

# **BUILDING COMMUNITY AMONG STRANGERS: A Plan for Study and Action**

Approved by  
The 211th General Assembly (1999)  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Developed by  
The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy  
of the General Assembly Council

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October 1999

To: Stated Clerks of the Middle Governing Bodies, Middle Governing Body Resource Centers, Clerks of Sessions, and the Libraries of the Theological Seminaries

Dear Friends:

The 211th General Assembly (1999) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in reliance upon the grace of God and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in exercise of its responsibility to witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in every dimension of life, has approved this policy statement on "Building Community Among Strangers." It is presented for the guidance and edification of the whole Christian Church and the society to which it ministers; and will determine procedures and program for the ministries divisions and staff of the General Assembly. This policy statement is recommended for consideration and study by other governing bodies (sessions, presbyteries, and synods). It is commended to the free Christian conscience of all congregations and the members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for prayerful study, dialogue, and action.

This policy statement is the result of a development process that included wide consultation and participation throughout the church, drawing upon biblical sources and insights from the Reformed tradition in giving renewed definition to Presbyterian understandings concerning building community among strangers. The policy statement presents a theological understanding for the challenges presented by the new reality of building community among strangers. Facing the challenges that diversity and pluralism offer for both our nation and our church, it acknowledges that we are all indeed strangers who have something to give to each other and that we are challenged to affirm each other even when we do not understand each other. As the church enters the third millennium, the policy statement and its recommendations call for renewed energy constructively working to overcome racism, put aside social class division, affirm equality between men and women where gender-based injustice divides, and to affirm that the Holy Spirit is at work in our interaction with people of other faiths and that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has no place for arrogance toward people of other faiths.

The policy statement comes to you with a study and action guide, designed for personal and class use, in the hope that we may all become more aware of our call to be God's people in our daily lives and work.

Yours in Christ,

Clifton Kirkpatrick  
State Clerk of the General Assembly

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**COMMENTS FROM THE  
211TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY (1999)**

Given the nature of “Building Community Among Strangers” and the current state of our church and culture, the committee felt that it would be inappropriate to approve this policy statement without recognizing one of the major concerns affecting the church. Therefore, this comment:

The 211th General Assembly (1999), believing that the Holy Spirit continues to convict our hearts and minds, (a) reaffirms the long-standing Presbyterian position of inclusiveness within our total community of persons of differing sexual orientation and practice as children of God, (b) urges the General Assembly to confess that our community (PC(USA)) is deeply divided concerning the full inclusion of self-affirming, practicing persons of homosexual orientation to all offices of the church, (c) reaffirms our confident hope that one day we shall all be one, even as Christ is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and (d) encourages that we faithfully continue our mission and ministries which build community among all strangers, even as we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus.”

To clarify the report “Building Community Among Strangers,” the 211th General Assembly (1999) advises that the individual references to Confessions in paragraphs 25.300–.301 include the name and reference of the quoted confession.

When possible, existing materials should be used, or updated for use, whenever directives for curricula or study materials are given.





## POLICY STATEMENT ON “BUILDING COMMUNITY AMONG STRANGERS”

· In April 1992, citizens of Los Angeles experienced a living nightmare as waves of violence against life and property swept the city. Especially troubled were African and Korean Americans who had lived in the same neighborhood for years, now having to view the wreckage of shops and houses destroyed by what seemed senseless anger. For seven years now, the date “4/29/92” has been commemorated in many Korean communities throughout the country as they ask themselves “how can we contribute to the elimination of racism in America?” In Los Angeles and the Bay area, church leaders of various ethnic communities have been meeting together to ponder the question so desperately posed by Rodney King, whose beating by police triggered this traumatic event: “Can we all just get along?”

Can we? Will we? This Presbyterian study addresses these questions.

· It was Christmastime for the Christians of Billings, Montana. As they prepared for their holiday, Jewish residents of Billings were about to celebrate Hanukkah. One night, an unknown person painted swastikas on the walls of the Jewish synagogue. Jews feared that all their homes, marked by distinctive Hanukkah symbolism, would be attacked next. The response of Christians was shock and then symbolic solidarity with the Jewish community: Throughout the city, church members and others placed a menorah—the traditional Jewish branched candlestick—in their windows, too. No easy targets remained. Later, the Montana Association of Churches prepared a statement about God’s just and loving purpose for all creation.

Can citizens of diverse religious loyalties live together in America?

The people of Billings encourage us to believe that the answer is: “yes.” This Presbyterian study is about such encouragement.

· In 1992, a man rejected by the University of Montreal’s admissions office stormed into a class of engineering students, armed and angry. He ordered the men to leave the room, announcing he was there to kill the feminists because they had taken his place in the entering class. He then killed each woman in the room. In 1996, a young boy, rejected by his elementary school girlfriend, opened fire on female teachers and students as they left the building. Amid national shock at the tragedy, some American women noted that male rage and violence against women has deep roots in early childhood upbringing. In 1998, the Presbyterian Church

(U.S.A.) appointed a task force on domestic violence in acknowledgment of this crisis.

Can the church become an influence for change in the relation of men and women in America? This study document offers reasons for answering a confident “Yes!”

What is the contribution of Christians in America to prevent these events and others from happening again—and again, and again? What “salt” have we to offer for shaping a society that is not a war of all against all, but a community of respect and empathy? In a country composed of immigrants, strangers from all the earth, what kind of community can be built among us?

The questions are urgent. This study seeks to help Presbyterians answer them in their faith and in their witness.

### THE BIBLICAL VISION

The Bible begins with the affirmation that there is one humanity created in the image of the Creator. In Genesis 3–11 we are told how sin has fractured our relation to God and to our fellow human beings. The bad news in Genesis 3–4 is that we *all* are estranged from God and each other. After Cain’s murder of his brother, his contemptuous question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9) and also in God’s punishment of him—“You will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (Gen. 4:12)—we find fearful images of human alienation, loneliness, and estrangement. Our alienation from God leads us to alienate our neighbors as well.

That estrangement reaches its apex in the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9. Seeking, in their arrogance, to ensure their unity in perpetuity, people, who were unified by a single language, gathered from across the earth and built a great city and a tower “with its top in the heavens” (Gen. 11:4). What followed was not a guarantee of community, but the exact opposite. They found themselves estranged by a confusion of language so that they could no longer understand one another’s speech and were then scattered over the face of the earth.

### *A Ray of Hope: God’s Covenant with Abraham*

Central to the ongoing story of the Bible is God’s long-term, patient, merciful purpose of recreating a human community in which the love of God and neighbor becomes a fact of history. That purpose takes a great step forward in the call to Abraham, whom God

promises to make “the ancestor of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:5) and through whom God promises the blessing of “all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:1-3). To one tribal patriarch it is an astonishing promise: “By your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves” (Gen. 22:18; cf. also 12:1-3).

Generations later, the character of that blessing was reconfirmed in the formation of the nation Israel in an exodus of slaves from the clutches of the Egyptian empire. Latter teachers and prophets of Israel always understood this beginning of their society as a miraculous deliverance, an act of divine grace in history.

I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect. (Lev. 26:13)

The lawgivers and prophets of Israel insisted that its citizens never forget that their ancestors “were aliens [strangers] in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 22:21). Their adherence to the ethical implication of this memory was to be their obedience to the rule: “You shall not oppress a resident alien [stranger (*ger*)]; you know the heart of an alien [stranger], for you were aliens [strangers (*gerim*)] in the land of Egypt” (Ex. 23:9). “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:19).

Professor Patrick D. Miller has written that

The term “resident alien” may be the best way to convey the meaning of *ger* as it conveys both the notion of stranger and sojourner but also points to the fact that this is the outsider who comes into the midst of the community without the network of relationships that can be counted upon to insure care, protection, acceptance, the one who belongs to another group but now resides in the midst of the Israelite community. [“Israel as Host to Strangers,” in *Today’s Immigrants and Refugees*, p. 4, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1987]

In this very law was embodied an echo of the universal promise of God to Abraham: that the people of Israel were to be hospitable to the outsider, the defenseless person on the margins of their society, never forgetting that a deep estrangement has been the lot of every descendant of Cain. Precisely because God made Abraham “the ancestor of a multitude of nations,” it was forever incumbent on Israel to live out that connection with the multitude. Not in Israel was the door ever to be slammed against the foreigner.

Miller comments that hospitality to strangers in Israel typically took the form of “the sharing of a meal, a simple act that more than any other in ordinary experience provides for human needs, builds friendships, and makes persons feel included in the community and at

home.” Such hospitality was not mandated as simply an occasional gesture of charity, but as a habit permeating “the whole social structure of the community beginning with the most intimate family contexts but moving out to the various aspects of community and social life, incorporating the central economic sources, the protection of the court, and the worship activities of the people” (“Israel as Host to Strangers,” in *Today’s Immigrants and Refugees*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1987, pp. 11, 16).

What biblical account better exemplifies this concept than Ruth’s acceptance into the embracing warmth of Naomi and her kin. Although reared in different cultural contexts, Ruth and Naomi’s friendship blossomed because, beyond “strangeness,” each saw a linked destiny with each other. Their friendship bond transcended cultural boundaries.

Here, then, was an extraordinarily compassionate law, rooted in a particular historical experience: You, Israel, “can put yourselves in the shoes of the weak, and not just exteriorly and condescendingly. Rather, you know what it means to be a stranger.” Your obedience to this law “arises out of an empathetic memory” of your own sojourn in Egypt. (“Israel as Host to Strangers,” in *Today’s Immigrants and Refugees*, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1987, p. 14-15.)

From time to time, of course, many in Israel slipped back into the old human habit of harboring contempt for the stranger, the marginal, weak, and poor of their society. Again and again prophets arose to remind Israel of its calling to bless all the families of the earth. Exile, aberration, being strangers in a strange land, would also become a recurring experience for the People of God. Thus, in his remarkable letter to exiles in Babylon, Jeremiah urged his fellow Israelites to settle down in this foreign land and to “seek the welfare” (*shalom*) of the very city that was enslaving them.

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer. 29:7)

As Presbyterian theologian Eugene TeSelle notes of this passage, whenever the people of God may find themselves strangers in a strange land, they are not to withdraw behind self-preserving walls but must continue, even in exile, to serve the good of people outside their own religious community.

We are to build a peaceful community even in Babylon, the city that is *not* controlled by the people of God, the city that must, out of respect for human dignity, make provision for people of other religions, or of no religion at all, whether or not there is a constitutional “First Amendment” requiring citizens to do so. [From feedback received by the task force from its study document *Building Community Among Strangers* during the churchwide study period.]

No prophet grasped this promise more clearly than the Second Isaiah. In a new rescue of Israel from a new captivity to another empire, Babylon, Isaiah envisioned God's reaffirmation of Israel's destiny as servant to the world:

... It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of [Israel] and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. (Isa. 49:6)

Resistance to this calling marked Israel's history. Its resistance was so strong that the writer of the Book of Jonah pictured that prophet as the unwilling instrument of God's strange mercy upon even oppressors of Israel like the Assyrians. Embedded within the Old Testament is God's commandment to embrace the stranger, as God's chosen people had been strangers in different settings. Humans have often been confounded by God's message—time and the repetition of history can attest to that. Yet God's call to foster community still stands. In fact, Jesus Christ is the greatest proponent of this divine message.

*"Light to the Nations": The New Testament Witness*

Disciples of Jesus, from the days of his earthly ministry until now, believe that he is that promised "light to the nations," in whose grace all the families of earth are blessed and are to be blessed (Luke 2:32 and Acts 26:23). Remarkable in the record of his ministry is his special care for those whom the laws of Israel tagged as strangers: Tax collectors and assorted other "sinners" (Matt. 9:10–11, 21:31–32, Mark 2:15–16, Luke 3:12, 5:29–30, 15:1–2, 19:1–10), Roman centurions (Matt. 8:13, Luke 7:6), a Syro-Phoenician woman (Matt. 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30), a Samaritan woman (John 4), and lepers (Matt. 8:2, 11:5, 26:6, Mark 1:40, Luke 17:12). In the eyes of certain leaders of the religious establishment of the time, Jesus' association with "tax collectors and sinners" was shocking, unlawful, and dangerous.

The early disciples looked back on his crucifixion as the ultimate demonstration that human beings are all estranged from their Creator, that all are sinners. They remembered the vision of Second Isaiah, and they saw the vision realized in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (John 1:11). It was the universal human estrangement from God that Isaiah had discerned: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way," in self-chosen alienation from our Creator. "His own people"—the likes of us all—"hid their faces" from him, despised, rejected, and "held him of no account," cut him off "from the land of the living," "numbered him with the transgressors," and

exiled from our society the one who most had a right to be honored in our society. There, in the crucified Jesus, was the ultimate clash between human alienation from God and God's refusal to be alienated from humanity. It was the ultimate miracle of God's strange persistence in love for the world:

because he poured out himself to death  
and was numbered with the transgressors,  
yet he bore the sin of many,  
and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isa. 53:12)

Paul testifies powerfully to God's persistent love in his letter to the Romans:

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. 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. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Rom. 5:8–11)

In one of his most probing reflections on the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus, Karl Barth wrote:

It is for the sake of the election of all the rejected that he stands in solitude over against them all. It is just for them that He is *the* rejected One.

And again:

The elect man is chosen in order that the circle of election—that is the circle of those who recognize and confess Jesus Christ in the world—should not remain stationary or fixed, but open up and enlarge itself, and therefore grow and expand and extend. What is given him in his election and calling is undoubtedly the task not to shut but to open, not to exclude but to include, not to say No but Yes to the surrounding world; just as he himself is undoubtedly one to whom it was opened, who was included, to whom Yes was said—the Yes of the unmerited, free and eternal grace and love of God. [Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II, Part 2, T & T Clark, Edinburgh: 1957 (1978), 353, 419]

From the earliest moment of their acknowledgment of this miracle down to our own attempt to grasp it, disciples of Jesus can only talk of these things with awe and astonishment. Out of that intercession, in that death, and in "the Spirit who raised him from the dead" came the victory of God in Jesus Christ our Lord, "that conquers the world" of sinners alienated from God and from one another (1 John 5:4). We are heirs to the great reconciliation. Little as any of us deserve it, we can now live in the company of God and the company of each other, knowing that we now are members of a community that cannot be broken: ". . . to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:11–12).

And, once touched by that power, the child of God has a new, astonishing perception of fellow human beings: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). Let it be said of you, when last your life is judged: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt. 25:35).

Throughout the New Testament, Christians testify to their new experience of God’s open-door invitation to all humans to participate in the Reign of God. What God began in Israel, God is continuing to do in Jesus Christ and in the church and in the world.

Indeed, in that event called the Day of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the gathering of believers is described, at least in part, as the restoration of communication or, in other terms, the reversal of the disaster at the Tower of Babel. In the building of the tower, a people joined in a common language found their language confused and communication destroyed. On Pentecost, people of many languages from across the world, found their communication restored in that outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Like the Book of the Acts of the Apostles (which might well be named “The Acts of the Holy Spirit”), the Letter to the Ephesians recounts the experience of the early church. In pockets of little congregations scattered in the cities of the Mediterranean Basin, a new community was being born, historically rooted in the community of Israel. They now, by derivation, could claim kinship to the original children of Abraham. “Gentiles” they might still be, but no longer “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). They had been as hopeless and as far from reconciliation with the Creator as Cain once was, and as once were the Egypt-enslaved people of Israel.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Eph. 2:13–22)

Some nineteen centuries have passed since these

words were written, and we who wear the name of Christian have yet to plumb the depths of this early witness to the miracle of God’s mercy. To such a message we can only respond in amazement and exclamation:

- God has raised us from the deadness of sin to life!
- By sheer grace we have been saved, as were our Israelite ancestors in Egypt!
- We were once no people; now we are God’s people!
- We are reconciled to God and to each other!
- The walls of hostility are torn down, and we can look at each other as the human beings God has always meant us to be!

The language of Ephesians resonates with “a joyful air of achieved unity,” as Raymond E. Brown puts it. Here is the praise of the people of the Lord, called-out to be the church (ekklesia), called out from behind the walls that segregate and separate humans from one another and God, are invited through Christ to participate in the Reign of God. The joy of such a calling is echoed in the words of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Order* when it says:

The unity of the Church is a gift of its Lord and finds expression in its faithfulness to the mission to which Christ calls it. The Church is a fellowship of believers which seeks the enlargement of the circle of faith to include all people and is never content to enjoy the benefits of Christian community for itself alone. (G-4.0201)

In the church, the early Christians believed that they were experiencing, by the grace of God and through the Holy Spirit, tastes of that end-time, first fruits of a great new humanity, a “provisional demonstration of God’s intention for all humankind.” The glory in it all led the writer of Ephesians to combine the metaphor of a church-solidly-established upon the “foundations of the apostles and prophets” with the metaphor of a church-on-the-move, “growing into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:20–22). “Thus Paul sees the church as a goal in God’s plan, which involves the whole of creation—a church, therefore, that has a future dimension” (Raymond E. Brown, *Introduction to the N.T.*, p. 622).

The story of the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10–11 indicates that at every step of the journey Peter resisted God’s decision about the inclusion of the Gentiles; and when Peter was persuaded, he had to turn to persuade others in the early community that in Jesus the walls of hostility that separate the Roman and the Jew, the outsider and the insider, the immigrant and the

long-standing citizen, have been broken down. In Gal. 3:28, Paul challenges, as well, church divisions based on

But teaching the church to become, in fact as well as faith, a community of hospitality is the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of every generation of Christians. If, like Israel, the people called Christian have been separated from “the world,” it is so for the sake of service to that world. We have Good News to share with the other aliens and strangers: God has given us the power to be sisters and brothers! We are invited by the very Spirit of God into new human community! Over our doorway is the notice that our sins have been forgiven, and our alienation has been destroyed! Believe this Good News, and celebrate with us!

Like those early followers we have much catching-up to do with the leading of the Holy Spirit in our day. Here, near the beginning of a twenty-first century, we are only too aware that we live in the midst of “all sorts and conditions” of humans, human groups, human loves, and human hostilities. But followers of Jesus, ancient and modern, have already experienced some of the welcoming hospitality of the Spirit that brought Gentiles and Jews together into worship, to baptism, and to a table spread with the Bread of Life and the Wine of Forgiveness. In Christ we are alive in “one new humanity.” In the Holy Spirit we yearn for the coming of that one humanity “on earth as it is in heaven.” In that Spirit, with all the creation, we too “wait with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God,” here, now, and in eternity (Rom, 8:19).

Meanwhile, however, we have a lingering experience of being aliens and strangers, too. We are not fully open to the work of the Holy Spirit who means to make us true neighbors to all our neighbors. We know that the church is sometimes a scene of division among its members, and a cause of division in society at large. We know that barriers of race, class, sex-based injustice, and theology can be formidable, denying the reality of reconciliation between sinners inside the church and outside in our society. Reconciliation begins with a confession of our brokenness and a seeking of the forgiveness and grace of Christ.

Even as the church is called to cross boundaries of race, class, and sex-based injustice, the church, as a community, has its own boundaries. We are bounded in a number of ways, but the most intimate revolves around our sacramental practices. We baptize only those who are children in the faith community or older believers who confess their faith in Jesus Christ. We have a generous invitation to the Lord’s Table and confess that in this Supper we recognize that “Reconciliation with Christ compels reconciliation with one another” (*Book of Order*, W-2.4006). Thus, the Directory for Worship explicitly states that “none shall be excluded because of race, sex, age, economic status, social class, handicapping

gender and social class.

condition, difference of culture or language, or any barrier created by human injustice” (*Book of Order*, W-2.4006) Nonetheless, the invitation is still limited to “the baptized faithful.” The “faithful are actively to seek reconciliation in every instance of conflict or division between them and their neighbors,” yet only those in the community of faith are invited to the table.

These sacramental practices remind us that we are joined together by a common belief in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, common practices of the sacraments, and a common dedication to following Christ’s path. These boundaries around the church cannot be dissolved even as we seek to build community with all our neighbors.

Believing as we do that Jesus Christ is Lord of the world as well as the church, we have to expect to meet the work of the Holy Spirit both inside and outside of the church. In the Reformed tradition, John Calvin taught us to expect to see God at work in the church and in the world. The good of the whole human community was a constant theme in Calvin’s ethics. Church and state had their distinctive responsibilities in the providence of God, but their ethical duties were similar and never related dualistically. As famously described by Ernst Troeltsch, in Calvinism “for the first time in the history of the Christian ethic . . . there came into existence a Christian Church whose social influence, as far as it was possible at that period, was completely comprehensive” [Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), Vol. II, p. 652]. We are to serve our neighbors inside and outside the church, without limitation, for the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead refuses to be the prisoner of our human institutions, societies, and systems. This Spirit gives particular gifts to the church so that the world might be served and find salvation in Christ. Without the witness of this Spirit, we would not be sure of God’s work in the world or in the church. Without the witness of the Spirit, we would have no Gospel to believe or to share with our neighbors. Without the Spirit, we could not count on God’s presence in the whole of this earthly life—on the floor of our legislatures, in our prisons, and in our business corporations as well as in our churches.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity provides a framework for a Reformed understanding of community as persons, created in the image of God, in relationships. Sensitivity to inclusive language has generated some other ways of referring to God and the Trinity. The orthodox formula, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” however, suggests a diversity in unity which Christians are called to foster within the church as a community of faith and it sets the theological grounds for Christian involvement in building community with other

communities in the world.

Reformed theology finds in the Trinity, a paradigm: a divine community of the most intimate nature: three persons “of the same substance”—one God. The three Persons not only have different attributes (Personalities) but also share in performing different tasks: creation, redemption, sustenance. At the same time, the three are equal and each participates in the work of the others. Some in the Reformed tradition affirm that the three are not just manifestations of God, or names/titles of God, but distinct Persons of the same substance, one God. And more:

There is no confusion or subordination among the three persons of the Holy Trinity, but only mutual self-giving, each person glorifying the others. In fact, the unity of the Trinitarian life lies in the movement of perfect mutual self-giving. This Trinitarian unity affirms the communion and distinctiveness of the persons. (Lossky, Nicholes, editor, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland, 1991, p. 1020)

Even in the divine community, distinction is preserved; to be in community does not mean to lose one’s identity in the other; it means to affirm one’s identity and the identity of the other.

Because God is a community of equals, humanity created in the image and likeness of God finds fulfillment of its true nature only when in community, i.e., the image of God is not an individualistic attribute of the human being.

Our testimony, therefore, is Christocentric and Trinitarian. The works attributed to the three Persons of the Trinity indicate that God is not limited to the work of redemption through the church. As the Creator of all, God is active also outside the church. As the Spirit that moves like a wind, God can surprise the world with a new day of healing and reconciliation for the whole creation. In building community among strangers, the church is called to be a partner with God and with others. As a people called to be a light to the nations, the church is commissioned by God to be a partner with other communities, in the building of the human community, whether or not these communities claim to know, love, and worship God as we do. The prophet Jeremiah told God’s people to pray for the peace of the city where they were taken (Jer. 29.7). This call implies a commitment to be in peace with and work to build community with people of other ethnicities, religious faiths, and traditions.

And so we live and work and witness, remembering God’s promise to Abraham that in him and in his descendants, “all the families of the earth will be

In addition to these exhortations to support and preserve the life of the human community (irrespective of whether one’s neighbors are members of the

blesSED,” a promise fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ and lifted up again in the closing words of Scripture. There in Revelation 21–22, the people of God are called to be bearers of the hope of that eternal city in which there is a river flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, nourishing the tree of life whose leaves are “for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2).

## OUR CONFESSIONAL HERITAGE

In the confessions on which our church is grounded, there are references over and over again to God’s intention for all humanity and to the role of the Church in bearing witness to that intention. Our confessions leave no doubt that the ultimate community which God intends for humanity is mediated through Jesus Christ by faith. It is offered freely to all:

1. God in infinite and perfect love, having provided in the covenant of grace through the mediation and sacrifice of . . . Jesus Christ, a way of life and salvation, sufficient for and adapted to the whole lost race of man, doth freely offer this salvation to all men in the gospel. (*The Book of Confessions*, 6.055)

Notwithstanding that conviction, the confessions also require believers to demonstrate the civility and concern for others that reflect God’s love for the whole human community, even beyond the circle of believers:

A. The duties required in the Sixth Commandment [“Thou shalt not kill.”] are: all careful studies and lawful endeavors to preserve the life of ourselves and others . . . by charitable thoughts, love, compassion, meekness, gentleness, kindness, peaceable, mild, and courteous speeches and behavior, forbearance, readiness to be reconciled, patient bearing and forgiving of injuries, and requiting good for evil; comforting and succoring the distressed, and protecting and defending the innocent. (*The Book of Confessions*, The Larger Catechism, 7.245)

A. The sins forbidden in the Sixth Commandment [“Thou shalt not kill.”] are: . . . the neglecting or withdrawing the lawful or necessary means of preservation of life . . . all excessive passions . . . provoking words . . . and whatsoever else tends to the destruction of the life of any. (*The Book of Confessions*, The Larger Catechism, 7.246)

A. The duties required in the Eighth Commandment [“Thou shalt not steal.”] are: truth, faithfulness, and justice in contracts and commerce between man and man; rendering to everyone his due; restitution of goods unlawfully detained from the right owners thereof; giving and lending freely, according to our abilities, and the necessities of others . . . [and to] endeavor by all just and lawful means to procure, preserve, and further the wealth and outward estate of others, as well as our own. (*The Book of Confessions*, The Larger Catechism, 7.251)

community of faith or not), reconciliation is a central theme and it is especially prominent in The Confession of 1967. A contemporary confession, it lifts up the

reconciling work of Jesus Christ, as both the hope for humankind and the model by which we who trust in him are to live with those around us. It offers a word to us both as individuals and as an institution of society:

God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ and the mission of reconciliation to which he has called his church are the heart of the gospel in any age. Our generation stands in peculiar need of reconciliation in Christ . . . (*The Book of Confessions*, 9.06).

In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself. Jesus Christ is God with man. He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became man and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation. He is present in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit to continue and complete his mission. This work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is the foundation of all confessional statements about God, man, and the world. Therefore, the church calls men to be reconciled to God and to one another (*Ibid.*, 9.07).

The Christian finds parallels between other religions and his [sic] own and must approach all religions with openness and respect. Repeatedly God has used the insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal. But the reconciling word of the gospel is God's judgment upon all forms of religion, including the Christian. The gift of God in Christ is for all men [sic]. The church, therefore, is commissioned to carry the gospel to all men [sic] whatever their religion may be and even when they profess none. (*Ibid.*, 9.42)

God has created the peoples of earth to be one universal family. In his reconciling love he overcomes the barriers between [people] and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all [people] to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of Life . . . Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their fellow men, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess (*Ibid.*, 9.44).

The church responds to the message of reconciliation in praise and prayer. In that response it commits itself afresh to its mission, experiences a deepening of faith and obedience, and bears open testimony to the gospel . . . (*Ibid.*, 9.50).

Most recently, in adopting *A Brief Statement of Faith*, our General Assembly declared that as a church we continue to be committed to a gospel that bears witness to a God who loves the whole world and who has sent Jesus Christ to heal the brokenness of that world. This declaration affirms that

In sovereign love God created the world good  
and makes everyone equally in God's image,  
male and female, of every race and people,  
to live as one community. (*The Book of Confessions*, 10.3)

In a broken and fearful world  
the Spirit gives us courage  
to pray without ceasing,  
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,  
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,

to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,  
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

(*Ibid.*,

10.4, Lines 65–71)]

### THE BOOK OF ORDER

Both the biblical vision of God's will for humanity and the witness of our confessions to that reality are brought together most clearly in our *Book of Order*, "Chapter III. The Church and Its Mission."

God's creative intention for all humanity is life in community, and God's persistent activity to see that intention fulfilled is made clear in this chapter:

. . . God made men and women to live in community, responding to their Creator with grateful obedience. Even when the human race broke community with its Maker and with one another, God did not forsake it, but out of grace chose one family for the sake of all, to be pilgrims of promise, God's own Israel. (*Book of Order*, G-3.0101)

It is equally clear that God intends for the Church to be God's agent of that promise:

The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity.

a. The Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ.

b. The new reality revealed in Jesus Christ is the new humanity, a new creation, a new beginning for human life in the world:

(1) Sin is forgiven

(2) Reconciliation is accomplished.

(3) The dividing walls of hostility are torn down . . . (*Book of Order*, G-3.0200)

a. The Church is called to tell the good news of salvation by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ as the only Savior and Lord, proclaiming in Word and Sacrament that

(1) the new age has dawned.

(2) God who creates life, frees those in bondage, forgives sin, reconciles brokenness, makes all things new, is still at work in the world.

b. The Church is called to present the claims of Jesus Christ, leading persons to repentance, acceptance of him as Savior and Lord, and new life as his disciples.

c. The Church is called to be Christ's faithful evangelist

(1) going into the world making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all he has commanded;

(2) demonstrating by the love of its members for one another and by the quality of its common life the new

reality in Christ; sharing in worship, fellowship, and nurture, practicing a deepened life of prayer and (3) participating in God's activity in the world through its life for others by

- (a) healing and reconciling and binding up wounds,
- (b) ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless,
- (c) engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger and injustice,
- (d) giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer,
- (e) sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world. (*Book of Order*, G-3.0300)

The Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ. (*Book of Order*, G-3.0400)

The Church is called

- a. to a new openness to the presence of God in the Church and in the world, to more fundamental obedience, and to a more joyous celebration in worship and work;
- b. to a new openness to its own membership, by affirming itself as a community of diversity, becoming in fact as well as in faith a community of women and men of all ages, races, and conditions, and by providing for inclusiveness as a visible sign of the new humanity;
- c. to a new openness to the possibilities and perils of its institutional forms in order to ensure the faithfulness and usefulness of these forms to God's activity in the world;
- d. to a new openness to God's continuing reformation of the Church ecumenical, that it might be a more effective instrument of mission in the world. (*Book of Order*, G-3.0401)

As Presbyterians, we are called to this vision of what the church is to be and what it is to do. Inasmuch as we are called "as the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity," we are bound together in the service of a vision that includes all humanity. A profound practical question before the church in our own day is: What does it mean for the church to serve that purpose in a time when humans all over the world are coming into new, intimate, unavoidable, and unprecedented contact with each other? In spite of their diversity and strangeness to each other, how is God at work building a new community among strangers, and what is the service of Christians to that divine community-building?

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

One of the greatest challenges created by the new reality of building community among strangers is the acknowledgment that we are all indeed strangers who

service under the guidance of the Holy Spirit;

have something to give to each other. We are challenged to affirm each other even when we do not understand each other.

At the heart of our ability to do this is the reality of the type of culture that we develop. Culture is a system of values, beliefs, and practices, and knowledge that develop when groups of people are in relationship to each other. It creates the shared understandings of the larger group. This includes a complex of language, values, and philosophy that are represented through symbols, including material objects, used to create identities and communication [Craig Calhoun, Donald Light, and Suzanne Keller *Sociology* (NY: McGraw-Hill Inc. 1994) 7–8].

The challenge of today is to create a shared culture in our congregations and in society-at-large, which acknowledges that ALL people have valuable beliefs and practices—a new culture that celebrates the diversity God has manifested in humankind. This is very different from what cultures have historically stood for. Societies have survived, historically, by celebrating homogeneity, e.g. that everyone was similar. In fact those who were different would be banished from the group.

We can see the manifestations of this history in the way differences have become ways of dividing community and creating hierarchies based on them. These hierarchies are most clearly seen, within the U.S. society, in the divisions created by race/ethnicity, social class, sex-based injustices, and religious differences. People who have recently immigrated into this country experience some of the same cultural responses that have historically been related to these societal divisions.

There is no challenge facing our nation and, especially, our own church greater than the *divisions based on racism*. In spite of the struggle for civil rights and, notwithstanding whatever gains may have been made in the roles of people of color, the divisions within our society and our church that are the result of racism remain a primary source of unrealized community. The PC(USA) has faced this reality in the division of the church over the American Civil War. In coming together, only since 1983, we have not yet learned how to live together celebrating the rich contributions of all persons who are members of the church. Rarely do we see congregations of the White majority meeting with members of African American, Korean, or Native American congregations, for examples, to work together on mission projects or to celebrate special events of each congregation. Rarely have White congregations sought to learn from brothers and sisters of color new ways of worshiping or receiving lessons about creating community from each other.



In the face of these challenges, we affirm that Jesus Christ has the power to overcome racism in our society and in our churches. We commit ourselves to wrestling with racism in the power of the Holy Spirit and in combating racism wherever we find it in our social, economic, and political environments in which we live. Further, we commit ourselves to developing, supporting, and implementing strategies within the church at large and within our own congregations, that make our church more pro active in celebrating our rich cultural heritage as people of God.

In facing the second division, we recognize that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is predominately a middle-class to upper middle-class church whose members tend to be managers, professionals of various kinds, and people in places of leadership in our communities and in state and national government. As such, the church has often found it hard to minister effectively among those in our society who are economically deprived or who have been pushed to the margins of society for other reasons.

Again, we affirm that Jesus Christ has called us to a life of service to others and into a community in which the *dividing walls of economic and social distinction* are breached. We commit ourselves to seeking new ways by which those who are less economically solvent can minister to us even as we minister to them. As we learn how to be in community with each other, we can be mutually enriched in the power of the Holy Spirit operating within each of us.

All who experience different cultural realities due to race/ethnicity and social class, share variations created by the third division, *sex, which is expressed as gender*. At first glance, it seems odd to characterize men and women as being strangers to one another. Gender differences seem familiar rather than strange to us since men and women live together in households and often have intimate relationships with one another. Yet a close look at gender relations indicates that it is important to explore how gender differences divide us. Even often-used references to “the war between the sexes” or popular book titles such as *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* point us to the alienation that exists between the genders.

A look at the status of women and men in society also illuminates the need to build a community in which men and women are no longer strangers to one another. To do so we must ask ourselves: are men and women equally valued within the culture of the community? Are they given similar honor in making decisions in both the public and private arenas of life? Differences in power are central to discrimination.

In the spirit of Jesus Christ, we are called to maintain a respectful presence with people of other

It has only been in our very recent history as a nation that women have had the right to vote and to exercise the other rights of citizenship accorded to men. It is even more recent that women who have been leaders in the church have been eligible for ordination to office. Even now, the struggle of women continues in the church and in our society for the full recognition of their gifts, for the value of their contributions to theological discourse, for the right to be compensated adequately for their work in comparison to men, and for the right to be protected from domestic violence.

We acknowledge that, whatever has been achieved in the long struggle of women in church and society, much more remains to be done. We commit ourselves to listening carefully to the voices of women in the church and society. Further, we commit ourselves, working in the spirit of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, to see that our words and our actions are marked by equity and justice and to bring an end to gender discrimination in all its forms.

Finally, worship is where we experience our cultural differences most strongly because those cultural ways of self-expression enter into the heart of our intimate communication with our God. The PC(USA) members have only recently begun to learn how to share and celebrate the rich worshiping styles among cultural groups within the Presbyterian tradition. Recent General Assembly worship services have celebrated those differences melding them together as we worship one God. However, generally members are uncomfortable with worshiping practices that are different from their usual practices. An example of this is the difficulty some Presbyterians have in understanding the way our Native American Presbyterian sisters and brothers have integrated aspects of their culture into worship.

The difficulties experienced in our own house of worship are multiplied many times over when we come in contact with *persons of other faiths*. It is a fact that in our society and our world at large, religious pluralism is making an ever greater impact on our lives as more cultural groups enter the United States. The challenge that we face in this new world reality is to work with others who have religious beliefs and practices that are very different from the traditional dominant religious practices in the United States. One of the most tragic marks of broken community is the religious intolerance that exists in many places. That intolerance has led to stereotyping and violence. We sometimes blame a whole group of believers for violent acts perpetrated by some who claim religious sanction for their deeds.

faiths. We commit ourselves to meet such persons with gentleness and humility and to seek to learn more about

the worshiping practices and faiths that they represent as a way of deepening our own. And we acknowledge that we are called, by the God who created us and the world in which we live, to remain faithful in our proclamation of the gospel in Jesus Christ, and to work with others irrespective of their practices and faith commitments, toward a world marked by justice and peace and in which the whole creation is nurtured and protected.

As a church desiring to become more diverse in its own life and to affirm the rich diversity of God's creation, we commit ourselves to new openness to the contributions of other cultures, not only to the Christian faith but also to the life of the whole human community; and we pledge to work, empowered by the Holy Spirit, toward the end that cultural barriers will be overcome as we see the light of God shining through every culture, revealing that which is true, righteous, and beautiful and transforming that which is false, corrupt, and unseemly.

Just as God promised Abraham that Israel would be a blessing to the nations and Paul claimed "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:19–20), at this time of racial, class, sex-based injustice, and religious struggles in our society, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to cross barriers that divide people and build bridges to connect people within the church and in society.

And now, following the biblical vision of God's intention for all humanity, mediated through Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, informed by our own confessions, and guided by our understanding of the nature of the church and its mission in the world, we call upon all Presbyterians to join in responding to the recommendations for action that are listed at the beginning. Together we might strive to build a different kind of community in society, always pointing toward the ultimate human community centered around Christ as Savior. We long for the day, anticipated in Revelation, when it will be proclaimed, "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ and he will reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15).

And, in doing so, let us begin with prayer—a prayer for building community:

#### A Prayer for Building Community Among Strangers

God of all communities and all strangers,

Your story tells us that out of clay and breath, you created all human beings.

Your story tells us that you are like a welcoming father and a nurturing mother, longing for your children to come home and be under your protective wing.

Your story tells us that you chose to be so close to us, that you came to us—Emmanuel—calling strangers together to live out "good news."

Your story tells us that this good news was "strange" for some and therefore threatening.

Your story tells us that, in his ministry, Jesus the Christ broke barriers of estrangement between race, class, gender, and religion in order to build communities of grace and love, and, in doing so, Jesus brought people uniquely to you.

Your story tells us that your Spirit, your breath, your wind, broke barriers of strangeness between those who spoke different languages and were from different cultures, and your Spirit empowered a new community called "church"—the body of Christ.

Now, in our day—full of strangers and communities—may this church hear your voice, a voice who calls us to build community among all people, so that, through the grace and love of Jesus Christ, and the empowerment of your Holy Spirit, we may become your hope—clay and breath, children of the living God.

And, as always, we ask it in the Name of Jesus.

Amen.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy recommends that the 211th General Assembly (1999) approve the following recommendations:

1. That, in response to the submission by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) of the report “Building Community Among Strangers,” the 211th General Assembly (1999)

a. approve the policy statement and recommendations;

b. receive the background sections and appendixes;

c. approve the report as a whole for church-wide study and use and direct the Stated Clerk to publish the entire report “Building Community Among Strangers” with appendixes and comment (pp. 30–31, Item 1. under II.J., paragraphs 25.200–202), and with a related study/action guide, distributing it to the middle governing bodies and their resource centers, sessions, libraries of the theological seminaries, making additional copies available for sale to aid study and implementation efforts in the church;

d. encourage middle governing bodies, sessions, and individual members to give prayerful attention to this report as a help in developing and affirming diversity and acceptance within their own congregations and in the communities where they live and work;

e. direct the Congregational Ministries Division, in consultation with the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, to develop a video resource for use with congregations on “Building Community Among Strangers”;

f. commend enthusiastically the following persons, with thanks for their contribution to the whole church as partners in the development of the policy statement “Building Community Among Strangers”

(1) the members of the Task Force on “Building Community Among Strangers”;

(2) the members of the local groups in the six metropolitan focus areas of study in Seattle/Tacoma, Oakland/San Francisco, San Antonio, Cleveland, New York, and Atlanta; and

(3) the many individuals and groups who participated in the churchwide study and provided responses to the committee.

**RACISM**

2. The 211th General Assembly (1999), affirming that Jesus Christ has the power to overcome racism in both the church and society,

a. directs the General Assembly Council to ensure the implementation of the *Racial Ethnic/Immigrant Evangelism and Church Growth Report*, approved by the 210th General Assembly (1998) with appropriate funding from new and/or old sources, in consultation with the Advisory Committee on Racial Ethnic Concerns and the Cross Caucus;

b. directs the General Assembly Council to monitor the degree to which the items identified in Appendix Two, Item 12. of the report, “Problems Caused by Racism,” approved by the 203rd General Assembly (1991), have been implemented. Item 12 reads as follows:

12. Encourage middle governing bodies and congregations to

a. support with funds and personal involvement organizations already actively working for racial justice;

b. provide support for victims of racial violence, including counseling, referral, and advocacy;

c. work with state offices of education to identify and develop educational resources that are multiethnic and multicultural and educate students about the contributions of racial ethnic people;

d. support racial ethnic caucuses in their effort to fight against racism and raise consciousness; and

e. support legislative initiatives that address racial violence and racial injustice and safeguards civil rights. (*Minutes*, 1991, Part I, p. 700)

c. urges the General Assembly Council and middle governing bodies to identify existing funds and designate new funds (no less than \$100,000 in 2001 and 2002) to combat racism and to make available resources on racism in order to utilize models already available;

d. directs the General Assembly Council to develop an instrument for the whole church to encourage Presbyterians to allocate funds to combat racism and to work for racial justice, especially lifting up the opportunity to support and expand the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Hawkins-Buchanan fund for racial justice and the fund for racial justice of the National Council of Churches of Christ;

e. urges the General Assembly Council and its National Ministries Division to seek to birth in the next five years ten intentionally biracial “new church developments” with co-pastors representing the biaxial partnership;

f. requests the General Assembly Council, working with middle governing bodies and sessions, to identify and compile positive interactions and linkages between racial ethnic and predominantly White congregations in order to develop resources and models for use in the church;

g. directs the General Assembly Council, in consultation with the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns, to evaluate the extent to which information on racial justice has been incorporated into and to identify new possibilities for Presbynet/Convene and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) web pages, and to report back with recommendations to the 212th General Assembly (2000);

h. directs the General Assembly Council to develop and make available curriculum and resources on multicultural ministry training for clergy and congregations;

i. directs the General Assembly Council to develop or distribute a Bible study curriculum for multi-ethnic congregations using language that is understandable to people who are nonnative English speakers, or who have a broad range of educational levels;

j. commends Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) theological seminaries that have incorporated into their curriculum multicultural preaching and pastoral care, and that provide opportunities for multicultural field education, and urges those seminaries currently not doing so to provide for these items in their curriculum.

### SOCIAL CLASS DIVISIONS

3. The 211th General Assembly (1999), affirming that Jesus Christ has put aside all class divisions, welcoming the stranger, and identifying with the poor,

a. urges suburban and inner-city congregations to approach one another with a view toward

(1) forming ongoing interpersonal and intercongregational relationships;

(2) forming partnerships in which the congregations may work together to address and/or redress community concerns (examples of matters to be addressed are the following: taxes/schools; community policing; legal assistance; mental health issues/funding; health care/clinics; tutoring/mentoring; Habitat for Humanity; Meals on Wheels; economic development, entrepreneurship and ownership of business);

b. encourages the General Assembly Council, middle governing bodies, and sessions to explore efforts

and initiatives to develop open housing and mixed-income, multi-class housing in city neighborhoods, including those in which the congregation and its members are located;

c. encourage the session of every congregation to spend at least one hour to discuss the question of the strangers within their community and what steps the church is taking to address their needs;

d. directs the General Assembly Council to prepare a bibliography of available resources on the themes of materialism, money, and wealth (including usury), including any curricula already available and commends the study document *Hope for a Global Future: Toward a Just and Sustainable Human Development* to the use of our congregations;

e. directs the General Assembly Council's Office of Urban Ministries to identify and develop models for multicultural mission opportunities/exchanges between urban and suburban congregations and ministries that

(1) explore mutual support and funding for pulpit exchanges;

(2) bring members of diverse congregations together in worship, fellowship, and service activities;

(3) provide opportunities to have a presence in each other's churches for extended periods of time;

f. directs the General Assembly Council to establish a workgroup to consider new ways to fund domestic mission pastorates so that full-time ministries may be established in low-income settings where the income level of congregants may be insufficient to support independently such a ministry.

### BUILDING COMMUNITY: GENDER-BASED INJUSTICES

4. The 211th General Assembly (1999), affirming that Jesus Christ has the power to guide the churches, both national and local, in the goal of affirming equality between men and women,

a. reaffirms and commends once again to the church the full implementation of the "Action/implementation Plan" recommendations of *God's Work in Our Hands*, approved by the 207th General Assembly (1995), specific to seeking justice for women and men in the workplace;

b. urges Presbyterians to listen with care and sensitivity to women who are seeking to express their

c. urges Presbyterians to offer prayer, encouragement, and thoughtful feedback for the current work of the task forces on “Healing Domestic Violence: Nurturing a Responsive Church Community” and on “Changing Families” of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, in consultation with the Advocacy Committees for Racial Ethnic Concerns and Women’s Concerns, as the topics are studied and policy statements are developed;

d. urges all levels and entities to address the brokenness of male-female relationships caused by sexism and gender inequality by educating men and women about the damaging spiritual, communal, and social effects of sexism, and requests the Congregational Ministries Division’s Curriculum Resources to produce resources for use in church and society to assist the development of holistic spirituality for women and men;

e. urges Women’s Ministries, in consultation with the Office of Theology and Worship, to form a work group to survey recent contributions by women theologians, biblical scholars, ethicists, and liturgists of diverse theological perspectives within the Reformed Tradition, and to produce a resource lifting up these voices for congregational study.

#### RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND CONFLICT

5. The 211th General Assembly (1999), believing that the Holy Spirit is at work in our interactions with people of other faiths, affirms that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has no place for arrogance toward people of other faiths,

a. urges the General Assembly, middle governing bodies, sessions, and church-related entities to encourage witness and evangelism based upon sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with respectful humility toward those of other religions;

faithfulness to Jesus Christ in new and meaningful ways;

b. reaffirms its historical support for the ecumenical movement and its efforts to promote the healing of the traditional divisions of the institutional churches through councils of churches, bilateral and multilateral consultations with other Christian denominations, and local ecumenical efforts at building community among strangers;

c. directs appropriate General Assembly Council entities to make available to clergy, laity, and confirmation classes accurate information on other religions, give ideas for learning and sharing with interreligious groups, and create an atmosphere of mutual respect;

d. encourages the appropriate middle governing bodies and sessions of the church to allocate financial and other resources for already-developed and developing interreligious groups in local and regional communities that meet the criteria of the *Guidelines for Participation in Interfaith Bodies*, adopted by the 204th General Assembly (1992), and encourages local congregations to become involved in appropriate interfaith bodies where they exist observing the *Guidelines*.

e. recommends that the appropriate entities of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) identify common ethical concerns with other faiths by participating in conversations held by multifith bodies (global ethic).

f. Encourages the General Assembly Council, through the Worldwide Ministries Division, in cooperation with the Committee on Theological Education, to convene a consultation on ways seminaries and others might provide continuing education for pastors to enable their training church members to articulate their faith adequately in the context of interreligious dialogue.



## RATIONALE

### CONTEMPORARY AMERICA—EVERMORE A NATION OF NATIONS

Our daily experiences touch the edges of momentous changes occurring in our world at the opening of the twenty-first century

- when we sit on a bus with people who have ancestors from every continent on the globe;
- when we hear two such persons conversing with each other in a language we do not understand;
- when a family in our church congregation shares the news that it is about to adopt an orphan from another country;
- when we come to church we find it unwelcoming by not providing access for our wheelchair;
- when, in our predominantly Spanish neighborhood, the grocery store clerks speak only English;
- when, as an American resident of a year, we feel humiliated for making mistakes in our first public attempts to speak English;
- when a Mosque or a Buddhist temple is built in our previously all-Protestant neighborhood;
- when, thanks to the Fair Housing Law, we move into a predominantly White suburb, only to be unmet by greetings from anyone on the block;
- when, in a private dinner party, we are not sure how to reply to the remark of a friend: “This country is getting ruined by all these immigrants”;
- when, we as American Christians, note that on June 25, 1991, for the first time in history, a Muslim imam, Siraj Wahaj of Brooklyn, opened a session of the U.S. House of Representatives with prayer.

These shifting points of view suggest many differing ways of experiencing the current growing diversity in American society, not to speak of similar phenomena in other societies around the world. The fact remains: Americans are now more diverse racially, culturally, and religiously than at any time in our history.

An impetus for this report was the social turmoil in Los

All nonwhite constituencies in the United States are increasing in number and percentages of the American populace. The recent *Racial Ethnic/Immigrant Evangelism and Church Growth Report* has a table that illustrates the demographic changes in twenty representative states (see

Angeles resulting from the verdict in the Rodney King/Los Angeles Police Department trial. King’s question still bears asking, “Can’t we all just get along?” The answer for Christians is in our theology and ethics—roots we explore in this report.

Experience teaches Americans that there is nothing easy or comfortable about living in a nation whose Statue of Liberty lifts its torch of welcome to people from other nations. The United States is, and always has been, a land of immigrant peoples. Some immigrants have come willingly in hopes of seeking freedom and economic opportunities. Other immigrants have not come of their own volition, but were brought under the bondage of slavery or economic servitude. Only those with the right to call themselves “Native Americans” are exceptions. The most accurate historical way for most Americans to address each other might be “Fellow Immigrants.”

Until 1965, immigration laws were arguably biased in favor of Europeans, indicative of an historic discomfort with “nonwhite” peoples. Only within the past fifty years has the U.S. government permitted Asians to become naturalized citizens.

The United States continues to be a destination for new immigrant peoples who are all profoundly reshaping the cultural landscape. Admitting the limitations of census data, it is still significant that demographic projections predict California will soon be the first large state with a majority of citizens of nonwhite racial ethnic backgrounds. New Mexico can already make that claim. Although there are sixty counties across the nation whose population is 99.5 percent White, there are 186 other counties where African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans are in the majority.

This experience of growing human diversity is heightened for Americans if they live in metropolitan areas, as 75 percent of us now do live. Our cities and regions differ in their respective “diversity” profiles, too. In the Pacific region, one in five persons was foreign-born, while in the Midwest only one in fifty. Yet a Midwestern farm family is as likely as any to have adopted that Cambodian orphan and to have a daughter who is taking a year abroad to study Japanese in Tokyo. Migrant farm workers from Mexico are likely to be harvesting melons in Iowa, and home for them may be a south Texas city where Mexicans constitute the majority of the local population.

attachment). The 1990 census found that over the previous decade Americans of Hispanic origin grew in number by 53 percent, becoming 9 percent of the U.S. population. In 1980, one in five Americans was identified as having African, Asian, Hispanic, or Native American ancestry; in 1990, one

in four. One in eight Americans now speaks a language at home different from English, and the borough of Queens in New York City now vies with Los Angeles as the place in America with the greatest number of languages spoken on its streets, at least two hundred. Ninety-eight languages are spoken by school children in Seattle. Accompanying the increase of many new citizens from other birth nations was also an explosion of expression of religious practice from around the world. These include Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Baha'i, and many other faith traditions.

Demographers predict that by the middle of the twenty-first century, people of color will be the majority of Americans. In this emerging America, *no* particular cultural tradition will be "dominant." Everyone will have some reason to consider him or herself a minority and, in one or another relationship, a stranger. Strangeness in America goes both ways. It is not that some of us are homefolk and others are aliens. All of us have had some experience of what it is not to feel at home with some majority of people different from ourselves.

The presence of the "stranger" on the streets of America, one has to conclude, is not all that strange! But how shall we react to these phenomena? As citizens? As Christians? As ordinary human beings who are likely to be nervous, fearful, even hostile in the presence of people we do not understand, with whom we have little in common, and with whom we have difficulty communicating?

#### DEFINITIONS OF "COMMUNITY" AND "STRANGER"

"Community" exists when relationships are established between people, creating a network based on common values that in turn create mutual rights and responsibilities of a shared history and identity (e.g., culture). [See Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society*, NY: Basic Books, 1996.] Community begins to develop when we discover each other as other human beings. Empathy, understanding, and openness to learning about each other's realities is a hallmark of community building. A New Testament word for community is *koinonia*, mutual participation of individuals in each other's reality. The most intimate, transforming participation of all, for early Christians, was that of God's very Spirit, the ultimate bond of the unity of the Church (Cf. 2 Cor. 13:14).

The shared sense of God's Spirit, which developed among the early Christians over time, created a shared understanding of the values, beliefs, and the meaning of behaviors of the people in that community. These shared understandings were expressed through language, rituals, and other expressions of the community. This *culture* included sharing their earthly possessions, ways of greeting each other, customs such as baptisms, and new ways of

From Los Angeles in 1992 to Rwanda in 1994 to Kosovo in 1998, the tragic illustrations multiply. But multiplying also

thinking.

Sociologists have sometimes distinguished "community" from *society*. A society is composed of institutions, laws, powers of law enforcement, and other comprehensive formal structures that interrelate large numbers of people who may touch each other's lives in rather impersonal ways. In modern urban society, we meet each other on the street as citizens with rights and duties to each other. Most bus rides, at most, bring us into short and casual "community" with each other. But a bus accident, a fire, or other threat to human well-being may bring strangers into a sudden, deeper community with each other. The relatives of the 168 persons killed in Oklahoma City by a bomb in 1995 are now members of a very important form of community—a community of shared pain.

The development of a shared culture is true of any group of people who have established a network of relationships among themselves that exists over time. Therefore, the culture that bonds the community can also help to *create* the "stranger." The stranger does not share the understandings (e.g., culture) of the community members. Therefore, the person does not "belong" to that community.

Just as not all community is good (a gang of criminals can be a community), so not all strangeness is bad. It is better for drivers on the highway to remain strangers to each other than to have to get to know each other personally as participants in a highway accident! Christian faith and ethics, however, have a special stake in taking every person on earth as a human being created and loved by God. For *theological* reasons, we have to be open to a vision of a *human* community. The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber suggested that one way to interpret the second half of the Great Commandment is: "You shall love your neighbor as a person like yourself." "Neighbor" in ancient Israel was anyone who lives next door, or in the same town, with you. The stranger (*ger*), on the other hand, was the newcomer, the person who wandered into town from parts unknown. The stranger in Israel was the person who had no fixed, traditional, inborn place in the society. As we will see below, the status of the stranger was peculiarly important to the writers of the social ethics of Israel. That status was even more important to the writers of the New Testament.

Perhaps no theologian has given us a better definition of "community" than Augustine: Humans are bound together by what they *love*. Because our loves are diverse, our communities are diverse; and because our loves are often mixtures of good and evil, our diverse communities can become occasions of fear, hostility, and violence. Communities in collision: much of world history is written that way.

are efforts of people in those locales to rebuild shattered communities. One recent example among many comes from



Rwanda: A long-exiled native Ugandan named Samite, took his music and his memories to Rwanda in 1997 to see if he could locate people among Hutu and Tutsi survivors of the 1994 massacre who were learning anew to live together. He visited a new Rwandan village, founded by returning refugees and composed mostly of Tutsi and Hutu women. “They are building the village on what they now have in common,” he said—their sorrows over their dead and their desire to live. “But eventually they will build it also on their differences,” as they learn to honor both Hutu and Tutsi heritages.

In this study we have tried to reckon with the difficult question: how can the church best express God’s will for a truly human, earthwide community in the face of the vast diversity of our modern experience of each other in the Church and in the world as a whole? How can Christians serve God’s revealed intention to make the whole inhabited earth (the *oikoumene*) into a neighborhood, all of whose members treat each other as persons with equal rights and responsibilities?

In the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin provides a pointer to assist our search as he explores how God would have us embrace our neighbor:

Now, since Christ has shown in the parable of the Samaritan that the term “neighbor” includes even the most remote person [Luke 10:36], we are not expected to limit the precept of love to those in close relationships. I do not deny that the more closely a man is linked to us, the more intimate obligation we have to assist him. It is the common habit of mankind that the more closely men are bound together by the ties of kinship, of acquaintanceship, or of neighborhood, the more responsibilities for one another they share. This does not offend God; for his providence, as it were, leads us to it. But I say: we ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves. [Endnote: Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Ch. 3, VIII, 55, p. 418]

## HUMAN DIVERSITY AND HUMAN COMMUNITY

Why is distinction necessary for community?

Distinction is needed for community because a community is a unity of various entities with one or more common interests and shared cultural understandings of what is the position of each in that community.

While the nature of a good community has been the subject of debate since antiquity, the contemporary debate has engaged voices until recently ignored or subjected to other voices. Principal among these are the voices of people of color, women, and the poor. These otherwise marginalized voices insist on their unique distinction from the system that has subjected them. Community depends on the mutual affirmation of distinct others—women, native peoples, people of African descent, the poor, and so on.

Only when one is ready to affirm the other as another distinct from oneself and the self as distinct from the total will community develop. For women, defined as being a derivative from men for millennia, this is crucial. For native peoples and people of African descent, defined for centuries by the White establishment, this is imperative. For the poor, defined always by the dominant classes, this is important. For religious minorities, this is requisite.

This principle of diversity in community is called “alterity.” Alterity is the antithesis to totality. While totality erases distinctions, alterity celebrates them. While totality swallows the other, alterity affirms the other: I am not you, you are not me; therefore, we can be in community.

Alterity is important for the church for three reasons: first, the church needs to affirm the uniqueness of its own member constituencies; second, the church needs to know who it is in order to continue to be; and, finally, the church needs to know what it can and what it cannot offer to the larger community and it needs to know also what it can and cannot accept from other communities. As a denomination, we want to be most welcoming of people from various cultural backgrounds and lifestyles; however, we ought not compromise, for example, on our commitment to the equality for women in the church and society in order to be acceptable to a misogynous community, to the needs of the poor as a Christian moral priority, and to the value of all humans in the sight of God.

## SOBERING TENSIONS: BETWEEN FAITH AND FACT

Contemporary world history makes us cautious about the capacity of humans to adjust peacefully to each other’s diversities. Violence in Bosnia, Rwanda, Northern Ireland, and Los Angeles should give any of us pause at the apparent limits of human tolerance for difference with our geographic neighbors. Who can be sure that the United States of the future will not become an array of armed camps, gated communities, and mutually antagonistic racial-cultural ghettos? What if the *global* human future is likely, too, to become a war of all against all?

Christians believe that God, known through Jesus Christ, is the Lord of history as well as Lord of the Church. Our faith in God gives us hope for the future of the human race in spite of our most atrocious sins against each other. We believe that God is already answering our prayer, “Deliver us from evil,” because, with Paul, we are “sure that . . . nothing in all creation will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). This Good News enables us to repent of our sins both personal and collective, to repent of the apathy, contempt, and hostility that we have sometimes entertained toward our neighbors near and far. But this puts us in the midst of some severe tensions. We cannot speak honestly about “building community among strangers” without reckoning with a wide array of such *tensions*:

- between the small communities where we may feel safe and comfortable and the larger human society that is often discomfoting;
- between institutions that simultaneously relate us to, and wall us off from each other;
- between the rigidities of traditional institutions and the new “communities” in which we can now associate with each other economically, politically, and culturally through “post-geographic” electronic means of communication;
- between the cultures, traditions, languages, and customs that define “people like us” and those that define the myriad “others” of our human species;
- between the hostilities that divide people from each other in society at large and the only too-similar hostilities that are alive inside the church, between those who assemble in the name of Christ;
- between our enjoyment of human differences and our fear of them;
- between our perception that economics and politics are bringing the people of earth closer and our like perception that the same forces are driving us into new rivalries and fears.

Above all, this modern world keeps us aware of tension in people that is established when “God creates a community among strangers.” We are still uncomfortable, many times, in such a community. Our uncomfortableness comes to us because we Christians are the stranger, too. In a world whose final reconciliation we can only hail “from a distance” (Heb. 11:13) surely finds us to be “aliens and exiles” (1 Peter 2:11) seeking to discern God’s call and to live faithfully.

How Presbyterians are called to build community among strangers in the church and in our civic life, is the heart of this report and its recommendations. Throughout we have two emphases: we ask how strangers can experience community with each other in the church and in society at large. We believe that God’s Spirit is surely at work in the church but also in the United States at large, that we are called by the Spirit at the beginning of a new century to reexamine our own church and national heritages, asking what it may mean now to be part of God’s new humanity in Christ and what it means to be “a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all [humans] are created equal.” We know how far short Christians have fallen from living as such a church and from contributing what we could

Below we identify four marks of estrangement and the signs of the Spirit’s overcoming of that estrangement in the church and in the world. In the principles and recommendations of this policy statement, we hope the General Assembly

contribute to such a “new nation” composed of many nations. But we see the growing diversity of peoples in our churches and in our country as a new calling from God to do our part in the building of a new community of people who are surmounting the barriers of race, class, sex-based injustice, and religion that hinder us from obeying the Great Commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27).

As we seek to do so, we take heart from the examples of our forebears who have already demonstrated the possibility that people of diverse cultures can live and work together in the Christian church and in our society. For example, a powerful witness comes through numerous African Americans who, as Sam Roberts says, have had “fewer historical or emotional motivations to adopt a country that had savagely kidnaped its forbears from another continent” [Roberts, p. 8.]. In what direction God is leading Americans one might discern from the testimony of James Baldwin, whose experience of visiting a village in Switzerland underscored for him what it means to call himself an American. He was the first person with black skin that many in the village had ever seen. Children came out to look at him. Adults peered through windows. The village was astir with the arrival of a true stranger. It is no longer so on the streets of America, reflected Baldwin. Africans have been a part of American society for almost four hundred years. “No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of [a] European village where white [people] still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger.” And, concluded Baldwin, “It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again” [James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (2nd ed.; Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), p. 175].

We know that we bear that testimony both in what we say and what we *are* as a church. In 1978, the 113th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) spoke of God’s will that humanity be one, stating “that the church’s unity is a sign and means of the unity of humankind.” When there is disunity, alienation, and distrust among the members of the church, we give false witness to the reconciling gospel and is a setback to the unity of humankind.

For our generation, we believe, the principal marks of estrangement in the church and in our society are racism, class divisions, sex-based injustice, and religious conflict and intolerance. We believe that the Spirit of God is at work today countering these estrangements in the church and in our world society.

will renew its own trust in God’s reconciling work in our time, and will remember the words of Jesus:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth . . .

(John 16:12–13)

## MARKS OF ESTRANGEMENT AND SIGNS OF THE SPIRIT

As baptized Christians, we know that the ever-present Spirit of God “helps us in our weakness” (Rom. 8:26), including the weakness we sometimes feel as we face estrangements in both the church and in our society. The accounts below seek to portray realistically the fractures that plague both church and society, especially in the United States. But in surveying these very alienations, we are obligated in faith to discern as best we can the work of the Spirit in the midst of them all. Great as are these estrangements, greater yet is the Spirit who, once brooding over the unformed Creation (Gen. 1:2), is at work now creating on this earth one new humanity.

### *Racism*

#### *A Mark of Estrangement: Racism*

In 1991, the 203rd General Assembly (1991) passed a resolution confessing to the ongoing struggle of Presbyterians against racism in and outside the church:

We acknowledge and confess that the Presbyterian Church has failed to respond faithfully to the gospel and the racial justice challenges it set forth for itself, as expressed in both its Confessional statement and its past pronouncements . . . This failure is found at all levels of the church, including those groups and instrumentalities charged with racial justice responsibilities . . .

The reasons put forth for failure and the lack of action by the church are very familiar ones and have been articulated frequently over the years . . . The major obstacle to racial justice in society, as well as in the church, is in the nature of racism itself. Racism has developed primarily as a means to protect and legitimate the privilege of one race over the others . . . [*Problems Caused by Racism: A Response*, p.6, DMS 200-91-028]

All groups of people of color have experienced some form of alienation based on skin color or other characteristics, though not all discrimination has been manifested in the same way. For example, the United States itself is situated on land acquired through brutal attacks on an entire race of people—Native Americans. During World War II, Japanese and Chinese Americans were forced into internment camps due to easily recognizable physical differences from the majority culture. Negative stereotypes about these groups led to public perception of these groups as national threats, which led to actions taken against them through such combative measures. Crippling stereotypes about these and other groups still, unfortunately, dominate much of American thinking.

The height of tension in U.S. race relations, however,

In this context, institutions such as schools, government, even the Church, have reflected those prejudices held by the dominant culture in their structures and policies. There are far too numerous examples of the historic exclusion of

exists historically in the dynamic between Blacks and Whites. As southern historian Shelby Steele has said, “Black and white relations are the true test of whether we as a nation are going to be able to overcome racism.” Jack Miles, former editor of *The Los Angeles Times*, echoed the same view as he reflected on the tragedy of the 1992 riots in that city: “My deepest, least argued or arguable hunch is that everything in America begins with that old and still unpaid debt,” which this country incurred when it built its early economy on slavery [Jack Miles, “Blacks vs. Browns,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1992].

As our country’s racial plurality influences more facets of society at large, no American and especially no Christian should gloss over the necessity of learning how to coexist more peacefully with one another. The post-Civil Rights era finds an increasing number of African Americans obtaining middle- and upper-middle-class statuses. At the same time, it also exhibits a devastating growth of poverty affecting a larger segment of the African American community, with nearly ten million African Americans living at or below the poverty level. Even those African Americans that have obtained some form of socioeconomic progress still cite experiences of other forms of racism and discrimination, both overt and subtle. Many people wonder why more African Americans continue to suffer even after many Civil Rights initiatives have passed that attempted to alleviate blockades to growth and self-determination. The answer appears to be that even though some programs have given African Americans increasing educational and employment opportunities, other facets of society erode the principles and commitments so hard fought for during the struggle for civil rights. From negative and uninformed representations of Black life in the media, to economic, environmental, and social policies that threaten to demean and undermine the basic humanity of African Americans, it is clear that racism remains an unresolved nuisance and disgrace to our society.

What is the root of racism? Certainly, racism has to do with prejudice. As part of our fallen human nature, all of us hold certain prejudices against things that make us feel uncomfortable or with which we are not familiar. Just as a White person who has never met a Black person may distrust Black people based upon distorted images of Blacks they see in the media, a Black person may assume that all White people harbor evil toward him or her in their hearts. Prejudices spring from fear or misunderstanding and cause us to create distances between each other. Racism in the United States, as it has unfolded throughout history, goes beyond prejudice. Scholars observe that racism involves a system of destruction and denial, based on prejudice, as it is put into practice by a dominant force to maintain its power.

African Americans from the ability to exercise political rights, live in certain restrictive areas, attend schools, work in companies, even from riding buses. Exclusion is one way of assigning status to different groups setting up a “pecking

order” of who belongs, who is considered “American” and who is not. While Civil Rights victories made statutory racism unlawful, racism today typically emerges in subtler but no less damaging ways. This leaves African Americans frustrated and angry at a country that was built from the forced servitude of their ancestors, which continues to deny their full equality.

Racism on this scale is not only a sociological phenomenon, it is also a “vexation of the spirit.” As a Mission Statement of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta said in 1997: “Racism is complex and ambiguous, but always demonic—vaunting its power against the power of God” [*Mission Statement on Combating Racism*, Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, April 16, 1997]. From a spiritual standpoint, racism is one of the “mysteries of iniquity” in our midst, one of the “wicked deceptions” of the culture and institutions in which many of us have been raised. (2 Thess. 2:7, 10).

To dismantle racism in the church and in world society, followers of Jesus must trust that there is still available to his disciples the power to “stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:10) and, indeed, to cast out devils (Luke 9:1).

The Holy Spirit of God is our source of that power.

### *Signs of the Spirit: Combating Racism*

In the years of its work, the Task Force on “Building Community Among Strangers” has encountered hopeful signs that the Holy Spirit is at work overcoming the unholy spirit of racism.

1. *There is renewed self-confidence and dignity that various cultures in America and in the church are claiming for themselves.*

Majority cultures all over the world easily fall into the illusion that “minorities” should aspire to be like the majority in as many ways as possible. In the church and in many parts of America, representatives of diverse cultures and nationalities are asking that respect for their humanity include respect for their diverse cultures. There are strong voices now in the African American community making this very claim.

One of the most eloquent is Presbyterian theologian Gayraud Wilmore, who illustrates the principle above that there are many degrees of “community” in the church and in society. Preserving the *fences* between our diverse communities may be as necessary as destroying the impervious *walls* between us.

A Baptist minister in Los Angeles commented, some years ago, that African Americans, residents of this continent for more than 350 years, are well-equipped by their historical experience to

[M]any African Americans, while advocating a racial integration that goes two ways, nevertheless choose to retain their ethnic identity and cultural particularity, believing that they still have something important to contribute to the rest of America out of their ancestral heritage. They propose, in other words, friendly fences rather than “wrathful walls.”

Wilmore tells a family story from the 1930s. His parents moved to Jefferson Street in North Philadelphia. A White neighbor was so hostile to the coming of a Black family to the block that he built his backyard fence to a height of eight feet. That wall stayed until, one day the neighbor’s wife appeared at the Wilmore front door with their young child who was choking to death. Mrs. Wilmore, knowing what to do, saved the child’s life on the spot. “Late that night, after [the neighbor’s] husband returned home, we heard him out in the backyard with his tools, pulling down the six-foot extension he had built on top of the original fence . . .” [Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Washington Office’s *Stewardship of Public Life*, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives,” January 1998].

Such a testimony embodies a gift that many African American Christians have contributed to society in the United States and into the Presbyterian church: the gift of respect for human difference, and a compassion that seeks to deconstruct hostile walls without destroying protective fences. Who will deny that this is a gift of the Spirit to us all?

2. *There is new awareness that we can chip away at racially divisive walls from both sides.*

A joint ministry of two congregations in San Francisco is one hopeful illustration. A suburban, inner-city “linkage” yokes a large predominantly White suburban Presbyterian church in Northern California with a small African American urban congregation. The two congregations designed a twenty-two-step covenant, agreeing to bring together equal numbers of members for worship and Bible study. Financial contributions from the suburban church are routed through the presbytery and are designated for building maintenance in the heavily used urban facility. The two congregations plan a common work camp each year in Mexico. What they experience is some genuine overcoming of suburban/urban splits in perceptions of each other. The overcoming of personal racial stereotypes, on both sides, occurs over a period of years, much to the spiritual growth of many who have come to know each other personally in this program.

3. *We are discovering that Presbyterian struggle against racism is strengthened by ecumenical and secular help.*

welcome newcomers to America from other parts of the world. They know the lifesaving importance of having neighbors who acknowledge one’s humanity, no matter what your race.

A minister in Queens, New York City, has come to realize that his neighborhood is not immune to the ethnic hatreds that have recently devastated some African and Asian countries. “People say that it won’t happen in the United States. We have it here, too, when there’s a killing of a black or a Hispanic, and nobody says anything.” He remembers that hostility to Asians in Queens echoes a time when Jews suffered the same. Forgetting their own pasts, people would sometimes say of new arrivals: “They come over from the other side. They have a few bucks. They buy a house. They seem to be doing better. And you hate them.” The fact that the minister is able to understand the situation is itself a sign of hope for the coming of a day when the American city will no longer be a place where races contend for pride of status and power.

In Tulsa in 1921, a major race riot resulted in an unknown number of deaths and in the burning of more than 1,000 homes and businesses owned by Black citizens. Seventy-five years later (in 1996), White and Black church and community leaders financed the erection of a memorial and public assembly to acknowledge the tragedy and sinfulness of this riot to pledge not to forget those who were victims and to commit together not to let such violence happen again. This event formerly ended the scandalous silence of fear and oppression that people who lived through this riot kept to themselves so that not even their children were aware that such an event took place in their city to/by their parents and grandparents.

The memory of past injustice must be recovered, and the pain of those memories acknowledged if the bonds of community could be strengthened in any sin-affected society—a truth that applies to Tulsa as well as South Africa.

#### 4. *There is new commitment emerging to ministry and witness to our neighbors in ethnic communities.*

Another sign of the work of the Spirit in eroding the sin of racism that clings so closely (Heb. 12:1) to the churches and secular institutions of America is the “Racial Ethnic/Immigrant Evangelism Church Growth Report” approved by the 210th General Assembly (1998). The spirit of this strategy is eloquently expressed in its theological-biblical foundation:

God works within the language and culture of those to whom salvation is offered. God uses one’s tribal, cultural, racial, or ancestral identity as

It is easy, however, for the “American dream” of middle class comfort to turn into occasions for alienation. This happens when different access and control of resources influence the perception that one group is “better than or more valuable than” another group. This understanding is called “classism.” It can happen whenever the following

legitimate gifts, means of revealing love and justice to the world. It is not necessary to surrender one’s cultural identity in order to be Christian. All Christians, regardless of color, class, size, or gender are chosen people. They are saved, transformed into communities of praise, and sent forth to share the good news of God’s love with people of all nations. (*Minutes*, 1998, Part I, p. 407)

The struggle against racism is a portion of our struggle against the many degrading and dehumanizing forces of world history. Among these other forces are those of social class divisions, sex-based injustice, and religion.

### *Social Class Divisions*

#### *A Mark of Estrangement: Social Class*

Unequal access to the resources of society is the defining characteristic of class divisions. In the United States, these resources include education, wealth, and occupational prestige. These resources help shape how we value people in this society. For example, a minister has a lot of education and occupational prestige even though on average she only made \$36,000 a year in 1997. Her access to two resources makes her valued in society and therefore able to shape some of the decisions made in her community.

While most people say they belong to the “middle class,” a quick analysis of their access to the resources of society show that those resources are NOT very evenly divided among all people in society. For example, the lowest 20 percent of U.S. population received less than 4 percent of the household incomes in 1990, while the top 20 percent received about 47 percent of total household incomes.

Access to resources creates the benefits of good nutrition, housing, transportation, health care, and other things that create for a better quality of life. While most Presbyterians can access more than adequate resources to care for their needs, there are differences created by race and gender.

In its 1996 recommendations, *God’s Work in Our Hands*, our denomination witnessed to the importance of seeking justice for women and men in the workplace. The justice of equal pay, equal opportunity for promotion, and equal consideration of individual needs (work hours, parental leaves, family duties) directly affects the possibility of a community—among men and women of different racial and ethnic groups who work together in offices and on shop floors.

happens:

- Affluent suburban church members feel “fortunate” to have fled the inner city and resist setting foot in the city.

- Anxiety about losing out in the competition for jobs in a time of economic change pushes us to ignore the problems of the unemployed.
- The fear of “falling behind” and “being poor” tempts us to resist personal empathy with those who have already fallen behind and have always been poor.
- Structures of separation, especially in metropolitan areas, keep many of us invisible to each other. In particular, the *dignity* and the *integrity* that many poor people manage to maintain in their lives are invisible to many in the middle class.
- The church becomes one of the structures of separation whenever—in its evangelism, its worship, its language, and its leadership—it accepts the principle of “people like us” as the key to church growth.

As Gayraud Wilmore reminds us, fences have their human purpose. Small, exclusive communities are vital for human identity, security, and growth. In marriage, family, friendship, and particular cultural relationships, we experience some of our first basic confirmation of the biblical truth, “It is not good [for the human being] to be alone” (Gen. 2:18).

In principle, the *Christian* community, however, is not one of these exclusive communities. As founded on the “grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God, and the communion [*koinonia*] of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13:14), the church is God’s open door to a connection between us as inclusive as humanity itself. As such, the church proclaims a gospel that challenges us all, in our experience of necessary exclusiveness, to open ourselves to membership in God’s New People. The church is not a club, a class, or an honorary society. It is a human community of porous boundaries. As Simon Peter learned so dramatically (Acts 10-11), the Holy Spirit is often at work puncturing the excluding walls that Christians, too, are apt to build between themselves and some of their neighbors. “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down” (Robert Frost). That “something,” for faithful followers of Jesus, is the Spirit who raised him from the dead and who raises us out of our lethargy, apathy, or antipathy toward strangers whom the Spirit wants us to know as strange no longer.

In its visits to six American cities, the Task Force on “Building Community Among Strangers” was sobered by the reality of these structures of separation in the life of these

*Signs of the Spirit: Combating Classism*

- In Atlanta, under the leadership of two ministers committed to sharing the subsistence budgets of

cities. Suburban flight, “gated” communities, and citizen resistance to scattered-site, low-cost housing were characteristic of all these metropolitan areas.

A Presbyterian church “in the world” of America cannot avoid the influences of these social structures on its own internal life. If it is to be “not of the world,” however, it will have to resist these provocations of classism within itself.

The signs of classism in our churches and in our society are many:

- In an Atlanta congregation, well-known for its effort to build a genuine interracial membership, the pastor observes that people use money to ensure their separation from other people. Gated communities are the prime example, and White flight from inner Atlanta to its suburbs.
- Some neighborhoods in Atlanta bear the brunt of the costs of economic change. In one area, lead and other toxic chemicals still contaminate the ground on which public housing was built, and a wire barrier puts part of the housing off limits as uninhabitable. Children still climb the barrier to play on the other side. City government planning and the waste-disposal policies of corporations are at fault here in the creation of what feels like another inner city ghetto.
- In San Antonio concern for the financing of public schools is linked by some church and government leaders to large state and local appropriations for new prisons, tax concessions to corporations located on the city perimeters, and cutbacks in the budgets of inner city schools. As one experienced city leader said, “In San Antonio, school finance legislation battles all boil down to class and economic issues, when affluent suburban precincts vote to ‘de-annex,’ leaving behind a lessened tax base in the central city and leaving the educational needs of children in our poorest families.”

Illustrations like these underline the truth that *the walls of social class outside the church are likely to be powerful inside as well unless we accept as our call from Christ to strive to tear down those walls wherever they rise.*

We thank God that there are signs across the church and across America that the Spirit is at work prompting just such striving.

poor people, the Open Door Community offers food, health assistance, job advice, and—most of all—a fellowship of caring for dozens of homeless people. Seminary students and volunteer members from a range of Atlanta churches work together. The

“Door” thus opens new human relationships between “those who are far off and those who are near” in a sense at once urban, geographical, and spiritual. Sitting down together around lunch and washing dishes together can help people discover each other’s humanity.

In Brooklyn, New York, the Church of Gethsemane conducts a ministry to people whom much of America “classifies” as permanent civic aliens: former inmates from prison and their families. Taking its name from the hillside on which Jesus was arrested and imprisoned, this congregation is a refuge from the prejudices and suspicion that greet its members almost everywhere their criminal records come into view. The Spirit who anointed Jesus “to proclaim release to the captives” (Luke 4:18) seems surely at work freeing these captives from the residues of their past still hindering their acceptance into genuine community with others in the church and the city.

Community organizers in Cleveland, with help from churches, have bridged some of the gaps of education, income, and culture that lead to the decline of livability in many once-poor neighborhoods. Community organizers have helped reorient people inside and outside of these neighborhoods to look for the *assets* and not just the “problems” of these neighborhoods. Through careful house-to-house conversations, outsiders probe for the strengths that still reside in networks of people living there: How many families are intact? Who are the storekeepers whom people trust? Who are the parents who have high ambitions for their children, keep up with their school work, and applaud their successes? Who would work in a job in another part of the city if transportation were available? One of the impacts of this approach has been renewed dignity for neighborhood residents and a new perception of others that “depressed” “poor” and “drug-ridden” are not appropriate words for describing the humanity of the folk who live there. As new housing and shopping centers begin to rise in some of these neighborhoods, local residents have the satisfaction that others respected their abilities enough to enlist them in meeting the needs of their neighbors.

The Tenderloin area of San Francisco is one of the poorest, most diverse areas of that city. The Tenderloin Network Ministries has developed a job search service, a computer training program, a

The party began with a time of sharing, focusing on all the things we have to be thankful for, including waking up in the morning. A woman I did not recognize passed out homemade Christmas cards to everyone in the group, except me, since I was a surprise guest. One by one they read their cards aloud. Each contained a Bible verse, so perfectly chosen for each individual that it left the readers stunned. By the time the last card was read, the room was thick with a kind of holy tension, a keen awareness of the presence of the Divine. Then, while everyone was changing presents, I approached the woman who had

modern apartment complex whose rents are based on ability to pay, and a pastoral ministry to troubled individuals ranging from drug addicts, to homeless Vietnam veterans, to prostitutes. A surprise gift to this ministry some years ago was an entire hotel offered by its owner as temporary home to the homeless of the area. A major source of financing has also been the designated gift of Presbyterian Women several years ago. Leaders of this ministry testify that poor people are sometimes the most caring of all the neighbors of the poor. They told us about a prostitute who gave up her hotel room so that a dying man could die in bed. Her care for that man, we were told, extended to the recruitment of her “street friends” for a twenty-four-hour bedside watch. Thus a sick, homeless man in San Francisco died surrounded by people who cared. It is not hard to believe that the Holy Spirit had something to do in that, however remote the bearers of that Spirit may have been from formal connection with a congregation of professing Christians.

One Sunday in February 1998, members of the Broadway Community, Inc., led worship at the Broadway Presbyterian Church in Upper West Side Manhattan. The “BCI” began in 1981 as a soup kitchen under the initiative of a local Presbyterian pastor and the students from nearby Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary. Theirs was literally a “church basement” ministry to folk near the bottom of the social ladder of New York City. These seventeen years later, members of BCI were upstairs participants in the church. Reported, the director:

A woman who had spent thirty years “drinking and drugging” testified that she had become clean and sober, had reconciled with her family, and had become a new person in their eyes. In this service, she came up for baptism singing “Glory!” as her peers in the Community sing, “We sing because we’re free!” In the first pew sat her daughters and her sister weeping—from joy and fear—because their newfound mother and sister was also facing a serious battle with lung and liver cancer. Life is hard and short. But moments of joy and gratitude are precious.

Christopher Fay, the director, shared another testimony to the work of the Spirit in this New York City ministry, this one to himself. After some weeks of absence, he attended the annual Christmas party of the Community.

distributed the cards to tell her how moved I was by the inscriptions she had chosen. She smiled at me and cocked her head, and said, “You don’t even know me, do you?” “No, I’m afraid I don’t. Have we met?” I said. “Yeah,” she said, “you used to be all about kicking me off the church steps . . . But I sure look different, don’t I?” Indeed she did; she looked terrific. As she went on talking, my mind went fuzzy, as I began to realize that *she was my Christmas inscription*. I was being taught never to judge a person by their appearance! When I was sexton of the church, I had to clear her off the steps in the morning. I was not always

polite, and I cursed her in my mind. I looked at her as nothing more than a problem I had to rid myself of before I got on with my day. I had written her off as beyond God's help. But there is no one beyond the orbit of God's love. I had written off the very person whom God would later appoint to be the messenger of his love to everyone in the program—including me.

The walls of class are not impenetrable to the Holy Spirit. Believing this, we Christians might find "community among strangers" being built *for us*, in our midst, by that very Spirit.

## *Sex-Based Injustice*

### *A Mark of Estrangement: Sexism*

Our church has inherited a shared cultural understanding of differences that injures our community by creating estranged relationships between women and men. The belief that women are of less value than men is a powerful belief held in place by our economic, educational, and religious-based shared understandings. This sexism hurts both men and women since both genders are placed in rigidly defined social roles that can prevent them from fully realizing God's plan for their lives. It most strongly hurts women since cultural beliefs and shared understandings place them in positions subordinate to men.

One of the differences in the estrangement of women from the other estrangement based on race/ethnicity or social class divisions is that those divisions are created partially by being unfamiliar and segregated. However gender-based strangers are created within the intimacy of the familiar and integrated. Women are different from the "normal"—the White, male, heterosexual property owner. Thomas Aquinas defined women as "misbegotten males" and Augustine called them "the devil's gateway." Today they are still "less-than." Women's estrangement exists within every racial ethnic, and social class-based groups.

Women are the majority of the world's and our nation's poor. The majority of women experience physical or sexual abuse in their life time. Women make up only 10 percent of the world's parliaments and only 11 percent of our nation's congress. Historically, less effort has been spent on women's health research than men's. Women are daily presented as less competent and less valued than men. And the media perpetuates this image of women across the world.

Both men and women learn these beliefs from infancy on and find them reinforced by family members, schools, the

Women in the United States share the reality of violence in the home with women in virtually every other culture in the world. Battering by a husband or intimate is the single most significant cause of injury to women in the U.S., resulting in more injuries to women than muggings and rapes combined [Note: E. Stark and A. Flitcraft. "Violence Against

media, and even in church. Women and men who question sexism are the most at risk. They risk such things as their personal safety, significant relationships, their community, and economic security. For instance, women who enter nontraditional jobs often experience high levels of sexual harassment. If they are married, changing their traditional role may put the marriage at risk. Men who challenge sexist beliefs may be alienated from their male friends. Their masculinity may be questioned, and they lose some of their male privileges. For instance, men who don't live up to sex stereotypes are often called "sissies" or "queers." [Note: The name "queer" offers a suggestion as to how homophobia and sexism are intertwined, just as racism, classism, and sexism are intertwined. Persons who are homosexual threaten rigid gender categories, thereby weakening the gender-based system of power.]

### 1. *Systemic Sexism*

Sexist attitudes and beliefs, when combined with power, creates systemic sexism. Systemic sexism is important to understand because, even as individuals seek to overcome sexist patterns of relating, institutional forms of sexism will hold some of those patterns in place. The institutions of our society have been constructed primarily by and for males in power who are White. People of color and women have been given little if any power within these institutions and, consequently, have had little voice in the systems governing their lives. The exclusion of certain groups from positions of power and leadership enables a particular segment of society to benefit from the disenfranchisement of the other groups. In our society, systemic sexism and racism offers benefit most to White men. White women benefit from systemic racism. Men of color are oppressed by racism, but receive some benefits from their gender. Women of color are doubly oppressed.

### 2. *Violence Against Women*

Rape and domestic violence can show how systemic sexism operates to further oppress women. According to statistics collated by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), every fifteen seconds a woman is beaten by her husband or boyfriend. Every six minutes, a woman is raped. One in three American women is sexually assaulted during her lifetime. Despite the epidemic proportions of violence against women, our legal and police institutions have been reluctant and ill-equipped to handle two of the most grave security concerns that women face: sexual assault and domestic violence.

Intimates, an Epidemiological Review." *Handbook of Family Violence*, 1988]. In 1995, the FBI reported that at least 26 percent of female murder victims were killed by husbands or boyfriends (3 percent of male victims were killed by wives or girlfriends) [Note: Diane Craven, "Female Victims of Violent Crime," U.S. Department of Justice, December



1996]. In a 1998 report of a study done by the U.S. Department of Justice and Centers for Disease Control, 25 percent of the women surveyed said they had been raped and/or physically assaulted by a current or former spouse or intimate partner [Note: Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, "Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings From the National Violence Against Women Survey," U.S. Department of Justice, November, 1998].

Rape remains a threat to every woman's sense of personal security. During the women's movement of the 1970s, women began to realize that rape and the threat of rape was not a sexual act, but an act of violence and even of political repression. They began to organize to change legal codes, create rape crisis centers, work with police units and hospitals, and change the culture that was permissive of rape.

Our culture has defined sex roles such that it is the man's role to be sexually aggressive (in fact the more aggressive, the more male you are) while the women's sexual role is to control male sexuality. Society has not yet reached the point of asking why it is that women cannot walk about as freely as men. Rather, the question asked blames the victim, asking why the woman was in a situation that led to sexual assault! These shared understandings create alienation between women and men.

Thousands of daily acts of violence create a climate of fear and powerlessness that limits women's freedom of action and controls their daily movements and decisions. In the words of one woman, "I learned not to walk on dark streets, not to talk to strangers or get into strange cars, to lock doors and to be modest." Another woman testifies: "I came to vocational school because I thought I'd like the electronics shop. But during orientation I met the two girls who are now in electronics and heard how they get teased and harassed. I'm taking cosmetology. It's all right I guess." Another states, "I almost left graduate school when a male student started stalking me because I refused to go out with him. The worst part was that the school administration would not take my concerns seriously." The sexist society in which we live is maintained in place, in part, by violence against women.

### 3. *Christianity and Sexism*

The Bible speaks with authority to millions. Even those who do not see the Bible as a source of guidance are still

- In 1956, after many decades of heated debate, the United Presbyterian Church approved the ordination of women as ministers. In 1964, the Presbyterian Church in the United States began ordaining women as elders, deacons, and ministers. While the leadership of women in the church has increased significantly since the sixties, much work remains to be done. A recent study on the status of clergy women in the mainline denominations shows that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) had only

influenced by its stories and ethical convictions. While Christianity has been a source of comfort and empowerment for women throughout history, the church has often been used as a powerful tool to reinforce prevailing sexist attitudes about women.

The Bible often is interpreted in such a way as to justify sexism, just as once it was used to justify slavery and White racial dominance. Religious leaders have long laid the blame for humanity's expulsion from Eden on Eve and used this as the reason for forbidding an equal role for women in society and ministry.

Until recently, the Bible was studied and interpreted mainly by male scholars and ministers. Male scholars were seldom, if ever, interested in delving deeply into what the Bible said about the daily lives of women in the Bible or in questioning the sexist interpretations and translations of Scripture. The Presbyterian church has recently begun the work of examining the ways in which the church has helped to reinforce male dominance.

### *Signs of the Spirit: Combating Sexism*

Signs of the Spirit's combat with sexism can be seen in a number of ways as women gain access to areas of life not traditionally available to them. New communal relations emerge between women themselves, between women and men at work, in families, and in public life.

- As women have entered academia and the ministry, they have begun the work of reinterpreting and reclaiming biblical texts long misinterpreted or overlooked. They stress Jesus' egalitarian ethic and his egalitarian relationships with women that often defied the customs of the day. They have pointed out that an early Christian theology of equality is embodied in the ancient baptismal formula recorded in Gal. 3:28: "There is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." They have studied the long forgotten women of Scripture and early Christian traditions that offer support to egalitarian relationships and leadership by women. In Acts, Peter quotes the prophet Joel: "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy."

twenty-one women serving as pastors of churches with memberships of more than 500 out of more than 1,200 such congregations that exist. In 1996, there were no more women serving as congregational ministers than in 1984. There is in effect what some would call a stained-glass ceiling.

In its visits to six American cities, the Task Force on "Building Community Among Strangers" encountered many signs of the work of the Spirit in this dimension of our

national and church life. Below are some of them:

- In San Francisco, three prostituted women were murdered. Network Ministries—led by a Presbyterian woman pastor—was asked to perform memorial services for each, two in its storefront church and one on a street corner. As the community mourned, the deaths became the clarion call to Network Ministries to move beyond good intentions and finally begin work on a Safe House for Women Seeking to Get Out of Prostitution. In February 1997, it drew together a planning committee that expected project development to take at least two years. Helped along by a few miracles, the Safe House opened in January 1998, not quite one year from the first planning meeting. The Safe House will house ten women for up to two years while they receive treatment for drug and alcohol addiction, life skills training, counseling, and spiritual direction in preparation for new life.
- The Church of Mary Magdalene, an ecumenical ministry for homeless women in Seattle, has been active for seven years. In Saturday worship services, a place is created where women, pushed to the margins of society by life experiences, can feel at home and accepted. There the image of God can be restored as positive among so many who feel they are being punished by God. Their own self-image of being worthless can be reversed, and they can feel lovable.

### *Religious Intolerance and Conflict*

#### *A Mark of Estrangement: Intolerance of Religious Practices Within PC(USA)*

We have examined ways in which traditional symbols of the “differences” in the U.S. culture can be used as ways of developing understandings that separate people from each other and create alienation. Each group of people becomes community within themselves and strangers outside that group.

Culture is the shared understandings that operate within each group. This includes a complex of language, values, and

We believe that the Holy Spirit is helping Presbyterians and other American Christians to answer these difficult, unavoidable questions. In the deliberations and site visits of the task force, signs of new, faithful connections have been seen between the one gospel and the many cultures. Among these encouraging signs are the following:

1. *As a church Presbyterians can rejoice in the new congregations of recent immigrants who are worshiping in their own languages.*

philosophy that are represented through symbols used to create identities and communication. These symbols bind us together with some and divide us from others. Within these communities, we can learn to value others who have different understandings and culture. For example, recent General Assembly worship services have celebrated those differences melding them together as we worshiped one god.

Like religion, culture touches some of the depths of human beings. We think with the language we learned as children; we grow up with certain images of how to become an adult; we eat certain foods, avoid certain others. Our culture forms us into particular sorts of behavior attitude and feeling. It may be as basic to our special identity as the clothing we like to wear, only more so.

By translating the Bible into a thousand languages, the church has demonstrated its conviction that the Word of God can shine through the lens of any human language. On any Sunday now, American Presbyterians can be found worshipping in a profusion of languages besides English, Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Spanish, and Choctaw.

Like the early Christians, we must rejoice that in Jesus Christ people of every culture have been invited in an inclusive community, the church. But since those early times, cultures have clashed in the church and have led to serious aberrations between Christians. Similar aberrations are legion in the history of the human world. The recent war in Bosnia was in part a clash of cultures growing out of three different religious roots: Catholic, Orthodox, and Islamic.

Is it possible to clothe the gospel in different cultural practices without losing its inner integrity? In order to preserve that integrity, must the church assume that one culture is superior to another? How is it possible to be Christian *and* German, Christian *and* Kenyan, Christian *and* Anglo-American Christian and . . . a faithful member of any culture on earth?

#### *Signs of the Spirit: Celebrating Many Practices Within the Church*

Many “ethnic” churches are finding a hospitable way to welcome English-speaking Americans into their communities through the sharing of food.

2. *Some congregations and their neighboring institutions are serving as “gateways” for new immigrants into American society.*

In the South Hayward area of Northern California, the Healthy Start Neighborhood Collaborative offers families of all cultures and classes much-needed support and training.

Four groups house a wide range of services: Westminster Hills Presbyterian Church, Glad Tidings Church, Eden Youth Center and La Familia Counseling Service. A high priority has been placed on emergency respite childcare. Ten percent of residents have been “trustlined,” trained and certified to provide respite care in the area’s four main language groups—English, Spanish, Farsi, and Vietnamese. Located in Alameda County, the community of South Hayward has a median income of only \$22,000, 53 percent of the children live in poverty, and 32 percent of the adults have less than a high school education. The area is a “Gateway” neighborhood, with 44 percent of families speaking other-than-English at home.

3. *The art and music of many cultures are beginning to enrich our liturgical life.*

The new (1990) *Presbyterian Hymnbook* breaks new ground for congregational music with its inclusion of more than fifty-seven hymns expressive of non-European cultural traditions

African American	26
Hispanic	22
Asian	6
Native American	3

4. *We are developing new appreciation of the gifts that Native Americans bring to the church.*

In the nineteenth century, some missions to Native Americans showed little respect for either their customs or their religious beliefs. An important contrary precedent was set in the mid-19th century by one Protestant mission to the Dakotas in their discovery that native leaders, converted to Christ, were the most effective builders of the church. In this era, the only all-Indian presbytery developed among the Dakotas. Here, under native pastors, churches became strong centers for Christian worship as well as for celebrating and mourning the benchmarks of native existence. Worship services were conducted in native languages. Native values of generosity, hospitality, and respect for age and kinship relationships were expressed in sermons as well as in practice. A proliferation of church com-

Religion has built some of the highest walls of hostility in history. To “walk by faith” is to walk by a loyalty and trust in something, or One ultimate for us. A faith is a North Star: it orients our whole life. To shake our faith is to shake our whole world. No wonder that, when we enter into conflict with others over issues of bedrock faith—or over the identity or the ideologies we acquire in relation to our faith—we are apt to become passionate. Christians attest that we are “rooted and grounded” in the love of Jesus (Eph. 3:17), and we teach our children that we should tend these roots. Yet they and we live among those who, through life’s circumstances and their own commitments, are rooted in a

mittees is only one example of the way Indian churches made Christianity their own. In a culture that honored the elderly and the deserving, committee chairs were a means of using Presbyterian forms for Indian purposes [“The Contextualization of Christianity by Native American Presbyterians,” Dr. Bonnie Sue Lewis].

This precedent has living embodiment today in the ministry of Hannah Bryan, “a Choctaw woman in her fifties.” This mother of three boys had lived and worked among her people and been active in the local Presbyterian church most of her adult life. She came to Dubuque seeking ordination to the ministry in order to serve more fully her Choctaw congregation. Hannah writes that her home church begins at 11:00 a.m., “or whenever they get there” since Choctaw culture is more concerned with having everyone present than starting “on time.” Services are usually led by laymen and laywomen since there is only one ordained pastor among the thirteen Presbyterian churches of the Choctaw Parish. While the meeting is reverent, the service of worship is often spontaneous, members of the congregation at times being asked “to come to the front and sing some songs as a choir.” Because early missionaries translated the Bible and hymns into Choctaw, the congregation is able to “read and write and sing in Choctaw, also to worship in Choctaw.” Although services are usually held in English, she relates that once a month they have an “All Choctaw Singing” in which no one “is to speak English.” Her goal, when she returns as an ordained minister, is to “educate the biblically illiterate people in our congregation.” For Hannah Bryan and her classmates, contextualization continues, aided by her understanding of the Choctaw language and culture [Hannah E. Bryan, “Missions to the Choctaws,” paper presented to Bonnie Sue Lewis, U.D.T.S., December 12, 1997].

#### *A Mark of Estrangement: Religious Intolerance in Society-at-Large*

religious life different than our own.

The United States is becoming the residence of people with a greater variety of religious faiths than have ever had to live together. Our historical experience has taught us to tolerate the varieties of religious experience in our democratic nation. Yet we should not equate easygoing tolerance with a form of “community” between people of different religions. Tolerance can be a synonym for ignoring each other, or ignoring the responsibility that some religions (Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, others) undertake for sharing their faith and inviting others to share it.

In a society in which religious voices old and new are increasingly within earshot of each other, we all have some new thinking to do about how to relate to each other as adherents of different faiths. Are we at the beginning of an era of “clash of civilizations” rooted in religion? Must religions that seek converts give up that mission? Is the only way to live peaceably alongside our Hindu or Muslim neighbors to avoid talking with them about our and their faiths? Should we give up on our specific religious commitments in the name of democratic tolerance? Are we rather called by the new religious pluralism to confess in all due humility: “Here we stand, God help us; we can do no other”? In the midst of all these perplexing, demanding questions in our society, Presbyterian Christians remain committed—like our sisters and brothers around the world—to an evangelical faith. We have good news to share with all our neighbors who will receive it. This good news includes the witness, in word and deed, that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, whose death and resurrection have made possible reconciliation to God and one another.

As we seek to build community with all our neighbors, in the religious arena, we continue to be bounded by the sacramental expression of our faith. While we seek to be inclusive at the Lord’s Table, that inclusiveness is nevertheless limited to baptized believers. This is part of the tension in learning how to build community in both the civic and religious arenas.

The tension is also seen in our claim to faithful loyalty to our living Lord at the same time that we assert our need to avoid hostility toward those outside our immediate family of faith. We are therefore forced to ask: Is it possible to see oneself as a “fellow citizen with the saints in Christ Jesus and member of the household of God” while seeking a truly human connection with fellow citizens of our secular nation? Is it possible to witness to Christian faith in such a context, in an open and respectful spirit? Is it even possible that the Holy Spirit promised to us in Jesus has something to teach us through people of other faiths? These are not easy questions. Christians face approaches to these questions based upon the example of Jesus, whose love and grace toward others called them to himself while allowing them human freedom. The questions are not dissimilar to questions facing every

- The General Assembly “calls upon the church to support the search for cooperation by providing for the promotion of interfaith relations with Muslims, Jews, Hindu, Buddhists, and others within the new Global Mission Unit; undergirding efforts of presbyteries and congregations . . . Engaging . . . at all levels of the church and, ecumenically . . . in the mutual search for peace and justice” [Islamic Study (1987) 3.328].

Dialogue is the most promising form of bridge-building across deep chasms of human difference. Dialogue is a

religious group on earth, as we move into closer proximity with each other, whether we like it or not. We live in a time when the issues related to religious faith and identity impose themselves on all those who seek to live ethical lives in their surroundings.

Even though Presbyterian Christians have long been aware of other religions around the globe, the particular circumstances of the United States are new enough to require patient listening for God’s Word spoken to us in our time. Our General Assembly has already begun offering counsel on threading our way into new forms of witness to, learning from, and living with our neighbors of diverse religious convictions. For example:

- “The spirit that is to inform our witness among people of other faiths “presupposes our presence with them, sensitivity to their deepest faith commitments and experiences, willingness to be their servants for Christ’s sake, affirmation of what God has done and is doing among them, and love for them” [“Turn to the Living God” adopted by 203rd General Assembly (1991)].
- “In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in church and culture, to hear the voices of people long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace” [“A Brief Statement of Faith”—10.4].
- “. . . God is the creator of the whole universe and . . . has not left [God’s] self without witness at any time or any place. The Spirit of God is constantly at work in ways that pass human understanding and in places that to us are least expected in entering into a relationship of dialogue with others, therefore, Christians seek to discern the unsearchable riches of God and the way [God] deals with humanity” [World Council of Churches, “Witness and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation,” adopted by the General Assembly (1983) as “a faithful expression of the basic commitment of the PCUSA to mission and evangelism” 43].

two-way communication in many forms, within which we become aware of the deep convictions of neighbors and share the commitments of our own lives. Through dialogue we may hear anew the voice of God’s Spirit who is present among all of humanity.

A few years ago, the British Council of Churches set down four guidelines for interreligious dialogue, worth repeating here:

- First, dialogue begins when people meet each other.

Second, dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust.

Third, dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the wide human community.

Fourth, dialogue, becomes the medium of authentic witness. [Can We Pray Together? 1983, pp. 18f]

Dialogue always involves our witness as well as our listening to the other. We best engage in this interfaith interaction when we are persons with convictions and commitments that we are able to articulate clearly enough that those who do not share membership in our faith community can understand what we wish to communicate. This requires that our community helps us to know our own tradition's heritage, as well as that we be clear about the meaning of our own experiences and beliefs. Dialogue also requires openness to the other, in the faith that God is present with us and that God respects the freedom of all. Thus, we do not enter dialogue with any less intention to listen than to speak. We do not enter dialogue having determined outcomes that will result from our mutual sharing. We trust God's Spirit to work in us and in the other, in and through our dialogue.

Frequently dialogue takes us into the arena of our mutual concerns about the well-being of society and the created order. We talk with others about public policy, ethics, and the sustainability of our world. In fact, dialogue about these matters is often the forum through which we begin to talk about those things that matter most in our lives. We discover real differences in both the realms of our ethics and of our spirituality. Precisely because differences between us matter so much on all sides, interreligious dialogue is often in danger of slipping back into less hopeful forms of human conflict.

Social scientist Anatol Rapoport identifies three forms of human conflict: "Fights, games, and debates." Religions that fight each other end up deepening their mutual hostilities. Rules against gross violence make games a more humane form of conflict, but somehow it is an insult to the

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a church born out of a commitment to building community and overcoming barriers among people. The persistence of our parent denominations, the PCUS and the UPCUSA, in seeking reunification in face of difficulties and even defeat, is a testament to the presence of the Spirit that intercedes for the visible unity of the Body of Christ as a sign of God's presence reconciling the world. The PCUS and the UPCUSA were not only concerned with the reconciliation of Presbyterians divided during the American Civil War, but they were instrumental in the formation of national and international bodies committed to the healing of the traditional divisions of the institutional churches for the sake of the world.

seriousness of religious faiths to view them simply as playing competitive games with each other. Because a debate, in Rapoport's terms, is a contest that depends on a search for understanding on both sides, it is by far the most helpful of these forms of conflict. But dialogue is not fundamentally a form of conflict and is not simply debate. It involves growing trust founded upon mutual relationships.

Dialogue is the opposite of self-righteousness. In dialoguing with people of other faiths, Christians must make it clear that we ourselves are under an authority, not that we have authority in ourselves. Japanese Christian theologian Kosuke Koyama epitomizes the evangelical spirit when he says. "The moment of evangelism is one of repentance," not for the gospel but for our very partial witness to it. Further guidance in relations with people of other faiths is offered by the 210th General Assembly (1998) through "Question 52" of its catechism offered for study and reflection. The response to the question, "How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions?" is:

As much as I can, I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith with humility and devotion as the occasion requires, whether silently or openly, boldly or meekly, by word or by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should always welcome and accept those others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord's welcome and acceptance of me. [*Minutes*, 210th General Assembly (1998), Report of the Special Committee to Write a New Presbyterian Catechism, p. 9.]

With humility the Christian enters each situation of dialogue.

### *Signs of the Spirit*

There are signs of the Spirit at work in our midst as we search for new forms of faithfulness amid the emerging religious pluralism of our society.

This ecumenical commitment to reconciliation in the church and healing of the world has produced a cloud of witnesses at all levels of church life, from national and international leadership (such as exemplified by Eugene Carson Blake, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., who in the 1950s served as president of the National Council of Churches, in the 1960s challenged the churches to seek visible, institutional unity (a challenge that resulted in the formation of the Consultation on Church Union) and in the 1970s served as secretary general of the World Council of Churches) to innumerable local efforts in which PC(USA) congregations participate

(such as soup kitchens, shelters, advocacy work, and many other ministries jointly sponsored through ministerial associations or local and/or state councils of churches).

- In Seattle, Washington, an urban Presbyterian church is confronted with an influx of Southeast Asians in its neighborhood. Many have arrived in America with little financial support or knowledge of English, and with many economic threats to their survival and the health of their families. Most of the new immigrants are Buddhists. The small congregation has opened the doors of its modest building to a variety of emergency services to these folk: food, clothing, language instruction, connection with public welfare agencies, introduction of children to public schools, and other basic expressions of hospitality to persons easily subject to despair and lostness in their new, strange environment. Church members see the material services and hospitality of their efforts as itself a witness to the gospel. Yet they have gone beyond doing something for newcomers by inviting Christian Southeast Asians to share in the church's leadership and proclamation. The new mix of people in the congregation enables a holistic ministry of both deed and word.
- In San Antonio, Texas, Presbyterians joined with Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal Christians, Jews, and the Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence in a Gang Peace Summit.
- In San Francisco, an Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights includes congregations, organizations, and individuals from Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, and Jewish communities. Their mission is to ensure humane treatment for newcomers, to promote immigrant leadership, and to improve immigrant living conditions. Their efforts soften the impact of federal welfare reform upon this vulnerable group of new Americans. They provide assistance to
- In New York City, the Saint Andrews Methodist Church and the B'nai Jeshurun Synagogue have been sharing the same church building ever since the roof of the synagogue came crashing down one Wednesday night. Mutual respect for the integrity of each other's worship, religious practice, and belief characterizes this Jewish-Christian relationship. The two congregations jointly staff a shelter for the homeless, and with the Presbyterian church down the street they occasionally join in support of justice-related causes in New York City. These congregations thus illustrate both the separation and the cooperation that can make for true neighborly relationships between different faith communities in a multicultural American city.
- immigrants dealing with governmental agencies, but also advocate for changes in laws and regulations to better meet basic immigrant needs.
- In Brooklyn, New York, the Crown Heights Youth Collective serves a neighborhood that has recently been afflicted by violence between the African American Christians and Hasidic Jewish communities. Leaders offer counseling to local youth on drug prevention, career planning, and family crises. They have also organized a school, the Collective Fellowship and Peace Academy, further to foster interpersonal relationships between members of the two communities.
- A Presbyterian pastor in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, is an elected member of the local school board. He has introduced the board to the practice of opening its meetings with prayer. "But I seldom lead the prayer myself. Our public school includes pupils from a great number of Christian denominations and other religions as well. So I have invited Baha'is and Native Americans, as well as ministers of the Pentecostal, Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian Christian churches to lead in prayer. We have had to recognize the difference between our community makeup now and thirty years ago when almost everyone was Baptist."
- In Pleasant Hill, California, a group of Native Americans, many of them members of Christian churches, have cherished their own ancient ritual traditions, seeing them as compatible in many ways with worship of the God and Father of Jesus. They lacked a space in the city in which to practice some of the rituals until a local church offered some of its land adjacent to the church building for the ceremonies. Local Native Americans experience this gesture as an act of hospitality and an affirmation of the integrity of their distinctive worship.
- In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Program Calendar, the dates for the Islamic Ramadan fast are now listed for the assistance of Presbyterians who want to know when their neighbors are engaged in this month-long religious observance. This avoids meal invitations during daylight hours when Muslims are avoiding food and enables shared celebration during the evening hours when the fast is broken.
- The Oakland Coalition of Congregations consists of twenty-seven religious denominations and community groups. Member congregations include Presbyterians, other mainline Protestant Christians, African American denominations, the Latter-day Saints, Baha'is, Religious Scientists, and Jewish

synagogues. The Coalition focuses on “improving the quality of life” for all of Oakland’s citizens in three areas: public education, public safety, and neighborhood reinvestment.

Christians in the United States live in a culture in which secularity has meant the freedom to avoid viewing our neighbors as persons with religious convictions who must be taken seriously. In an attempt to avoid conflict concerning religion, in both public and private arenas, we avoid addressing core elements about our own identity and that of others. Many believe that the increased religious diversity within U.S. society will make this avoidance no longer viable. Avoidance has seldom been a faithful form of Christian life.

Globally, we live in a time when uncertainties frequently are answered by adherence to religious absolutes. While Christians may view much of this absolutism as a form of human idolatry that refuses reliance on God, it persists within the church as well as within other religious communities. Thus, both inside and between religious bodies, clashing absolutes can mean serious eruptions of hostility and enduring alienation. Conflict about religious identity can be manipulated for purposes of power, in patterns of enmity.

Few committed people are willing to dissolve the particularities of their faith in a melting pot of religions nor to abandon their quest for freedom to maintain their religious institutions. Christians, among others, find ourselves bound by our convictions and our desire for freedom to practice our faith. In the current environment, we are called to balance commitment and openness, in the words of *Witness and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation* (WCC, 1982, citation; adopted by the PC(USA) 195th General Assembly (1983), as a faithful expression of our commitment to witness and evangelism). The motive for our stance is not an adherence to some American value extolling public harmony and tolerance that avoids religious arguments. We are motivated, instead, by the example of Jesus Christ, who respected the freedom of others and who lived among them as a witness to the life offered to all by God.

In Christian faith we have reason, “beyond all we ask or think,” to trust the Holy Spirit to empower us to confront these estrangements, to meet each other in the church and in the world with openness, courage, and readiness for dialogue with all who are strange to us even as we are equally strange to them. If the church is indeed “a provisional demonstration of God’s intention for all humankind,” then our hope for community among Christians expands into hope for humanity. By the end of time, God means to love us into a community in which sin, death, and every aberration have been conquered. In that end, the service of the church to the world will at last be completed; and, as the Book of Revelation tells us, there will then be no need for church, religion, or cultural achievement. In the meantime, faithful builders of community among strangers will work and witness in the church and in the whole of human society.

It is in this context that we offer our humble witness and service, living as signs pointing to God’s will for all humanity, through the power of the Spirit. As Presbyterian Christians, we are called to be distinctive and we are called to be neighbors. In a religiously pluralistic society, we seek to combine respect and separateness with dialogue and openness. As we join hands with others we demonstrate our trust in the Reign of God, where God’s grace is manifested in justice, peace, and concern for all God’s creation. That is the shape of the future in which we should yearn in the United States in the century to come.

In such an environment, we are called to follow the example of Jesus Christ in respecting the freedom of others. We offer our humble witness and service, living as signs pointing to God’s will for all humanity, through the power of the Spirit.

#### BUILDING COMMUNITY AMONG STRANGERS: LOOKING AHEAD

Of the ministry of Jesus it is written: “To as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the children of God.” In Him, God reveals an astonishing love for the past, present, and future of human beings. In the gospel, we are given higher hopes for ourselves than we could ever have entertained on our own.

Indeed our hope for the future of both Church and world are higher and more inclusive than this study—or any study—could indicate. Many “dividing walls” (Eph. 2:14) beyond race, class, sex-based injustice, and religion still separate us, in the church and in the world. Among the walls not much treated here are those between persons alienated from each other by diversities of theological points of view; political and economic ideologies; views of sexual orientations; conditions of mind and body, mental illness and physical disabilities; generational perspectives; rural and metropolitan lifestyles; and many others.

Gayraud Wilmore rightly sums up the stance of those who seek to be servants of Jesus in this coming century. This is the faith, the hope, and the love that have prompted the message of this report to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

Because Jesus Christ has broken down the wall of religion and made us members of one new humanity in himself, let us again become wall-breakers in the church and in the society to find the secular equivalent of what the Lord did for us when he made peace between two estranged peoples by the blood of his cross.

So, then, now:

To him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or conceive, by the power which is at work among us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus from generation to generation evermore. Amen. (Eph. 3:20–21)

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## APPENDIX A

### TASK FORCE ON “BUILDING COMMUNITY AMONG STRANGERS”

#### A. *The Task Force Membership*

The Task Force on “Building Community Among Strangers,” appointed by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, included: Sallie Cuaresma, member of the Native American Ministry Project, Los Angeles, Calif., recently joining the General Assembly Council staff as associate for Native American Congregational Enhancement; William J. Doorly, minister, retired, Presbytery of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Penn., biblical scholar and author of books on the Old Testament; Martha Goble, elder, Church of the Covenant, Presbytery of Western Reserve, Cleveland Heights, Ohio, executive director of Heights Community Congress; Wayne Herstad, minister, Presbytery of San Francisco, pastor of Broadmoor Presbyterian Church, Daly City, Calif.; Krista Kiger, minister, Milwaukee, Wis.; William Lytle, minister, retired, San Antonio, Tex., Moderator, General Assembly (1978); Sunok Pai, elder, Korean United Presbyterian Church, Overland Park, Presbytery of Heartland; Loretta Pain, elder, Seattle, Wash.; Floyd N. Rhodes Jr., minister, Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, staff of the presbytery; Mara Rivera, minister, Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, Wis.; Donald W. Shriver, minister, retired, Presbytery of New York City, president emeritus Union Theological Seminary, New York City; Corene M. Washington, elder, Presbytery of Genesee Valley, Rochester, N.Y.; Robert L. Washington, elder, retired, Presbytery of New York City. In addition, Peter Kwon, minister, retired, and who died in 1998, Westminster Gardens, Los Angeles, Calif., served on the task force for part of its duration.

Three ecumenical/interfaith participants in the task force included: Sylvia Schmidt, Roman Catholic sister, executive director, Tulsa Metropolitan Ministries; Daaiyah M. Taha, Muslim, a teacher and freelance writer, Alhambra Academy School of Science and World Cultures, Oakland, Calif., and who died in 1997; and Arthur J. Naparstek, Jewish, professor, Mandel School of Applied Social Science, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.

Staff assistance was provided at various times by Catherine G. Borchert, former coordinator (ACSWP); Belinda M. Curry, associate (ACSWP); Peter A. Sulyok, coordinator (ACSWP); Margaret Thomas, coordinator, Interfaith Relations, Worldwide Ministries Division; Trey Hammond, coordinator, Urban Ministry; and Phil Tom, former coordinator, Urban Ministry.

#### B. *Process Statement*

And throughout all of these changes in our lives, we gathered seven times over three years to help us and the church think and pray over how we become community, neighbors. We decided early on that this topic was much to

On Friday, May 5, 1995, eighteen “strangers”—women, men; older, younger; lay people, clergy; mostly Presbyterian, but also Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim—from places as far flung as Seattle, Wash., Atlanta, Ga., New York City, and even Saint Joseph, Missouri, gathered in Cleveland, Ohio, to begin what would become a three-year commitment to ponder Scripture, listen to the Holy Spirit, and ask ourselves and the church: “How do we build community among strangers?”

We had all read the prospectus: the purpose of the Task Force on “Building Community Among Strangers” is to examine the church’s policy base and propose new policy to strengthen its capacity to build human community in the midst of the growing diversity of American society, especially in metropolitan areas. The task force will focus on the following questions:

1. How can metropolitan areas establish community, celebrate diversity, and learn to embrace strangers?
2. How can the church embody and contribute to the building of such community?
3. What does it mean for the church to bear witness to the message: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19)?

Throughout our years together, we experienced the ebbs and flows of change and transition as we built community among ourselves and became community. Kitty Borchert moved on to new ministries and Peter Sulyok became the coordinator. Belinda Curry became the new associate. Other staff from Louisville journey with us: Phil Tom, Trey Hammond, Peggy Thomas. Sad moments eclipsed our life together: Peter Kwon and Daaiyah Taha both died before our work was done, and Kitty Borchert’s husband Frank—who helped to host one of our first social gatherings as a group—also died. Sallie Cuaresma became the associate for Native American Congregational Enhancement; Krista Kiger received a new call to Trinity Presbyterian Church in Milwaukee and adopted a five-year-old boy; Bob Washington went through an illness; Peter Sulyok became a father for the third time. Our families grew and changed, our lives in our own congregations continued to challenge our own faithfulness.

big to cover all ground, so we chose to cover three areas: race, class, and interfaith relations. Later we recognized that the relationships among men and women deserved special attention as well. We gathered first in Cleveland, where we

saw a model for rebuilding both an economic and neighborly base for families to grow and thrive, deep in a neighborhood once devastated by poverty and violence. We gathered next in Atlanta, where battles for civil rights were won, but not finished; where an “Open Door” community welcomed the homeless and any who sought to live a radical Christian life. We gathered in San Antonio, where many groups—gang members, clergy, business people, teachers—gathered around a common table to seek to end violence. We gathered in New York City, where creative partnerships among interfaith peoples both served ministries of social justice and interfaith understanding. We gathered in San Francisco, where usually marginalized people—gay and lesbian, and homeless—found a home in welcoming churches and ministries of empowerment. We gathered in Seattle, where the profound reality of recent immigrants and the need to build community among peoples of different languages challenged churches to become authentic “Pentecost, language-filled churches.” And finally, we gathered in Chicago to try to finally tell the story.

In the midst of all this, we worshiped, studied Scripture, pondered, fought, found common ground, and became friends, colleagues, and partners in the Spirit as we sought to be helpful to the church, and faithful to God, through the grace and welcome of Jesus Christ. That is a part of our story. But the story is not finished.

### C. *Feedback Response from the Churchwide Study Document*

#### 1. *Origin*

In the spring of 1997, the Task Force on “Building Community Among Strangers” prepared a study document for use in local churches. The material provided was a result of two-and-a-half years of study and visits of the task force to six metropolitan centers: Cleveland, Atlanta, San Antonio, Newark/New York, Oakland/San Francisco, and Seattle/Tacoma. By sharing information and provocative questions in a five-session study format, it was hoped to involve motivated groups and individuals within the church in both the development of the policy paper and to broaden the base of ownership.

#### 2. *Participants*

Those responding by the December 31, 1998 deadline included the following:

- Forty groups, Sunday School classes, sessions; two clusters of seminarians; and presbytery committees, totaling 350 to more than 450 participants.
- Ninety individuals, pastors, elders and lay persons.
- Together, somewhere in the neighborhood of 420 to more than 540 people participated, providing feed-

back from the churchwide study.

#### 3. *Learnings*

The following paragraphs provide the sense of how respondents felt about the study:

a. Some general comments on the churchwide study document *Building Community Among Strangers*:

- The vast majority of respondents agreed “that it is very important to work wherever possible in cooperation with ecumenical, interfaith, and secular partners with whom we share common goals, in our efforts to promote justice, peace, and reconciliation in our nation’s cities.”
- “Racial, social, and economic barriers are deeply imbedded and difficult to break down or rise above, creating tension among us.”
- “We need to experience diversity—work and live in communities other than our own.”
- “Confess biases, then find a need and fill it; know ourselves; listen and understand other perspectives; be friendly and receptive.”
- “Building community is something that happens on a person-to-person, group-to-group, life-to-life basis. It is not a government program. It happens when congregations and synagogues, for example, meet together.”
- “Christians should try to build community with people of other traditions. This means that we need to be able to listen to each other and to express our faiths unconditionally even if what is said might be ‘offensive’ to either or both parties. True community and dialogue happens not when we suppress our deepest convictions or dilute them in order not to offend, but rather when we feel free to express and to listen in love to each other.”
- “. . . takes patience, tolerance, compassion, and perseverance.”
- “Work at it—work together on common projects.”
- One group summarized their comments as follows: “Welcome and listen to others; work in mission together; keep an open mind; embrace diversity; share stories and food; hold joint meetings; visit other churches; lose the air that ‘there is nothing better for thee than me’; become aware of strangers and include them with intention and hospitality.”

b. Ways in which Presbyterian churches are presently seeking to build community among strangers:

- “Our church has house churches which are called to a particular mission; so, we are with people who
- Food pantries;
- Dental fund for working poor;
- Legislative actions;
- Prison ministry;
- Habitat for Humanity;
- Parish nurse;
- Open gym nights;
- Participation and leadership in housing homeless families;
- Exchange programs annually with Temple Beth Israel;
- Youth visit regularly in nursing homes.

c. Problems encountered in building community among strangers:

- “So many of us, so few of them”;
- Suspicion;
- Fear of embarrassment;
- Homogeneity of the church;
- Apathy;
- “We are too comfortable—strangers will feel they must change”;
- Homophobia;
- “We are shy”;
- “People are set in their ways”;
- “Visual barriers of the building”;
- “Fear of visiting in nearby neighborhoods.”

3. *General Comments on the Study Document Itself*

a. Some were very positive about the study:

- “The important reaction was that of pleasure in being asked to help and joy that openness and sharing is being encouraged as an effective and

aren’t like we are”;

Christian style of resolution of difference. Please look upon this report as evidence of thirty individual positive responses that study continue and that the PC(USA) must continue in dialogue and sharing.”

- “This was one of the best studies I have ever taken . . . because it addresses the central problems facing all religions. It brought up issues I have felt strongly about . . .”
- “The six-week study has done more to stimulate some biblical, theological thinking among this group than any other materials they have used.”
- “The discussion questions are provocative, thoughtful, and challenging. They provide for the exchange of opinions, personal experience, and scriptural interpretations in a respectful way. Many of them encourage application of Scripture to everyday life.”

b. There were some concerns expressed:

- More than thirty respondents felt that “the study did not adequately represent the Bible’s authority and guidance on these issues.” A number of these respondents took issue with the use of the Ephesians 2 passage in the document.
- Many of the same respondents felt that the Christological position expressed in the document was weak.

The following is a representative statement of that feeling: “. . . it is our strong conviction that indeed Jesus Christ is Lord of all and is as our Confessions assert, the unique revelation of God. We feel that the document comes far short of orienting itself around that central truth of faith.”

- Many of these same respondents were offended by the imagery of “The Scandalous Banquet” in the first session, in particular, by the suggestion of prayers being offered in the name of Allah, the Lord Krishna, Siddhartha Buddha, and the Goddess Gaia.
- Several respondents expressed their concern over the failure of the document to mention one or more of the following among the strangers—children, young adults, Asians, gays and lesbians, persons from rural communities, and people with disabilities.
- There was an expressed need by a number of respondents for a definition of the terms “stranger” and “community.”

#### 4. Observations

a. The task force recognizes that the study document's response form proved to be inadequate. It did not readily encourage the constructive responses that had been

b. The Internet has proven of real value both in making available to a wide audience the study document itself and in providing the means for instantaneous response. Of the 40 groups responding, 2 groups utilized the Internet. Of the 90 individual responses, 53 utilized the Internet. In addition, there were numerous hits on the web-page containing the document.

c. The concern over the "banquet" imagery resulted from a misreading and hence a misunderstanding of the text. The banquet that was described was seen as a community Thanksgiving feast, lifting up the global society of which the United States is a growing part. It was certainly not the Eucharist as some respondents mistakenly assumed.

d. Having been made aware of the concerns about its Christological position and the use of the banquet imagery, the Task Force on "Building Community Among Strangers," meeting in Seattle on October 11, 1997, promptly issued the following statement:

Early feedback to the document has highlighted concern about how Christians live among people of other religions. The task force intends to look at this issue from the perspective of social witness policy. It recognizes, in accordance with *A Brief Statement of Faith*, that God, in sovereign love, "Makes everyone equally in God's image . . . to live as one community" (10.3). The task force reaffirms the confessional stance of the Presbyterian

anticipated. The task force is all the more grateful to those individuals and group that took the time to write out their reflections and constructive criticisms.

Church (U.S.A.) That the "risen Christ is the savior for all [people]. Those joined by him in faith are set right with God and commissioned to serve as his reconciling community" (*Confession of 1967*, 9.10). "The same Jesus Christ is the judge of all. His judgement discloses the ultimate seriousness of life and gives promise of God's final victory over the power of sin and death . . ." (*The Confession of 1967*, 9.11). The task force recalls that the 113th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S. (1978) spoke of God's will that humanity be one, state "that the Church's unity is a sign and means of the unity of humankind." Likewise, the task force is informed by the *Book of Order* which indicates that the Presbyterian Church will seek new opportunities for understanding with bodies of other religions in furtherance of common interests, concerns, and action, as compatible with our own means and aims. (G-15.0104).

The task force has pondered the meaning of Jesus' invitations to strangers of his own time to dine with him. It has reflected that the great ultimate "supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19.9) is already anticipated in the church's present celebration of the Lord's Supper. It has drawn upon those traditions of Reformed theology which propose analogies between a democratically<sup>25</sup> organized church and a democratic secular society. It has seen the "round table" as one model of a public gathering of estranged persons, and it has proposed the metaphor of a "civic banquet table" in American society—made up of persons of many religions, ethnicities and races—to which Christians may contribute together with others. The task force views this as one of many possible images of a multi-religious American civic society which honors religious liberty and peace among people of other faiths.

## **BUILDING COMMUNITY AMONG STRANGERS: A PLAN FOR STUDY AND ACTION**

Prepared by Nancy J. Benson-Nicol, Former Vice Chair,  
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### **PURPOSE AND SCOPE:**

Written with the intent to encourage individuals to explore their place and participation in an increasingly diverse and complex society, this study/action guide covers four specific issues: racism, social class differences, gender-based differences, and religious differences. Each of these four areas is allotted two sessions, one focusing on “Signs of Estrangement”—problem areas tearing communities apart, and the other, “Signs of Hope,” examining ways in which community-building is fostered. The sessions are meant for the typical sixty-to-ninety-minute duration of an adult Sunday morning study group. It may often be the case that not all questions can be covered sufficiently in one sitting. It may be appropriate to choose just one or two focus questions to discuss.

At its core, this study focuses on understanding the role of partnership in building community. To be in partnership means that each participant must recognize the legitimate gifts, values, and perspectives that the other brings, and mutually recognize one another as peers in the process of community-building. Partnership also requires each participant to come to an honest awareness of his/her own shortcomings and limitations in the process.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) is composed of a richly diverse assembly of congregations and individuals. Some churches benefit from culturally and socioeconomically diverse congregations; many others feature little or no diversity among their congregations. While a large proportion of congregations are predominately White, many others are mostly Black, Asian, Latino, or Native American in membership. Women pastors and/or large numbers of women who are elders or deacons lead some churches. Men lead others almost solely. The study guide attempts to allow points of entry for a breadth of people and their experiences, whether they are among traditionally marginalized or dominant groups. It is hoped that all may learn and grow by studying the issues that the policy statement and study guide present; however, each congregation will have unique issues, expectations, and ways of entering into dialogue due to their uniqueness. The function of this study guide is to allow participants to imagine and act on ways in which such a study can address situations. You may want to supplement this material with experiences and insights already present in your particular congregation or organization. It is strongly encouraged that groups making use of this study take advantage of opportunities to invite guest speakers to educate and join in dialogue with study group participants. This can only aid in enriching learning and growth about these issues.

### **NOTES FOR THE FACILITATOR:**

Despite the fact that each study group is unique, there are general principles to guide facilitators in ensuring that their group fosters informed, open, and uplifting participation.

#### ***Creating a Safe Space***

Many of the discussions will center on participants’ own experiences, feelings, and beliefs. In order to make candid and open contributions to discussions, they must feel that what they say will not be used destructively against them, *that they will be safe in sharing of themselves with fellow participants*. It is vital to establish ground rules in the very beginning that facilitate a safe environment. These include the following:

- Forbidding the use of obscene or derogatory language in reference to individuals and/or groups of people.
- Making confidentiality mandatory so that no comments shared within the group by a participant can be repeated outside of the group to anyone without the expressed consent of the group participant.
- Soliciting the input of everyone in the group, and guarding against domination of conversation by one voice or viewpoint.
- Encouraging participants to communicate when they are feeling uncomfortable about or unsure of the tone or feeling of discussion.

#### ***Ensuring Diverse and Balanced Participation***

A major hope underlying the creation of the policy statement and study guide is that individuals and groups will feel led to expand their associations and interactions with others different from themselves. This may mean that study groups invite others of different races, social classes, or religious backgrounds to be in dialogue about their experiences. Arranged thoughtfully, these connections can only serve to enrich learning and growth. Whenever possible, the study group should be balanced in composition by gender, race, age, and social class. Some things to consider when dealing with such balance:

- Make sure that anyone who is interested or may be interested in participating in the study is encouraged to do so



- Be careful to avoid placing the burden of discussion regarding specific subjects on participants who are representative of a certain group. For instance, if only one man of color is a member of the study group, do not expect or require him to bear the sole responsibility of addressing any and all issues regarding men of color, and so on.
- If feasible, you may wish to arrange a joint session or two with a neighboring congregation or group that is engaging in the study as well.

### ***Preparing for Session 1:***

Prior to the first session, make sure all participants receive a copy of the Policy Statement, *Building Community Among Strangers* (pp. 3–12.), including the Recommendations' section (pp. 13–15). Participants should read these materials before the first session. Much of the first session should focus primarily on personal introductions, and should also acquaint participants with the scope of the study and

issues to be covered. As a part of the personal introductions, ask participants to identify what they hope to learn by engaging in the study group. Outline clearly the ground rules for discussion, and solicit suggestions from the participants about any further issues of concern.

### ***Materials:***

These items will come in handy throughout all the sessions:

- large sheets of paper and markers *or* a chalkboard and chalk;
- copies of the *Building Community Among Strangers: A Plan for Study and Action*;
- Bible;
- television and VCR (if accessible).

## SESSION 1

### ***Scripture:***

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

### ***Prayer:***

Open with “A Prayer for Building Community Among Strangers” (p. 12).

### ***Focus Questions:***

- Listen attentively to how others in the group introduce themselves, and what they hope to learn through participating in the study. Do you and anyone else share common learning goals?
- From the biblical examples highlighted by the policy statement, how has the concept of the stranger been defined throughout the Old and New Testaments? In what ways are these definitions similar to our contemporary concept of the stranger? How are they different?
- Outside of your family, to what community (based on race, gender, social class, religion, sexual orientation, field of employment, fraternal organizations, etc.) do you feel the strongest allegiance? Can you identify what cultural elements of that community most appeal to you?
- In what ways is your community diverse? In what ways homogeneous? What cultural or social cues indicate to you that someone is *not* a member of your community?

### ***Assignment for Session 2:***

Rationale—Introduction through “A Mark of Estrangement: Racism” (pp. 17–21).

## SESSION 2

### ***Scripture:***

“He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (John 1:11).

### ***Prayer:***

Blessed Creator, enable us as the estranged to cherish Jesus’ courageous life as one among us, and love us as agents of estrangement into redemptive wholeness through the example of his works for it is in Jesus’ name that we pray. Amen.

### ***Reading:***

Rationale—Introduction through “A Mark of Estrangement: Racism” (pp. 17–21).

### ***Focus Questions:***

- The “Contemporary America—Evermore a Nation of Nations” section of the Rationale states that, “The fact remains: Americans are now more diverse racially, culturally, and religiously than at any time in our history (p. 17).” To what extent is this true to your own experience at this time? What types of diversity are present in your everyday surroundings?
- This section also states, “Strangeness in America goes both ways. It is not that some of us are homefolk and others are aliens. All of us have had some experience of what it is not to feel at home with some majority of people different from ourselves” (p. 18). To what extent do you find this statement true in your own life? With what impact?
- What has the term “racism” meant to you prior to reading this policy statement? Does it mean the same to you now? If not, how is it different?
- How have you felt impacted by racism, if at all?

### ***Assignment for Session Three:***

Rationale—“Signs of the Spirit: Combating Racism” (pp. 22–23);  
Recommendations—Racism (pp. 13–14).

Exercise for Next Session—In preparation for the next session, spend the time inbetween perceiving yourself as a person of a race different from your own. Listen to how news articles, magazines, movies, television shows, and people discuss your race in general or members of your race in particular. Think about how your “virtual race” is presented in various situations. For instance, if you spend time in a library, note how many books it contains on the lives and contributions of people of your race. See how many other people of your assumed race you see in the grocery store, or in your workplace. What are

the situations in which you see other people of your assumed race?

For the next session, bring in a significant news article, quote from a book, scene from a movie or show to screen in class (if there is access to a television and VCR), or something else to share and discuss.

### SESSION 3

***Scripture:***

Ephesians 6:10–17

***Prayer:***

Almighty God, shield us from the temptation to wear racism and prejudice as our armor in this world. Embolden us with the courage to rely on your love and justice as our strength. We lift up this prayer in the name of Jesus. Amen.

***Reading:***

Rationale, “Signs of the Spirit: Combating Racism” (pp. 22–23);  
Recommendations—Racism (pp. 13–14).

***Focus Questions:***

- Briefly share one or two insights you learned from the previous exercise (assuming the identity of another race) with the large group. Be sure to identify how your experiences affected what you think? (Or, with two persons of considerable inner security, consider a role-play version of the assigned exercise and encourage the group to critique the dialogue.)
- Given the nature of your experience participating in the exercise, does it suggest anything about how to combat racism in your own life? Do your insights on combating racism in any way relate to the examples mentioned in the reading for this session?
- With regard to racism and prejudice, what character traits should be developed that would serve as the “full armor of God” against these evils?
- What is the nature of partnership as exemplified within the reading?

***Assignment for Next Session:***

Rationale—“A Mark of Estrangement: Social Class” (pp. 23–24).

## SESSION 4

### ***Scripture:***

Psalm 49

### ***Prayer:***

God of all people, focus our efforts on being distinctive as your children, not proprietors of distinction in our own eyes by our own limited, worldly standards. Teach us, Holy Spirit, to make this prayer truly in Jesus' name, in spirit and in truth. Amen.

### ***Reading:***

Rationale, "Signs of the Spirit: Combating Classism" (pp. 23–24).

### ***Exercise:***

Divide the large group into smaller groups comprised of no more than six participants each. Instruct them to discuss and identify what they see as major barriers and/or areas of discomfort in analyzing issues of social class (1) within U.S. society at large and, (2) within their church congregation or group. Reconvene the large group, and invite representatives from each small group to briefly summarize the views of their group.

### ***Focus Questions:***

- Consider what observations were common among all the groups and highlight those issues that seem in some way or other unique.
- How might other issues of estrangement, such as race, gender, or other, have anything to do with social class distinctions?
- According to Psalm 49, what are the dangers of placing an undue focus on material wealth and excess?

### ***Assignment for Next Session:***

Rationale—"Signs of the Spirit: Combating Classism" (pp. 25–26);  
Recommendations—"Social Class Divisions" (p. 14).

## SESSION 5

### *Scripture:*

Matthew 5:1–12

### *Prayer:*

Bless our words, thoughts, and actions, O Lord, in accumulating peace and love in our hearts to overflowing to the end that Jesus Christ be praised. Amen.

### *Reading:*

Rationale—“Signs of the Spirit: Combating Classism” (pp. 25–26);  
Recommendations—“Social Class Divisions” (pp. 14).

### *Focus Questions:*

- Revisit the issues uplifted last session regarding difficulties in addressing social class distinctions. Do any of the “Signs of the Spirit” with regard to classism address the issues generated from the previous discussion? If so, how?
- Can you identify God’s work in addressing issues of classism in your surroundings? How do you feel you fit into God’s direction to this end, if at all?
- In what ways do the examples from this session’s reading demonstrate the concept of partnership? Does partnership play a significant role in combating classism? How are different people working together in faithfulness and with dignity?

### *Assignment for Next Session:*

Rationale—“A Mark of Estrangement: Sexism,” (pp. 26–27).

## SESSION 6

### ***Scripture:***

Galatians 3:25–28

### ***Prayer:***

Blessed Redeemer, teach us to celebrate, not worship, our distinctiveness from one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. Mature our perception so that we may envision the oneness in Christ Jesus that you intend for us. Amen.

### ***Reading:***

Rationale, “A Mark of Estrangement: Sexism,” (pp. 26–27).

### ***Exercise:***

Divide the large group into two smaller groups, one comprised of women, and the other, men. Hand out two pieces of paper to each group. Instruct the groups to make two columns titled “positive” and “negative” on their two pieces of paper. Tell them to label one paper “men” and the other, “women.” Under each column, the groups should write down all the adjectives that come to mind in describing “men” and “women.” Allot no more than twenty minutes for this portion of the exercise. Reconvene the large group, and display the four charts.

### ***Focus Questions:***

- Compare and contrast the types of adjectives attributed to men and women by each group. Are there patterns that emerge, or adjectives that appear on both lists? What, if anything, is strikingly different among the lists?
- Given the “marks of estrangement” identified in the reading for this session, what are gender-based obstacles to the forming of partnerships between women and men? Are any of these obstacles mirrored in the adjectives listed by the small groups?
- In the spirit of Galatians 3:25–28, how can we work toward unity and equality in Christian service and fellowship?

### ***Assignment for Next Session:***

Rationale—“Signs of the Spirit: Combating Sexism,” (pp. 27–28);

Recommendations: “Building Community: Gender-Based Injustices” (pp. 14–15).



## SESSION 7

### ***Scripture:***

Luke 1:24–25

### ***Prayer:***

Creator and Sustainer, gift us with sight for the life-giving role of Elizabeth, and for those sisters and brothers in faith who follow in her footsteps to give life to all endeavors in your glory, honor, and praise. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

### ***Reading:***

Rationale—“Signs of the Spirit: Combating Sexism,” (pp. 27–28).  
Recommendations: “Gender-Based Injustice” (pp. 14–15).

### ***Focus Questions:***

- From the examples in the reading for this session, what key elements emerge as integral to the social and spiritual uplift of women?
- Who are the women in your life that serve in some way as your role models? Who are the men who serve in the same capacity? Do they demonstrate the value of building community or establishing partnerships?
- What work needs to be done in your surroundings (job, school, home, church, etc.) to promote partnership and combat gender-based injustices?
- How can the partnership between those in a marriage exhibit the spirit of Christian community, especially as expressed in Galatians 3:23–29?

### ***Assignment for Next Session:***

Rationale—“A Mark of Estrangement: Intolerance of Religious Practices Within PC (USA)” (p. 28); and “A Mark of Estrangement: Religious Intolerance in Society-at-Large,” (pp. 29–31).

## SESSION 8

### ***Scripture:***

Genesis 11:1–9

### ***Prayer:***

When we confuse and abuse each other with our words, precious Lord, clarify our intentions and make pure our steps along our paths toward Jesus. Let no one stumble as they encounter our path. Amen.

### ***Reading:***

Rationale—“A Mark of Estrangement: Intolerance of Religious Practices Within PC (USA)” (p. 28); and “A Mark of Estrangement: Religious Intolerance in Society-at-Large” (pp. 29–31).

### ***Focus Questions:***

- Have you ever experienced a form of Christian worship different from your own that served to strengthen your faith?
- Have you ever participated in a form of religious celebration or worship that was *not* Christian that served to strengthen your own personal Christian faith? For a Christian, can such an experience be possible?
- When a stranger walks into our congregation, what might be the marks or experiences she or he might identify as “Christian”? What are other marks or experiences in our congregation that are not especially Christian, but “cultural”?
- Because religious values are so spiritually and emotionally embedded within us, the difficulty of maintaining a sense of tolerance can be a tall challenge. How do you envision the concept of “religious tolerance”? Can it exist at all? Under what conditions?
- What elements of religious intolerance are influenced by racial, class, or gender-based forms of estrangement?

### ***Assignment for Next Session:***

Rationale—“Signs of the Spirit: Celebrating Many Practices Within the Church” (pp. 28–29); and “Signs of the Spirit [in Society at Large]” (pp. 31–33).

Recommendations—Religious Intolerance and Conflict (p. 15).

## SESSION 9

### ***Scripture:***

Acts 10:9–17

### ***Prayer:***

Lord and Deliverer, help us to discern what you have made clean that we shall not call profane. Let us not make profane our witness and dialogue with others through our own areas of blindness, pride, or conceit. Amen.

### ***Reading:***

Rationale, “Signs of the Spirit: Celebrating Many Practices Within the Church” (pp. 28–29); “A Mark of Estrangement: Religious Intolerance in Society at Large”(pp. 31–33); Recommendations—Religious Intolerance and Conflict, (p. 15).

### ***Exercise:***

Arrange participants in small groups consisting of no more than five people in each group. Each group should choose a religious tradition, other than Christian, as a point of reference. Present this question:

Imagine that you are about to engage in dialogue with a group of Christians. Brainstorm about some issues you think you would find important to discuss, then comprise a short list of questions that you think your assumed religious tradition would have about Christianity in general, and/or Presbyterianism in particular.

Have each group write their questions on paper. Reconvene as a large group, and display the lists of questions from each small group. Encourage a representative from each group to briefly discuss their questions, noting how and why they chose them.

### ***Focus Questions:***

- Identify any questions and themes common among all the lists. Think about why such commonalties exist, and whether they seem to help or hinder the process of interfaith dialogue.
- In your estimation, what is needed to strike a proper balance between upholding the boundaries of faith and destroying the fortified walls of intolerance?

### ***Assignment for Next Session:***

Rationale, “Building Community Among Strangers: Looking Ahead,” (pp. 33–34).

## SESSION 10

### ***Scripture:***

Ephesians 2:13–22

### ***Prayer:***

“Compel us to keep our eyes open  
And our senses alert,  
To remain ever aware  
That we all belong to you  
And through you  
we belong to one another.

“Bend our wills  
That we may dare  
To reach and touch and overcome  
The fears that drive us apart.

“Prod ourselves  
That we may move  
Out of our complacency and into action  
That your community might come soon  
On this earth as it is in heaven.”  
(Prayer, Task Force on Building Community Among Strangers)

### ***Reading:***

Rationale, “Building Community Among Strangers: Looking Ahead,” (pp. 33–34).

### ***Focus Questions:***

Choose one of the following questions for personal reflection in the large group:

- The Building Community Among Strangers document assumes the first person plural, *we*, in its analysis. Throughout this study, when has including yourself as a part of *we* been most challenging? When has it been most uplifting?
- How do you think the Holy Spirit is empowering you to tear down walls of estrangement in your own life?
- In what ways do you think that the four focus areas, racism, classism, gender-based injustice, and religious intolerance intersect? In what ways do indications of “Signs of the Spirit” intersect with one another?
- What issues do you hope to spend more time reflecting upon, and what issues do you feel should have been a part of this study but weren’t?

- Thinking back to your original learning goals for this study, do you feel they've been fulfilled? Did your goals change over time, or remain the same?

***Exercise:***

Choose another participant in the group with whom you will be accountable for promoting a personal goal for action in building community. The action item may be selected from the recommendations within the policy statement, or of your own formulation.