on issues, that the task force’s recommendations be considered and
weighed in a spirit of discernment, and that they also be given an opportunity to work.

Although the task force has affirmed commonly held convictions of Presbyterians on the
issues the General Assembly named in the task force’s mandate, it has not taken positions on
disputed issues whose resolution might necessitate constitutional change. Nor has it debated
various measures that have been or may be sent to the General Assembly at which this report
will be received. We believe it would create confusion and further conflict to attempt to make
major constitutional changes to section G-6.0106 or on other controversial issues before the

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church has reacquainted itself with the time-tested principles of the proposed authoritative
interpretation. In the same period, additional measures are required to create a climate for
discernment. Whenever possible, personal engagement, mediation, and conciliation should be
used before either administrative or judicial action is considered.

7. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends to the
217th General Assembly (2006) that this report answer the following: Overture 01-33,
Commissioners’ Resolutions 00-28, 01-23, and Item 02-10.

Rationale

These items referred to the task force by previous General Assemblies are answered by
this report.

VI. A Final Word

This entire report has as its premise that a season of discernment is due in the church, one
that all the task force’s recommendations are intended to support. We have
• recommended that the church remain united and strengthen its internal partnerships;
• suggested that Presbyterians form and support communities of discernment;
• offered a Theological Reflection that is the result of our own search for Christian
identity;
• urged governing bodies to use a variety of methods, the better to discern the will of
God;
• recommended a return to traditional methods of making ordination decisions that put
discernment at the center; and
• suggested that if these measures are approved, the church seek to create new patterns
of interaction and to increase mutual understanding before engaging in processes of
constitutional change.

Life together in a discernment mode has the potential to be more constructive and less
difficult than our current pattern of head-to-head confrontation over issues. The purpose of
discernment, however, is not to minimize critical issues in order to get on to other matters,
much less to make life more pleasant. The purpose, rather, is to know, in our very being as a
church, the peace, unity, and purity that have been given to us in Jesus Christ, and to show
that peace, unity, and purity to the world we have been commissioned to teach and serve.

Therefore, our denominational struggle to live into the fullness of the gift we have in
Jesus Christ is not a diversion from our true mission, as some would claim, but integral to our
Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church

vocation to proclaim the truth of the gospel. On the night before he died, in the longest prayer recorded in the Gospels, Jesus prayed for us, the church of the future, lifting our names and our troubled church before God in prayer. And chief among his petitions in our behalf was his prayer that we “may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. . . . By this everyone will know that you are my disciples [he said], if you have love for one another” (John 17:21; John 13:35).

How is the world to be challenged to know the truth about God? The world needs not only to hear our witness to the gospel, but also to see and experience the embodied witness of a community joined in love of one another.

Jesus does not, it should be noted, pray that we may all be the same or that we all agree. Indeed, one of the most compelling reasons to continue to hold on to one another is to persuade one another of the truth as God has given us to know it. Another is to strengthen and support one another, different as our vocations and life circumstances may be, in personal holiness and in service to a world riddled with suffering and injustice. Nevertheless, even as we differ and even as we contend with one another, Jesus prays that we may all be one, that we might love one another despite many differences that threaten to divide us. At a time when people readily kill one another over their differences, a church that lives and works for that kind of witness will capture the attention of a polarized world. What besides the mystery of divine love could give us the capacity to love those whose goals and views differ from, even contradict, our own?

The task force is convinced that the world is watching the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other denominations as we engage in highly publicized debates. To be one is not to say that we will be the same, that we will all agree, that there will be no conflict, but as the church listens to Jesus pray, all its members are reminded that the quality of our life together—our ability to make visible the unique relationship that is ours in Jesus Christ—is compelling testimony to the truth and power of the gospel we proclaim.

Comment: The success of this proposal is dependent upon all governing bodies taking all standards of the church seriously and applying them rigorously in the examination process. All governing bodies are encouraged to develop resources to ensure that this happens.

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Study Guide

Introduction

This brief guide is designed to facilitate discussion of the task force’s report, “A Season of Discernment,” to the 217th General Assembly (2006). Theological reflection groups can use the guide with or without a facilitator. The task force anticipates developing a more extensive curriculum based on their report by the time of the assembly. Additional resources are already available on the task force’s Web site at www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/.

Each participant should have read a copy of the task force’s report in advance of this discussion.

Engaging in discussions about this report may lead to personal sharing among group members that runs the gamut from unshakable expressions of faith to deep-seated doubt. It is important to create a space in which participants feel safe to express themselves honestly and freely. A newly formed group especially needs to spend time getting to know one another and building trust before engaging in serious discussion. Helpful tools for fostering this kind of community can be found in segment one, “Fostering Community,” of the task force’s first video, Seeking Peace, Unity, and Purity, and a resource called “Resources for Fostering Community and Dialogue,” which can be found on the task force’s Web site.

Decide early on how you want to structure your time as a group. You may discuss the entire report in one session or choose to devote one session to each of the report’s six sections. Schedule yourselves in a way that will provide ample time for discussion.

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As you discuss the following questions, consider using an approach such as mutual invitation or prayerful listening, which are described in the resources named above. If the group is large, divide into subgroups of five to seven participants in each small group. Provide each small group with newsprint and markers if you choose to have them record the highlights of their discussions to share with the larger group.

**Section I: Prologue: The Theological Basis of This Report**

The Theological Reflection in the prologue demonstrates that a group of Presbyterians, chosen for its diversity, can affirm with one voice the core theological convictions of Christian faith, the Reformed theology that the PC(USA) teaches, and the mission of the church to a rapidly changing world.

- How does the Theological Reflection compare to your core convictions as a Presbyterian Christian?
- What is compelling about our Presbyterian identity?

**Section II: The Plan and Progress of the Work of the Task Force**

Over our time together, a common conviction has grown among us: different as we are, God has called us all to be part of the body of Christ as it is manifested in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (lines 386–388).

- Refer to lines 315–339. Do you find yourself in one of these descriptions of ways we have harmed one another in the body of Christ?
- Within your community of faith, how do you remain true to what you believe and who you are and hold together with those who are different from you?

**Section III: The Issues Before the Task Force**

A. **Christology**

We were inspired by the power that the affirmation “Jesus is Lord” and other traditional Christological formulas have to shape faith and discipleship in our day. (lines 449–450)

- What does it mean to you that Jesus is Lord?
B. Biblical Authority and Interpretation

...Scripture has the power to shape and transform us as the community of faith. (line 507)

- How has your understanding of Scripture been deepened through studying it with others?

C. Sexuality and Ordination

...We were all able to agree that perspectives on questions of sexuality, ordination, and same-gender covenental relationships are rich and complex, and our fellow task force members who hold these views are sincere, faithful, and guided by Scripture. Therefore, we believe, the church should seek constructive, Christ-like alternatives to the “yes/no” forms in which questions about sexuality, ordination, and same-gender covenental relationships have been put to the church in recent decades. (lines 602–607)

- How do you respond to this conclusion by the task force?

Section IV: Resources for Peace, Unity, and Purity

A. Resources for Understanding Our Situation: Reformed Theology of Church Governance

- Refer to lines 658–666 for a list of items the task force found helpful in cultivating mutual forbearance and understanding. What helps you grow in mutual forbearance?

B. Resources for Constructive Engagement: Presbyterian Polity

- Refer to the points of balance in line 699. How are these lived out in your own context?

C. Resources for Constructive Engagement: Communal Discernment

Communal discernment involves corporate study of Scripture, gathering of information, prayerful reflection, mutual questioning, careful listening, and collective weighing of options. (lines 856–858)

- Where do you imagine communal discernment to be most useful in the life of the church?
D. A Concluding Word on Polity and Process

The task force has been impressed again and again by the church’s own members and organizations, many of which are pioneering new ways of working together that build bridges among parties and factions, deepen mutual understanding, and build up the body in love. (lines 885–887)

- What is already happening in your congregation that is helping to build bridges and deepen mutual understanding?

Section V: Recommendations

- Refer to the task force’s recommendations (lines 927–1335). How do you think the recommendations flow from the conclusions of the report?
- The task force presented and voted on all seven recommendations together, rather than considering each recommendation separately. What difference(s) do you see between considering the recommendations together as opposed to separately?
- How might the recommendations contribute to the peace, unity, and purity of the church?

Section VI: A Final Word

- Read the final two paragraphs of the task force’s report (lines 1370–1386). What do you make of their conclusion?
- What will be your next steps toward a season of discernment in the PC(USA)?
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.