

# Peace Unity Purity

**Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church**

## *A Season of Discernment*

*The Final Report of the  
Theological Task Force on  
Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church  
as approved by the  
217th General Assembly (2006)  
with Study Guide*

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

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church is directed to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century, using a process which includes conferring with synods, presbyteries, and congregations seeking the peace, unity, and purity of the church. This discernment shall include but not be limited to issues of Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power.

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

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- 27           • loves us,  
28           • saves us, and  
29           • empowers us with a calling and commission.

30           These three convictions are the basis for our response to three enduring questions of  
31 spiritual discernment:<sup>3</sup>

- 32           • What does the loving revelation that is ours in Jesus Christ enable us to know?  
33           • What does this saving revelation prompt us to hope?  
34           • What does this empowering revelation call us to do?

## 35                           **Theological Reflection: *Discerning Our Christian Identity*** 36                           ***in and for the Twenty-first Century***

### 37    A. God Loves Us: *The Ground of Our Faith*

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

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

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

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this process of theological discernment, we have reminded ourselves that we were not asked to draft a new confession of faith. We do believe, though, that the recommendations we are making should be based upon strong theological convictions. The following theological reflections are an account of conclusions we have drawn from our studies and basic convictions that we recognize as significant. They do not include every topic of theological importance or full developments of the themes we lift up. The language in which they are expressed is a mixture of terms that various task force members have introduced. Each of us might have chosen some different wording if we were making individual statements. These affirmations have, however, been endorsed by every member of the task force as important ingredients of “Christian identity in and for the twenty-first century.”

51 Our faith is in the God of Israel who raised Jesus Christ bodily from the dead. This is the  
52 one faith confessed by the people of God: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and  
53 Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:5–6). This one faith is  
54 diverse but not divided. The Reformed family of churches believes that there is no teacher but  
55 Jesus Christ. Therefore, unlike other communions that have a single teaching office or a single  
56 confession, Reformed churches have embraced across the centuries many confessions as a  
57 cloud of witnesses to one true faith. All creeds and confessions are subordinate to and  
58 grounded in Scripture, which speaks afresh in every age.<sup>4</sup> It is by following Jesus Christ, as  
59 attested for us in Scripture, that the unity of our faith will be made visible today as it has been  
60 in the past. It is this one historic faith that will carry the church into the missional future that  
61 God is setting before us.

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

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

82 2. *We are a people whose identity is rooted in God who adopts us through grace.*  
83 Through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit we have been adopted into God’s family  
84 (Rom. 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5–6). We worship and serve a covenant-making God, the God of

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<sup>4</sup> Even when our predecessor Presbyterian churches in this country had adopted a single confessional standard, Westminster, for themselves, they recognized other Reformed churches that had adopted other Reformed confessions.

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

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

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

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<sup>5</sup> “G-6.0108 Freedom of Conscience—Individual and Corporate

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

“Within Certain Bounds

“b. It is to be recognized, however, that in becoming a candidate or officer of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) one chooses to exercise freedom of conscience within certain bounds. His or her conscience is captive to the Word of God as interpreted in the standards of the church so long as he or she continues to seek or hold office in that body. The decision as to whether a person has departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity is made initially



- 111       4. *We are a people whose identity is sealed in the waters of baptism.* Baptism “in the  
112 name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19) initiates us into the  
113 community of faith and attests to a God-given identity that can never be erased. This is an  
114 identity more enduring than all other identities we ourselves or others may give us. Our  
115 relationship to one another in the household of God is grounded in this identity alone.
- 116       5. *We are a people whose identity is nurtured in the sharing of bread and cup.* Just as  
117 we have been baptized into Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, so also are we sustained in  
118 our life together through Christ’s presence in the sharing of the Lord’s Supper. This meal of  
119 thanksgiving is a place where we receive the grace of God and confess our sins before God  
120 and one another. At this table we continually embrace the reconciliation that is ours through  
121 the death of Christ, enact our unity in Christ’s body, and anticipate the great feast to which  
122 people shall come from north and south and east and west to be welcomed and to sit at one  
123 table with Jesus Christ as host (Luke 13:29). The ultimate consummation proclaimed in this  
124 meal dignifies our diversity, seals our unity, and even reverses our assumptions about our own  
125 and others’ acceptability, for in that day “some are last who will be first, and some are first  
126 who will be last” (Luke 13:30; cf. Matt. 8:11–12).
- 127       6. *We are a people whose identity is strengthened through discernment and service.*  
128 God created us all in God’s very image, and though we are sinners, God’s Spirit is restoring us  
129 in the image of Christ. To that end, God has firmly established our Christian identity in  
130 election. We are not elected to an elevated status but to a special service—to embody God’s  
131 purposes in and for the world. Our given Christian identity, however, requires ongoing  
132 discernment. Although God knows us fully, we do not always think and act as though we  
133 know God. Embodying God’s purposes in our time and place requires that we rely on God’s  
134 grace and cultivate wisdom, committing ourselves to faithful prayer, study, worship, and  
135 works of mercy and justice. We must seek the will of God revealed in the Scriptures by the  
136 Holy Spirit as we discern our unique calling in these unique times.

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

“Candidates for Ministry

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

[www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/](http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/)

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

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

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

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

154 2. *We confess the faith of the Protestant reformation*, including the doctrine of  
155 justification by grace through faith, "so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). From this  
156 doctrine, we know that all things, including peace, unity, and purity, are gifts that the church  
157 receives by faith in the saving work of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.<sup>6</sup> As heirs of the  
158 Protestant reformation, we also acknowledge that the Bible gives us the unique and  
159 authoritative witness to Jesus Christ (*Book of Order*, G-14.0801g(2)), divine Word mediated  
160 and spoken through inspired human words. These writings are our rule of faith and life (*The*  
161 *Book of Confessions*, Westminster Confession, 6.002)—our reliable guide in matters  
162 pertaining to salvation, our light in a world of moral obscurity, our measure of what is  
163 theologically truthful and spiritually life-giving. These words also reflect the social, cultural,  
164 and intellectual conditions of their times, so the church approaches Scripture with historical  
165 and literary understanding as it engages in interpretation.

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

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<sup>6</sup> For this reason, in our preliminary report we were bold to claim that Jesus Christ is the source of our peace with God and with one another; that Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the church's unity; and Jesus Christ is the source of purity and righteousness to which we aspire, individually and corporately.

169 vision impels us to resist the temptation to substitute our own ideologies and forms of thought  
170 for the reality of God (*Book of Order*, G-2.0500a(4)). Guided by the ancient creeds and  
171 confessions, we are a church continually being reformed in accordance with God’s Word.  
172 Instructed by the confessions of more recent years, we seek to be a church that pays attention  
173 to what God is continually doing in our midst.<sup>7</sup> Living in expectation of God’s reign, we not  
174 only look to Jesus Christ as our Lord and the Lord of the church but proclaim him the Lord of  
175 all. As a pilgrim people, we await the day when “every knee should bend, in heaven and on  
176 earth . . . , and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the  
177 Father” (Phil. 2:10–11).

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

186 Through grace we are also enabled to recognize and to confess our fallibility and our  
187 capacity for distorting truth. Christians and churches have too often authored or endorsed  
188 false and damaging teachings.<sup>8</sup> The humility this engenders should lead us to step back from  
189 controversies that threaten the peace, unity, and purity of the church and to take time to seek  
190 the truth together. In so doing, we make room for the living God to lead us and guide us by  
191 the Spirit. This can occur every time we meet for worship, study, and service.

### 192 C. God Empowers Us to Proclaim the Gospel: *The Source of Christian Love* 193 *and Witness*

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

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<sup>7</sup> See *The Book of Confessions*, Confessional Nature of the Church Report, pp. xi–xxx.

<sup>8</sup> In its deliberations, the task force paid special attention to several instances of such distortions of truth. We were reminded that many who perpetrated the slaughter of Native Americans in this country were worshiping, believing Christians. We also were reminded that more than half of the tracts and treatises defending the institution of slavery in America were written by Christian ministers, armed with what they thought were sure readings of Scripture and convinced that their side was entirely in the right and the other side entirely in the wrong. We made each other aware of these historical facts not to score ideological points in our current debates but to engender the humility that leads to forbearance and repentance.

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

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

214 3. *We proclaim the gospel by our commitment to peace and reconciliation.* We are  
215 living in a war-torn world. The church acknowledges diverse traditions on the morality of  
216 war,<sup>9</sup> but all these traditions recognize a just peace as the ultimate will of God and contain a  
217 presumption against violence. We also live in a world where many are afflicted by poverty  
218 and injustice. As a North American church, many of whose members are among the most  
219 affluent even while many others are not, we recognize that the blessings of prosperity bring  
220 with them a sacred obligation to care for the needy both at home and abroad. This can be done  
221 not only by acting charitably but also by working for justice. Having been forgiven by God,  
222 we are committed to forgive those who have wronged us and seek the forgiveness of those we  
223 have wronged. Because controversies over sexuality and ordination have been a special focus  
224 of the task force's work, the task force has become aware of how much alienation and  
225 contempt many have experienced. The task force has heard a call to seek God's forgiveness  
226 for our sin and our hurtful attitudes and actions. In gratitude for the good news of the gospel,  
227 the task force prays that God will grant the whole church the grace of reconciliation,  
228 especially with those who have been wronged.

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

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<sup>9</sup> The two most prominent are pacifism and the just war tradition.

231 twenty-first. With the church at Barmen we believe that “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us  
232 in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust  
233 and obey in life and in death” (*The Book of Confessions*, 8.11). Members of the church in  
234 Korea resolved “that we will follow the footsteps of our Lord, living among our oppressed  
235 and poor people, standing against political oppression, and participating in the transformation  
236 of history, for this is the only way to the messianic kingdom.” (Text for the Theological  
237 Declaration of Korean Christians can be found at the World Alliance of Reformed Churches  
238 Web site: [www.warc.ch/pc/20th/01.html](http://www.warc.ch/pc/20th/01.html).) The church at Belhar affirmed “that the church as  
239 the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with  
240 the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and  
241 privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others” (*Minutes*,  
242 2004, Part I, p. 704). We stand with these churches in confessing a gospel that looks to God  
243 alone for salvation, that upholds justice and promotes righteousness, and that excludes no one  
244 from the offer of God’s judgment and grace.<sup>10</sup>

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

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

<sup>11</sup> In our own country, we have experienced the devastating attacks of September 11, 2001, a war in Afghanistan, another war in Iraq, polarizing presidential elections, controversies over the nature and scope of democracy in both the United States and abroad, and ongoing racial tension and cultural division over moral and social issues.

257 *Gracious God, may we look back upon this time of trouble, in repentance*  
 258 *and hope, and see that in coming together to confront our differences, we*  
 259 *found a new measure of the peace, unity, and purity that were already ours in*  
 260 *our loving Savior, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

## 261 **II. *The Plan and Progress of the Work of the Task Force***

### 262 **A. *Plan of Work***

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

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

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

290 difficult issues. Analysis of thoughtful published presentations of positions on issues  
291 contributed a great deal to mutual understanding.

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

## 296 B. *Spiritual Progress*

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

### 299 1. *Pain and Penitence*

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

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

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

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

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<sup>12</sup> See inside back cover for text of covenant.



- 320 • Those of us who identify our views as liberal came to understand how alienating it is  
321 for conservatives and evangelicals when their passionate commitment to holy living  
322 and upright conduct are labeled rigid and judgmental.
- 323 • Those of us who identify our views as conservative came to understand how  
324 alienating it is for liberals when their passionate commitment to justice and  
325 compassion are labeled unbiblical.
- 326 • Those of us who identify our views as moderate came to understand how alienating  
327 it is when those with passionate concerns on either end of the theological spectrum  
328 are labeled extreme and divisive.
- 329 • Many of us came to understand how alienating it is for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and  
330 transgender persons to be so regularly identified as a major threat to the peace, unity,  
331 and purity of the church.<sup>13</sup>
- 332 • Many of us also came to understand how alienating it is for those who support a ban  
333 on the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian persons to be accused of prejudice,  
334 and how alienating it is for those who oppose such a ban to be accused of moral  
335 laxity.
- 336 • All of us came to see that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in its current  
337 factionalized state that we have all created together by our mutual stereotyping and  
338 misuse of power, fails to offer a suffering world a sign of the peace, unity, and purity  
339 that is God's gift to us in Jesus Christ.

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

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



350           2. *Gratitude and Joy*

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

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

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

370           Nor did we overcome all our differences and reach agreement on all the issues about  
371 which the church continues to disagree. *We have not compromised our basic convictions or*  
372 *commitments.* We still hold most of the views and perspectives we brought to the task force.  
373 From the beginning, some of us had ties to affinity groups (groups in the church that have  
374 specific stands on some task force issues) and have maintained those ties during the life of the  
375 task force.

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

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

### 389 *C. The Structure of This Report*

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

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

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

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

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

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

406 Section VI offers a final word from the task force.

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

### 413 *III. The Issues Before the Task Force*

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

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

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

#### 435 A. *Christology*

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

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<sup>14</sup> We were greatly aided in our preliminary work by the document “The Confessional Nature of the Church,” Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly, *Minutes*, 1986, Part I, pp. 516–27. The text can also be found in *The Book of Confessions*, pp. xi–xxx.

<sup>15</sup>Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. *Who Is Jesus Christ*, video, produced by the Office of the General Assembly (OGA-04-069), Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

<sup>16</sup> Refer to footnote 10.

446 We, the members of the task force, were shaped by our study together of the affirmations  
447 that the church has made through its history about Jesus Christ, in whom we receive life and  
448 salvation. Our understanding of him was expanded and deepened in the following ways:

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

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

#### 466 *B. Biblical Authority and Interpretation*

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

- 475 • The centrality of Jesus Christ
- 476 • The priority of the plain sense of the text
- 477 • Interpretation of Scripture by Scripture

- 478           • The rule of love  
479           • The rule of faith<sup>17</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>18</sup> William C. Placher, “Struggling with Scripture,” in Walter Brueggemann, William C. Placher, and Brian K. Blount, *Struggling with Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), pp. 32–50; and Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 379–406.

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

### 508 C. *Sexuality and Ordination*

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

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

520 Our study of human sexuality yielded several major insights:

- 521 • The theological and biblical literature on human sexuality in general and same-  
 522 gender sexuality in particular is diverse, subtle, and complex. It could not readily be  
 523 divided into the two categories—either approval or disapproval of same-gender  
 524 relationships and practices—that are assumed to anchor much of the conflict in the  
 525 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today. In one session, a member of the task force  
 526 offered a typology of six positions. Each position conveyed a distinctive view of sin,  
 527 reconciliation, and redemption. We acknowledged that other analysts might approach  
 528 the material differently and provide alternative interpretations.<sup>20</sup>
- 529 • Methods of biblical interpretation, theological traditions, and policy conclusions did  
 530 not line up neatly in the work we studied. As the resource, “Same-Gender  
 531 Relationships in the Church: Six Theological Viewpoints,” demonstrates, scholars

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<sup>19</sup> For a bibliography of materials the task force studied, see the Web site: [www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity](http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity).

<sup>20</sup> The forthcoming paper, “Same-Gender Relationships in the Church: Six Theological Viewpoints,” will be posted on the Web: [www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity](http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity).

532 and writers who reached different conclusions often based their work on similar  
533 theological premises.<sup>21</sup>  
534 • Further, opinions about ordination and sexuality did not always correlate precisely  
535 with particular theological positions. Writers associated with a particular theological  
536 perspective sometimes reached conclusions different from what is often assumed to  
537 be their party’s “line” on the witness of Scripture; the morality of covenantal, same-  
538 gender relationships; and the permissibility of ordination. For instance, some writers  
539 who believe that same-gender relationships are wrong nevertheless believe pastoral  
540 acceptance should be extended to gay and lesbian couples; some writers who believe  
541 that the full witness of Scripture supports the possibility of covenantal relationships  
542 between persons of the same gender nevertheless acknowledge that where Scripture  
543 speaks explicitly of same-gender acts it disapproves them. These were only two of a  
544 number of combinations and permutations of theological, biblical, and polity  
545 perspectives on the broad topic of sexuality and the narrower one of same-gender  
546 relationships.

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

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

- 553 • One model of Christian leadership that is consistently offered throughout the New  
554 Testament is servant leadership. Christians are to imitate Christ in a posture of self-  
555 giving and service, and to “outdo one another in showing honor” to others  
556 (Rom. 12:10) by respectful attention and loving care.
- 557 • Reformed theological tradition emphasizes
  - 558 —the common Christian vocation of the entire body, the “priesthood of all  
559 believers,” in which all members are called by God to promote the ongoing  
560 health and maturation of the body of Christ.
  - 561 —that certain members of the body of Christ are called by God through the voice  
562 of the church to lead and nurture the body in its spiritual growth and in mission.

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<sup>21</sup> One surprise was how often writers on all sides of the questions bolstered their arguments with appeals to natural law (theological reasoning based on the orders of nature), which is not traditionally a central theme in Protestant theology.

563                   These ordained officers must adhere to confessional, governance, and  
 564                   disciplinary standards not required for membership.

- 565                   • Beyond these themes, Scripture does not provide a thoroughly developed theology of  
 566                   ordination, and a theology of ordination has not been clearly and consistently  
 567                   articulated in the development of Reformed and Presbyterian doctrine.<sup>22</sup> As one  
 568                   might expect, then, ordination has been a source of some confusion and a matter of  
 569                   controversy in our history. From the outset of American Presbyterianism to the  
 570                   present, denominational conflicts have often centered on matters of fitness for  
 571                   ordination.<sup>23</sup> The current controversy regarding issues of human sexuality and  
 572                   ordination is the latest example of this recurring pattern.

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

578                   At the same time, we found we could reach ready agreement on several points<sup>24</sup>:

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

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

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

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

<sup>24</sup> These points of agreement emerged during our theological and biblical studies and other discussions rather than from an assessment of current teachings of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but all our agreements do accord with previous statements approved by the General Assembly.



591 Having heard a presentation to the task force by member Stacy Johnson on a spectrum of  
592 theological viewpoints on same-gender relationships in the church, many believe that, instead  
593 of beginning with the question of ordination, it would be more profitable first to explore a  
594 more basic theological question: How does God’s gracious drama of creation, reconciliation,  
595 and redemption work itself out in the lives of baptized gay and lesbian persons who are  
596 committed to exclusive, covenanted relationships?<sup>25</sup>

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

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

#### 611 *IV. Resources for Peace, Unity, and Purity*

612 Recent debates about sexuality, ordination, Christology, and other controversial topics  
613 have been especially contentious, but the dilemma these issues pose is not unique. Most of the  
614 debates that have threatened to break the church apart in the past have followed a similar  
615 pattern: A range of possible positions exist on the issue at hand, but pressure to make  
616 decisions, especially about eligibility for church office, forces the choice into a binary format  
617 that divides governing bodies into two parties. Each party, often substantial in size, struggles  
618 long and hard for control of the policy of the whole church. The result is a church both  
619 preoccupied with and weary of conflict.

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

620 Are there alternatives to constant, often bitter, contention that creates factions and  
621 rivalries? The task force has searched Presbyterian tradition and other sources for models of  
622 constructive engagement for moments like the present, when the church is segmented into  
623 parties that are in almost constant conflict. We have discovered valuable resources that may  
624 allow those who hold different positions on important issues to maintain the bonds of  
625 Christian fellowship, respecting both the will of majorities and the conscience of minorities in  
626 a spirit of charity and mutual forbearance. Using these resources, conflict can be transformed  
627 into creative and constructive engagement in which those who disagree can seek together to  
628 know and follow the will of God. In this section, we share the results of our search for such  
629 resources in the theology, history, and polity of our church as well as in certain practices we  
630 have incorporated into our life together that have strengthened us as a Christian community.

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

633 The foundational claim Presbyterians make about the governance of the church is that  
634 Jesus Christ is its head (*Book of Order*, G-1.0100). Christ's rule over the church takes  
635 concrete form as we hear and obey his voice speaking through the Word of Scripture as  
636 illumined by the Holy Spirit. The connectional system established by Presbyterian polity is  
637 our best human attempt to create structures and procedures for attending to the spirit of Christ  
638 speaking through the Scriptures, in accordance with the confession that Jesus Christ is head of  
639 the church. "Presbyters are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek  
640 together to find and represent the will of Christ."<sup>26</sup>

641 Potential church conflicts arise at times when sincere efforts to attend to God's Word and  
642 Spirit lead various segments of the church to differing conclusions over contested issues. In  
643 finding this to be the case among ourselves, the experience of the task force has mirrored that  
644 of the church at large.

645 The task force is convinced that differences represented within its own membership result  
646 from attempts on all sides to be faithful to the Word of God given in Scripture. These  
647 differences are serious because they revolve around important topics. The differences are  
648 difficult to settle, because each of the divergent conclusions attracts substantial numbers of  
649 faithful adherents who are persons of sound qualification, good character, and strong faith.  
650 Such situations are not uncommon in the history of the church. They require disciplines of  
651 patience, mutual forbearance, and dedicated communal discernment to reach faithful

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<sup>26</sup> *Book of Order*, G-4.0301d.

652 resolution as we trust Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit will ultimately lead the church into  
653 all truth.

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

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

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

#### 670 B. Resources for Constructive Engagement: *Presbyterian Polity*

671 Presbyterian polity is an expression of deep theological convictions about  
672 the church's . . .

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

685 Historically, Presbyterian polity has been neither static nor singular. The denominational  
686 traditions that have formed the current PC(USA) placed different emphases on the particular

687 dimensions of polity that they viewed as most distinctively “Presbyterian.” Yet they all sought  
 688 to maintain equilibrium between certain principles of governance that theologically  
 689 distinguish Presbyterian church life and discipline from other Christian communions.

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

699 Presbyterians have regularly sought

to honor communal discernment of God’s will and the Spirit’s leading	<i>while also</i>	recognizing that God alone is Lord of the conscience under the authority of Scripture
to adhere to essential and necessary beliefs and practices that bind the faithful into the body of Christ	<i>while also</i>	respecting freedom in nonessential matters of belief, worship, piety, witness, and service
to maintain a distinctive Presbyterian and Reformed witness to the world	<i>while also</i>	engaging in mission with Christians of other traditions
	and	
to uphold the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that have original jurisdiction in church governance	<i>while also</i>	sustaining the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that have the power of oversight and review

700 1. *To honor communal discernment of God's will and the Spirit's leading while also*  
701 *recognizing that God alone is Lord of the conscience under the authority of Scripture.*

702 During the earliest days of American Presbyterianism, the need arose to find ways to  
703 connect these two basic principles. The standard of faith to which the church adhered, the  
704 Westminster Confession, acknowledged that councils of the church may err.<sup>27</sup> Therefore,  
705 throughout its history the church has affirmed "the rights of private judgment, in all matters  
706 that respect religion, as universal and unalienable."<sup>28</sup> At the same time, Reformed Christians  
707 have always insisted that Christ's way is not a solitary one. The first Presbyterian courts and  
708 councils recognized that faithful witness to the unity of the body requires mutual  
709 accountability and communal discernment of the working of the Spirit. These are strenuous  
710 disciplines. They require both forbearance in love and respect for the will of the body in one  
711 of two forms, either acquiescence to its decisions or, if that is not possible, peaceful  
712 withdrawal.<sup>29</sup>

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

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

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<sup>27</sup> "All synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both." The Westminster Confession of Faith (6.175), in *The Book of Confessions*.

<sup>28</sup> Historic principles of church order in *Book of Order*, G-1.0301(1)(b).

<sup>29</sup> Historic principles of church order in *Book of Order* (G-1.0302) This principle was established early in the church's history: "When any matter is determined by a major vote, every member shall either actively concur with, or passively submit to such determination; or, if his conscience permit him to do neither, he shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceably withdraw from our communion, without attempting to make any schism. Provided always, that this shall be understood to extend only to such determinations, as the body shall judge indispensable in doctrine or Presbyterian government" (Plan of Union, 1758, Synod of New York and Philadelphia, p. 3; see also *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, Minutes of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia 1758, p. 286; also *The Presbyterian Digest, 1907*, William E. Moore, compiler (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work), p. 28.).

724 The question of freedom of conscience under Scripture emerged immediately, however,  
725 because some ministers of the synod considered certain articles in the standards to be at  
726 variance with, or at least not explicitly enjoined by, Scripture. The synod resolved this conflict  
727 of conscience by permitting these ministers and, later, candidates for the ministry to declare  
728 their disagreements (“scruples”) with particular articles of the Westminster standards. It then  
729 delegated to the examining body the responsibility for determining whether the candidate’s  
730 disagreement concerned an essential article of the church’s “doctrine, worship or  
731 government.”<sup>30</sup> Although the Adopting Act was later modified, it established a precedent that  
732 has heavily influenced American Presbyterians’ understanding of their confessional  
733 commitments to this day. Therefore, the church has consistently maintained that certain  
734 beliefs and practices are indispensable for the church’s theological integrity. At the same time,  
735 “differences always have existed and been allowed . . . as to [the] modes of explaining and  
736 theorizing within the metes and bounds of the one accepted system.”<sup>31</sup>

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

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

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

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<sup>30</sup> *Minutes of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1706–1788*, Guy S. Klett, ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1976), 103–104.

<sup>31</sup> *Minutes*, PCUSA, 1868, “Proposed Terms of Reunion Between the Two Branches of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America,” p. 33. For Plan of Reunion of 1869, see *Digest, 1886*, pp. 99–106; also *Minutes*, PCUSA, 1865–1869, p. 276ff.

754 delegates withdrew and regrouped as a church with the same legal name, but popularly known  
755 as the “New School.”

756 In 1870, the northern Old School and New School churches reunited in a spirit of “mutual  
757 confidence and love.” The reunion agreement carefully integrated themes of both “schools”  
758 by seeking “guarantees for orthodoxy . . . and Christian liberty” combined in a spirit of  
759 “diversity and harmony, liberty and love.”<sup>32</sup>

760 4. *To uphold the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that have original*  
761 *jurisdiction in church governance while also sustaining the rights and responsibilities of*  
762 *governing bodies that have the power of oversight and review.*

763 Another disagreement that dates from the church’s earliest days concerns the powers of  
764 governing bodies. The first gathering of an American presbytery (1706) was composed of  
765 ordained officers with differing views of what constituted faithful church governance. One  
766 group from New England, led by Jonathan Dickinson, favored limiting the power of all  
767 governing bodies. Scripture alone, they believed, provided all that was necessary for the  
768 whole work of ministry. Another group, from Scotland and Ireland, also acknowledged  
769 Scripture as an “infallible rule” and the possibility that church councils would err. They  
770 insisted, however, that the “bare letter” of Scripture must be interpreted by widely  
771 representative assemblies that could be trusted to guide the church by devising creeds, by  
772 adopting statements of confession, and by ordering the church’s common life.<sup>33</sup> This view  
773 prevailed in 1797, when the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United  
774 States of America was organized.

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

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

<sup>33</sup>Is it “the bare letter [of Scripture] that is the church’s rule or is it the letter together with its true and proper sense and meaning, intended by the Holy Ghost that is the rule?” (John Thomson), *An Overture Presented to the Reverend Synod of Dissenting Ministers, Sitting in Philadelphia, in the Month of September 1728* (Philadelphia: printed for the author, 1729), 15–16, 18–19.

784 recognized the General Assembly as the court of final appeal in specific cases. Yet its General  
 785 Assembly was circumspect in offering general deliverances, and when it did provide them, it  
 786 regarded them as “didactic, advisory, and monitoring.”<sup>34</sup> The reunion in 1983 of the PCUS  
 787 and the UPCUSA reinforced those elements in both streams that had upheld the rights of  
 788 presbyteries over against the General Assembly.

789 Presbyteries and sessions have the right and responsibility to examine and ordain their  
 790 officers and to decide who may be admitted to membership in congregations and presbyteries.  
 791 In addition, lower governing bodies may petition higher ones by overture to take action.  
 792 Presbyteries have the additional right to confirm (or veto) changes in the church’s  
 793 constitution. In turn, the General Assembly, synods, and presbyteries, acting as “higher”  
 794 governing bodies, have the duty of oversight and the right to review lower governing bodies’  
 795 decisions in specific cases. Such rulings have the power of precedent for lower governing  
 796 bodies that are deciding similar matters.

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

- 798 • The discipleship of maintaining a healthy tension within these four sets of  
 799 complementary commitments has always been a strenuous and complex exercise.  
 800 The Presbyterian church has consistently looked to the Holy Spirit speaking through  
 801 Scripture for its compass in navigating a faithful course to God’s kingdom. But  
 802 simply charting a course has never been sufficient. The opportunities and  
 803 temptations of the culture that the church inhabits, discord over controversial issues,  
 804 and other factors internal and external to the church can push the church to one side  
 805 of the polity balance or the other. In certain situations they can even threaten to  
 806 capsize the ship of faith by collapsing the necessary tension between its guiding  
 807 principles. The church’s calling in the face of such a challenge has been to seek  
 808 flexible equilibrium rather than static and perfect balance. It achieves this goal by  
 809 weighting its polity for a time in favor of those principles neglected by current trends  
 810 in culture, controversy, theology, or practice. Such temporary maneuvers are  
 811 essential to right the ship, but they too can endanger its faithful forward course if

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<sup>34</sup> [Presbyterian Church in the United States, *Minutes of the General Assembly 1879* (Wilmington, N.C.: Jackson and Bell, 1879), pp. 23–24.] An illustration of the restraint with which the PCUS General Assembly spoke of its authority may be found in its 1965 Digest of the acts and proceedings of previous General Assemblies. There the Digest characterizes the 1898 General Assembly’s reaction to a proposal that it set forth the “fundamentals” of the system of doctrine in the Westminster standards. The PCUS General Assembly declined to adopt binding fundamentals. But according to the Digest, it affirmed that the General Assembly “can, of course, declare what it conceives to be the fundamentals of this system [of doctrine]. But it cannot determine abstractly, apart from regular judicial process, how the presbytery, which under our Constitution is charged with the duty of ordaining candidates, is to interpret this requirement in the regular discharge of its own functions . . .” *A Digest of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1861–1965* (Atlanta, GA: Office of the General Assembly, 1966), p. 117.



- 812 they are taken to be permanent or irreversible. When conditions change, equilibrium  
813 between the complementary commitments described above should be restored.
- 814 • The church, as Reformed traditions are acutely aware, is situated in human culture.  
815 This has both positive and negative implications:
    - 816 —The inclusion of Christians from different cultural backgrounds has already and  
817 can again open new vistas of faithfulness that strengthen the fabric of  
818 Presbyterian polity and the vibrancy of Presbyterian life together. In the colonial  
819 period, a vigorous, uniquely American form of Presbyterian life in community  
820 was spawned from the mix of its earliest members' differing convictions about  
821 church government, which were derived from their various cultural backgrounds  
822 in the British Isles. Similarly, today, the inclusion of non-Anglo communities'  
823 traditions is expanding and revitalizing the church's vision of faithfulness for the  
824 era ahead.
    - 825 —Because the church is composed of fallen human beings, it remains susceptible  
826 to sin. Sin has the power to disrupt the balance between principles of polity that  
827 the church has long felt called by Scripture to maintain. Any contemporary  
828 polity is, inevitably, only an approximation of its ideals and is, therefore, a  
829 candidate for reform. But at its best, the church's maintenance of a faithful  
830 equilibrium between its polity principles keeps the ship of faith righted and  
831 progressing toward the full reign of God on this earth.
  - 832 • Church government, with the help of the Spirit then, can aspire to be a visible  
833 embodiment of a communion's understanding of Christian life in community.
  - 834 • Obedience to Presbyterian church polity is a condition of ordained leadership, even  
835 as church members acknowledge the necessity of the ongoing reform of church  
836 structures, disciplines, and policies.
  - 837 • A church's polity cannot live up to its calling unless it provides ways for conflicts  
838 within the church to be addressed theologically. Technical or merely political  
839 solutions to serious controversies rooted in sincere theological differences will not  
840 hold for long. In our denomination, this integral relationship of theology and polity  
841 has been strained in recent history.

### 842 C. Resources for Constructive Engagement: *Communal Discernment*

843 Presbyterian polity and traditional patterns of decision-making have great strengths.  
844 History and experience have shown, however, that not all situations faced by the church are  
845 most effectively addressed by the parliamentary procedures on which Presbyterian church  
846 law relies. In particular, decision-making by up-or-down vote, in which the winning  
847 majority takes all, may be ill-suited to situations in which there is a sizable minority or a  
848 persistent, substantial division on important aspects of its common life. In such situations,

849 parliamentary methods may exacerbate political infighting and escalate conflicts rather  
850 than resolve them. Adversarial debate tends to set positions in opposition to one another  
851 and to mask the needs, values, interests, and concerns that underlie those positions.  
852 Participants in a debate are tempted to defend their positions at all costs and to resist  
853 attentiveness to other views, mutual submission in love, and the leading of the Holy Spirit  
854 through collaborative exploration.

855 For decisions that have a significant impact on the life of the church, particularly those  
856 that are complex or potentially divisive, time is needed for corporate study of Scripture,  
857 gathering of information, prayerful reflection, mutual questioning, careful listening, and  
858 collective weighing of options. For clearer discernment of the mind of Christ, and for the sake  
859 of the unity of the church, all voices should be heard, including those who may be affected by  
860 the potential outcome of a decision.

861 The task force has made use of a variety of approaches for discernment. It has deliberated  
862 as a “committee of the whole” and employed disciplines such as mutual invitation, polarity  
863 management, consensus building, and other tools for structured communal discernment.  
864 These tools, plus approaches used by some other bodies within the church, are discussed in  
865 more depth in the resource, “Discernment and Decision-Making,” one of the discussion  
866 resources that can be found on our Web site ([www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/](http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/)). The task  
867 force has come to believe that the whole church at every level, including the General  
868 Assembly, would be well served by more regular use of communal efforts to discern the mind  
869 of Christ through the Scriptures, nurturing communal attitudes and practices that allow us to  
870 live faithfully with difference while we seriously engage in the quest for common  
871 understanding.

#### 872 *D. A Concluding Word on Polity and Process*

873 In this section we have looked back into Presbyterian history and then beyond Reformed  
874 traditions for resources that might help the church in its current difficulties. In order for these  
875 resources to point the way to resolutions of problems and to promising future directions, we  
876 as a communion must learn how to pass along more than the simple storyline of our  
877 tradition’s biography or the legal codes of its discipline. We must also school ourselves in the  
878 foundational theological commitments and the practical wisdom that flows from them—what  
879 we have called “points of balance”—that gave rise to that storyline and discipline in the first  
880 place. It is these points of balance that have allowed Presbyterian churches at their best to  
881 remain grounded and, at the same time, flexible and open to alternative means within and  
882 beyond their history and practice. This “balanced” posture is not easy to achieve, but it is  
883 essential if a Presbyterian church is to maintain the faithful equilibrium to which Reformed  
884 understanding aspires.

885       There is a third source of help and renewal for the church today, one that has impressed  
886 the task force again and again: the church's own members and organizations, many of which  
887 are pioneering new ways of working together that build bridges among parties and factions,  
888 deepen mutual understanding, and build up the body in love. One of the goals adopted by the  
889 task force was to study the health and promise of the church. In the midst of the difficulties  
890 and challenges that the denomination faces, we have found much health and strength to  
891 celebrate.

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

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

913       Task force members have read communications from those engaged in this wide range of  
914 efforts and learned from presbyteries, congregations, and other groups that are already  
915 promoting the church's unity, purity, and peace.<sup>35</sup> These experiences are heartening. They  
916 demonstrate that the progress the task force seeks to foster by this report and its  
917 recommendations will not be a new experience for the church, but an extension of attitudes  
918 and practices into which the church is already living. This report is not a new or different

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<sup>35</sup> Leslie Scanlon, "Common Ground: Task Force, small groups seeking way forward for PC(USA)," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, May 30, 2005, Vol. 187, No. 20, pp. 3-5.

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

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

## 928 *V. Recommendations*

929 [As amended by the 207th General Assembly (2006)]

930 Seeking the peace, unity, and purity that God offers us in the work of our loving Savior,  
931 the task force offers the following seven recommendations.

932 **1. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends that the**  
933 **217th General Assembly (2006) strongly encourage**

934 **a. every member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to witness to the**  
935 **church’s visible oneness, to avoid division into separate denominations that obscure our**  
936 **community in Christ, and to live in harmony with other members of this denomination,**  
937 **so that we may with one voice together glorify God in Jesus Christ, by the power of the**  
938 **Holy Spirit; and**

939 **b. all sessions, congregations, presbyteries, and synods to renew and**  
940 **strengthen their covenanted partnership with one another and with the General**  
941 **Assembly.**

## 942 *Rationale*

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

951 (U.S.A.) must not let its differences pull it apart. Each of us on the task force still thinks that  
952 some positions others among us hold are incorrect, even damaging to the church and the  
953 clarity of its message. Yet we have come to respect the integrity with which theological views  
954 different from our own are held, and we have seen that many others in the church have the  
955 same capacity to perceive the biblical basis and Christian credibility of other perspectives.

956 Therefore, the task force has concluded that, despite disagreements, the Presbyterian  
957 Church (U.S.A.) should make every effort to prevent schism. What protections are there  
958 against bitter division? The task force, diverse in its makeup, has gained some practical  
959 wisdom about what it required for unity while important differences remain. Our pattern of  
960 life together, our experiences of the results of sustained study and regular worship, and our  
961 review of history and the principles of polity have convinced us that there are Presbyterian  
962 traditions and habits, some of which have been underutilized, that may enable the  
963 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) not only to avoid a division, but to grow closer in Christ as its  
964 members struggle together to live out the gospel. The following recommendations, which are  
965 means to this end, commend the use of the resources we have discovered to the whole church.

966 **2. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends that the**  
967 **217th General Assembly (2006) urge governing bodies, congregations, and other groups**  
968 **of Presbyterians to follow the example of the task force and other groups that, in the face**  
969 **of difficult issues, have engaged in processes of intensive discernment through worship,**  
970 **community building, study, and collaborative work.**

971

### *Rationale*

972 The task force was directed to devise “an instrument and a process” by which means the  
973 church can discern and discuss matters that unite and divide it. By the grace of God and with  
974 the Spirit’s help, the task force grew into a Christian community. We also discovered that we  
975 were not unique, that numerous groups in the church were also seeking mutual understanding,  
976 using the disciplines of study, sharing of joys and sorrows, and prayer that paved the way. We  
977 commend to the church the methods that the task force and others have used to pave the way  
978 to discernment: deep reflection on Scripture; serious study of basic theological doctrines;  
979 intensive review of the history of the church, the currents of conviction that created and  
980 resolved conflicts, and the practical wisdom it has gained from its experience over time;  
981 regular prayer and worship; use of texts written from a variety of perspectives as an  
982 introduction to the discussion of potentially divisive issues; and work together toward  
983 important goals. Taken together, these disciplines form part of the “instrument and process”  
984 the task force commends to the church.

985 To assist other groups that want to use methods the task force employed, discussion  
986 resources that helped us shape our thinking are on our Web site:  
987 [www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/](http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/). In addition to educational resources produced by the task  
988 force, a complete bibliography of materials we have read is available  
989 ([www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/](http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/), look under Resources). Before June 2006, we will publish  
990 curricular materials that help church leaders, members, and groups make use of the  
991 educational resources we have prepared or used ourselves.

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

997 **3. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends that the**  
998 **217th General Assembly (2006) commend for study the Theological Reflection that**  
999 **heads the task force report (see lines 35–260).**

1000

### *Rationale*

1001 The task force was directed to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in “spiritual  
1002 discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century.” We began our discernment  
1003 process by studying core doctrines of the Christian faith. Toward the end of our time together,  
1004 as we began to draft this report, we summarized what we have come together to believe about  
1005 who we are called to be as Presbyterian Christians facing an uncertain, challenging future.  
1006 That summary, the Theological Reflection that begins this report, affirms biblical faith,  
1007 foundational Christian and Reformed teachings, and helpful ways that contemporary believers  
1008 express the faith in a world hungering for meaning and truth.

1009 The Theological Reflection is not, however, intended to be an official doctrinal statement  
1010 of the church, much less a new confession of faith. It is the work of one group whose  
1011 members were chosen, as we have said, not because we are experts but because we are typical  
1012 of the range of backgrounds and views of church leaders and members. The fact that the task  
1013 force, in all its diversity, has been able to agree on so much will, we hope, be an  
1014 encouragement to the church. What we hold in common is far greater than those things that  
1015 divide us. Many readers of the Theological Reflection will want to restate portions of it or add  
1016 to it. We encourage them to do so. We urge that the Theological Reflection be studied, not as a  
1017 finished or perfect product, but as a starting point for other groups that seek the experience,  
1018 which we have found so valuable, of grappling with basic theological issues in the company  
1019 of those who bring different perspectives. Listening to how our presumed opponents

1020 understand God, Jesus Christ, the work of the Spirit, the mission of the church, and other  
1021 centrally important features of the faith has done more to deepen our discernment and mutual  
1022 understanding than any other activity. Such theological searching, we believe, should be an  
1023 early step in any process of discernment meant to foster purity, unity, and peace.

1024 **4. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends that the**  
1025 **217th General Assembly (2006) direct the Committee on the Office of the General**  
1026 **Assembly, and urge those who plan and moderate meetings of other governing bodies,**  
1027 **to explore the use of alternative forms of discernment preliminary to decision-making,**  
1028 **especially in dealing with potentially divisive issues.**

1029

1030

### *Rationale*

1031 The other element of “an instrument and process” the task force commends to the church  
1032 is the wide variety of processes of discernment and communal decision-making the task force  
1033 used in its deliberations. These processes are alternatives to the mode of debate, in which  
1034 opposing sides emphasize the strength of their own position and the weaknesses of the other.  
1035 In discernment, members of the body work together to generate and weigh options. Advocacy  
1036 is complemented by inquiry. This can lead to cohesion in the body as well as discernment of  
1037 the will of Christ. These methods can be used under *Robert’s Rules of Order* [the primary  
1038 framework for decision-making in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)] in modes such as  
1039 “committee of the whole” before proceeding to a vote. The alternative approaches that were  
1040 most effective for the task force as it sought insight, understanding, and cohesion in Christ are  
1041 described in detail in “Discernment and Decision-Making,” one of the discussion resources  
1042 that can be found on our Web site ([www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/](http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/)), in video resources the  
1043 task force produced, and in additional resources posted on our Web site.

1044 The task force, having gained so much from these approaches and methods, strongly  
1045 commends them to the church. Such methods are easily integrated into the proceedings of  
1046 small groups like the task force. They also can be used by larger decision-making groups. In  
1047 the resources noted above, examples are provided of how all deliberative bodies, including  
1048 large assemblies, can integrate some of these alternative means of discernment into their life  
1049 and work.

1050 **5. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends that the**  
1051 **217th General Assembly (2006) approve the following authoritative interpretation of**  
1052 **section G-6.0108 of the *Book of Order*:**

1053 **a. *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government of the *Book of Order***  
1054 **set forth the scriptural and constitutional standards for ordination and installation.**



- 1055           **b. These standards are determined by the whole church, after the careful**  
 1056 **study of Scripture and theology, solely by the constitutional process of approval by the**  
 1057 **General Assembly with the approval of the presbyteries. These standards may be**  
 1058 **interpreted by the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission.**
- 1059           **c. Ordaining and installing bodies, acting as corporate expressions of the**  
 1060 **church, have the responsibility to determine their membership by applying these**  
 1061 **standards to those elected to office. These determinations include:**
- 1062                   **(1) Whether a candidate being examined for ordination and/or installation**  
 1063 **as elder, deacon, or minister of Word and Sacrament has departed from scriptural and**  
 1064 **constitutional standards for fitness for office,**
- 1065                   **(2) Whether any departure constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials**  
 1066 **of Reformed faith and polity under G-6.0108 of the *Book of Order*, thus barring the**  
 1067 **candidate from ordination and/or installation.**
- 1068           **d. Whether the examination and ordination and installation decision comply**  
 1069 **with the Constitution of the PC(USA), and whether the ordaining/installing body has**  
 1070 **conducted its examination reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately in**  
 1071 **deciding to ordain a candidate for church office is subject to review by higher governing**  
 1072 **bodies.**
- 1073           **e. All parties should endeavor to outdo one another in honoring one another's**  
 1074 **decisions, according the presumption of wisdom to ordaining/installing bodies in**  
 1075 **examining candidates and to the General Assembly, with presbyteries' approval, in**  
 1076 **setting standards.**

1077

*Rationale*

1078           The most intractable conflicts in the Presbyterian church often result in disputes over  
 1079 ordination. Therefore, the task force recommends this authoritative interpretation, which  
 1080 clarifies ordination procedures by emphasizing principles that are, we believe, closer to  
 1081 Presbyterian tradition than some of our current practices.

1082           If adopted, this authoritative interpretation would restore a greater degree of both rigor  
 1083 and flexibility in ordination decisions. The authoritative interpretation would accomplish this  
 1084 by clarifying provisions of G-6.0108 that stem from long-established principles of  
 1085 Presbyterian polity:

- 1086           1. Standards for ordination are determined by the whole church by constitutional  
 1087 process. Acting on their own, local governing bodies cannot set their own standards or set  
 1088 aside the church's standards.



1089           2. Ordaining and installing bodies are empowered and duty-bound to apply the church's  
1090 standards and to determine the fitness for office of those elected to office. This responsibility  
1091 includes determining, on a case-by-case basis, whether officers-elect adhere to essential and  
1092 necessary articles of doctrine, discipline, and government.

1093           3. Ordaining/installing bodies and higher governing bodies are partners in the  
1094 ordination process. Higher governing bodies oversee the decisions of lower ones. Ordaining  
1095 and installing bodies determine fitness for office. Partnership requires mutual respect of each  
1096 other's decisions.

1097 *Why is an authoritative interpretation needed?*

1098           The function of an authoritative interpretation is to clarify potentially ambiguous words  
1099 or phrases in the *Book of Order*. (See line 1243.)

1100           Section G-6.0108 was added to the *Book of Order* in 1983. It requires that all candidates  
1101 for office adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity (G-6.0108a, sentence one) as  
1102 expressed in *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government. Ordaining bodies may  
1103 not dispense with the church's standards or promulgate their own. Section G-6.0108 also  
1104 requires the application of the standards with integrity. It ensures freedom of conscience in  
1105 interpretation of Scripture within certain bounds, requires ordaining/installing bodies to  
1106 determine whether there is a "serious departure" from standards (G-6.0108a, sentence two),  
1107 and makes an important distinction between "standards" and "essentials."

1108           Standards are aspirational in character. No one lives up to them perfectly (for this reason,  
1109 G-6.0108 permits "departures" from standards that are not deemed essential). Essentials, by  
1110 the terms of G-6.0108b (third sentence), are those matters of faith and polity that the officer-  
1111 elect's governing body discerns are indispensable for ordained service. Essential doctrines are  
1112 those that are required for a person's beliefs to fall within the bounds of Reformed  
1113 understandings of Christian faith. Essentials of polity are those that are required for a person's  
1114 ordained service to fall within the bounds of Reformed understandings of church governance.  
1115 Essential practices are those that are required for a person's life to fall within the bounds of  
1116 Reformed understandings of Christian discipleship.

1117           In recent years, the relationship between G-6.0108 and other *Book of Order* sections on  
1118 ordination has become unclear. Some ordaining/installing bodies have maintained that the  
1119 *Constitution* gives them the right to overlook or dispense with certain churchwide standards.  
1120 Others have considered adopting their own version or distillation of essential standards, to be  
1121 applied to all officers-elect. Some interpreters have insisted that some provisions of the  
1122 *Constitution*, such as those that govern sexual behavior, supersede the right of ordaining and  
1123 installing bodies to determine fitness for ordination in all cases.

1124 This authoritative interpretation addresses all these points of confusion, by reaffirming  
 1125 the wisdom in G-6.0108, as it holds together key historical and theological principles—the  
 1126 need for the establishment of standards by the whole church and the duty of ordaining and  
 1127 installing bodies to apply those standards in determining fitness for office and compliance  
 1128 with essentials. If the authoritative interpretation clarifies current confusions about ordination  
 1129 and installation, it will, we believe, contribute to the peace, unity, and purity of the church.

1130 *What is new or different about the proposed authoritative interpretation?*

1131 No elements of the proposed authoritative interpretation are new. In fact, both G-6.0108  
 1132 and this interpretation represent a reemphasis of traditional principles that, as we  
 1133 demonstrated in the previous section, have been held in constructive balance and tension in  
 1134 the past.

- 1135 • *The power of the whole church to set standards is affirmed.* This power was first  
 1136 conferred in 1729, when the General Synod adopted the Westminster standards as  
 1137 the confessional basis for all ministers. The principle established then and confirmed  
 1138 in this authoritative interpretation do not permit the kind of “local option”  
 1139 arrangements that some have proposed, in which each ordaining and installing body  
 1140 sets its own standards. Such a procedure would be new, and it would be un-  
 1141 Presbyterian.
- 1142 • *The authoritative interpretation also emphasizes the traditional respective*  
 1143 *responsibilities of various persons and bodies.* Officers-elect have the duty to  
 1144 conform to essentials of faith and polity and the right to freedom of conscience  
 1145 within bounds. Ordaining and installing bodies have the duty to apply standards and  
 1146 the right to discern which are essential for ordained service. These two principles  
 1147 were also established in 1729, when ministers were given the opportunity to dissent  
 1148 from articles of the Westminster standards (“declare a scruple” was the language of  
 1149 the time) and ordaining bodies were given the right to determine whether the  
 1150 “scrupled” article was an essential tenet.
- 1151 • *The authoritative interpretation emphasizes as well the power of higher governing*  
 1152 *bodies to review ordination and installation decisions if they are challenged,*  
 1153 *determining whether examinations were lawfully and fairly conducted and whether*  
 1154 *the matter of essentials was adequately grappled with.* This, too, is a tradition of  
 1155 Presbyterian polity, dating from the adoption of a constitution and the establishment  
 1156 of the General Assembly in 1789.

1157 By emphasizing traditional principles, the authoritative interpretation might, however,  
 1158 introduce at least two changes in current practices of ordination.

- 1159           • Though current practices vary from session to session and presbytery to presbytery,  
1160           it is often reported that examinations lack rigor by not fully investigating the scope  
1161           of each officer-elect’s beliefs, practices, gifts, willingness to uphold the governance  
1162           of the church, and scruples. *The authoritative interpretation lifts up the obligation of*  
1163           *the ordaining or installing body to gain the broadest visions of each officer-elect’s*  
1164           *faith, manner of life, and promise as it applies standards and makes determinations*  
1165           *about essentials.*
- 1166           • The authoritative interpretation also lifts up a feature of G-6.0108 that is grounded in  
1167           history but has fallen out of current practice. *Section G-6.0108 puts “faith and*  
1168           *polity”—belief and behavior—on an equal footing, as they were in 1729, when*  
1169           *scruples were permitted in matters of “doctrine, discipline and government.”* Over  
1170           time, an imbalance has developed, with flexibility afforded in matters of doctrine and  
1171           strict compliance required on all points of conduct and polity. By implication, this  
1172           confers greater authority on the Form of Government than on the confessions and the  
1173           Scripture they interpret. The proposed authoritative interpretation restores the  
1174           balance, grounded firmly in the Reformed theological insight that faith and action are  
1175           inextricably related. Faith is not only mental assent but also a pattern of life lived in  
1176           the presence of God. The test and fruit of faith are change of heart and amendment of  
1177           life. Therefore, officers-elect must comply with essentials of polity and practice as  
1178           well as faith. Ordaining and installing bodies may exercise judgment in the  
1179           application of standards of both belief and practice that are deemed by those bodies  
1180           to be nonessential.

1181           In a word, the proposed authoritative interpretation introduces no innovations, but it does  
1182           seek to retrieve and clarify long-established Presbyterian principles of decision-making in  
1183           matters of ordination to and installation in church offices.

1184           *How would the authoritative interpretation address current critical issues*  
1185           *in the church?*

1186           The authoritative interpretation we have proposed is intended to clarify constitutional  
1187           principles and decision-making procedures in any church controversy that affects ordination  
1188           standards, as so many Presbyterian disputes have done in the past. It is not designed to settle a  
1189           particular issue but to clarify the common framework within which all ordination decisions  
1190           are made. The problem on which it focuses is a perennial one. Because Presbyterian standards  
1191           for office are ideals, including the highest ideal—perfect obedience to Scripture—all  
1192           candidates for office will depart from them in some ways, in both belief and practice. There  
1193           never have been or will be perfect officers-elect. Thus every ordaining/installing body, in  
1194           every case, must decide what departures can be tolerated and which are so serious that

1195 essential matters of faith and practice are compromised. The interpretation proposed here  
 1196 makes clear that standards may not be compromised merely because they are unpopular in a  
 1197 particular locale. At the same time, ordaining/installing bodies, which have the most direct  
 1198 connection and responsibility for people seeking to enter their membership, have the  
 1199 responsibility for making judgments about whether these actual, fallible human beings have  
 1200 the self-awareness, commitment, and capacity to exercise faithful ministry.

1201 At the present moment, however, many will ask how the proposed interpretation may  
 1202 affect several issues that have been the focus of recent conflicts about ordination, including  
 1203 the use of theological standards in the ordination process, the application of G-6.0106b, the  
 1204 respective powers of governing bodies, and the status of authoritative interpretations.

- 1205 • *Theological standards*: The proposed authoritative interpretation emphasizes what  
 1206 the Constitution already requires: the examination of officers-elect according to the  
 1207 standards of Scripture, the confessions, and the Form of Government.  
 1208 Ordaining/installing bodies may not ignore any existing churchwide standards or  
 1209 adopt additional standards to be imposed on all candidates. The proposed  
 1210 authoritative interpretation further emphasizes the duty of ordaining/installing bodies  
 1211 to determine whether the officer-elect accepts the essentials of faith and polity. If the  
 1212 candidate cannot accept the essentials of Reformed faith and polity as determined by  
 1213 the examining body, the ordination cannot proceed.
- 1214 • *G-6.0106b*: It is not the intention of this proposed authoritative interpretation of  
 1215 G-6.0108 to change existing ordination standards, including the standards of  
 1216 G-6.0106b, which was added to the *Constitution* in 1997, and authoritative  
 1217 interpretations addressing its concerns.<sup>36</sup> The task force was not asked to adjudicate  
 1218 the issues named in its mandate, including the questions about sexuality and  
 1219 ordination that are the focus of G-6.0106b. Rather, the task force was instructed to  
 1220 propose ways for the church to live faithfully while dealing with those issues. The

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<sup>36</sup> “G-6.0106 Gifts and Requirements

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

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

1221 task force recognizes that the debate over G-6.0106b may continue for many years.  
1222 The authoritative interpretation the task force proposes is designed to help the church  
1223 maintain peace, unity, and faithfulness to scriptural and theological principles while  
1224 that debate continues.

1225 The proposed interpretation requires ordaining and installing bodies to examine  
1226 carefully both the doctrinal views and the manner of life of those elected to office. If  
1227 an ordaining or installing body determines that an officer-elect has departed from  
1228 G-6.0106b, a manner-of-life standard, the ordaining/installing body must then  
1229 determine whether this departure violates essentials of faith or polity. If so, the  
1230 candidate may not be ordained. If the departure is judged not to violate the essentials  
1231 of Reformed faith and polity, after the ordaining/installing body has weighed the  
1232 departure in the full context of a candidate's statement of faith and manner of life,  
1233 then there is no barrier to ordination (though there also is no requirement that the  
1234 person be ordained). As at present, the ordaining/installing body would make the  
1235 decision, with the help of the Spirit, about whether to ordain and/or install and based  
1236 on all the evidence before it.

- 1237 • *Review of decisions*: The interpretation reaffirms long-standing principles of review  
1238 of lower governing bodies by higher ones. Decisions about who meets standards of  
1239 fitness and whether those elected to office are in compliance with essentials of faith  
1240 and polity belong to the ordaining/installing body, but whether the ordaining body  
1241 has adequately exercised its duties, including whether it has adequately grappled  
1242 with the question of what constitutes essentials for ordination, is subject to review.  
1243 Prior judicial commission rulings have specified that examination of candidates must  
1244 be reasonable, responsible, and deliberate and that it must be thorough enough to  
1245 ensure compliance with essentials. This interpretation conforms to the letter as well  
1246 as spirit of those earlier judgments.
- 1247 • *The status of authoritative interpretations*: The proposed authoritative interpretation  
1248 would clarify an issue that has caused considerable confusion: how authoritative  
1249 interpretations of ordination standards function. The Constitution gives the General  
1250 Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission the power to issue authoritative  
1251 interpretations of constitutional provisions and stipulates that such interpretations are  
1252 binding on lower governing bodies (*Book of Order*, G-13.0112 and G-13.0103r).  
1253 Ordination standards are constitutional provisions, and thus are subject to  
1254 authoritative interpretation. At the same time, the General Assembly Permanent  
1255 Judicial Commission has established that higher governing bodies may not prevent  
1256 lower bodies from carrying out their constitutionally mandated responsibilities. The  
1257 conjunction of these two principles means that, if an ordination standard has been  
1258 authoritatively interpreted, (1) ordaining/installing bodies must interpret the standard  
1259 as the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission have

1260 authoritatively directed, and (2) ordaining/installing bodies have the power to  
1261 determine whether any officer-elect's departure from the interpreted standard  
1262 compromises essentials of Reformed faith and polity and thus should constitute a  
1263 barrier to ordination. In short, an authoritative interpretation binds how an  
1264 ordaining/installing body interprets a standard, but it does not override that body's  
1265 power to judge which matters are essential and whether any departure from  
1266 nonessentials is sufficiently serious that a candidate will not be ordained or installed.

1267 We believe the practical effects of the implementation of the proposed authoritative  
1268 interpretation can be positive. Confirming the standard-setting role of the whole church  
1269 will contribute to the church's unity and purity. Affirming the right of ordaining/installing  
1270 bodies to make judgments about standards and fitness for office will, we believe, ultimately  
1271 contribute to the church's peace. These measures will not be effective, however, unless  
1272 subsection (5) of the proposed authoritative interpretation is taken with utmost seriousness:  
1273 *All parties must outdo one another in honoring the decisions of other bodies, presuming*  
1274 *that other governing bodies have employed their best wisdom and sincerely sought the*  
1275 *Spirit's guidance in all their deliberations.* The proposed authoritative interpretation is not  
1276 a license either to disregard standards or to override judgments of the fitness of persons  
1277 elected to office.

1278 Admittedly, this measure will stimulate some vigorous debates and possibly dissension in  
1279 sessions and presbyteries about critical issues. Groups that meet together regularly have,  
1280 however, many more opportunities to engage conflicts constructively than do large national  
1281 bodies like the General Assembly whose membership changes from meeting to meeting and  
1282 often finds itself under sustained pressure from opposing interest groups. And what about  
1283 purity? Some will object that the approach we propose will lead to variations in the actual  
1284 judgments made by ordaining bodies and will permit persons to be ordained who do not meet  
1285 the church's standards. There is already considerable variation in the judgments of ordaining  
1286 and installing bodies; and no candidate perfectly conforms to the church's standards. We  
1287 predict that the authoritative interpretation, by bringing renewed emphasis to the process of  
1288 examination and application of standards, will in fact lead to more careful and balanced  
1289 decisions about fitness for ordination, thereby promoting the purity of the church and the  
1290 quality of its leadership.

1291 *Finally, it is essential to note that the proposed authoritative interpretation is meant to*  
1292 *serve these purposes—peace, unity, and purity—no matter what standards are in place in the*  
1293 *future.* Some current standards, particularly G-6.0106b, are controversial. If that provision  
1294 were to be removed, or others were to be added, the authoritative interpretation, with its  
1295 emphasis on the right of ordaining/installing bodies to apply the standards in a given case,  
1296 would continue to ensure that an ordaining body could not be forced to ordain a person  
1297 whose faith or manner of life it deems to constitute a departure from essentials of Reformed

1298 faith and practice established in *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government in the  
1299 *Book of Order*.

1300 We submit that the authoritative interpretation proposed here answers many pressing  
1301 needs of the church and will continue to do so in years to come. At the same time, we  
1302 acknowledge that there are no perfect solutions to the challenge of living with a common  
1303 confession of faith and deep difference about particular issues. Some will be disappointed that  
1304 we have not adjudicated the controversial issues of the moment, making recommendations on  
1305 behalf of one side or another. We have understood our mandate to be broader and farther  
1306 reaching: to seek ways for the church to live the gospel joyfully and productively amid  
1307 inevitable disagreement. We believe that the recommendations we have put forward,  
1308 including this authoritative interpretation, will facilitate that.

1309 **6. If the 217th General Assembly (2006) approves Recommendation 5, the Task**  
1310 **Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church strongly encourages**

1311 **a. the 217th General Assembly (2006) to approve no additional authoritative**  
1312 **interpretations, to remove no existing authoritative interpretations, and to send to the**  
1313 **presbyteries no proposed constitutional amendments that would have the effect of**  
1314 **changing denominational policy on any of the major issues in the task force's report,**  
1315 **including Christology, biblical interpretation, essential tenets, and sexuality and**  
1316 **ordination.**

1317 **b. all church members to acknowledge their traditional biblical obligation, as**  
1318 **set forth in Matthew 18:15–17, Matthew 5:23-25, and in the Rules of Discipline in the**  
1319 ***Book of Order*, “to conciliate, mediate, and adjust differences without strife” prayerfully**  
1320 **and deliberately (D-1.0103) and to institute administrative or judicial proceedings only**  
1321 **when other efforts fail to preserve the purposes and purity of the church.**

#### 1322 *Rationale*

1323 In order to assess whether the ways forward we have proposed are effective in promoting  
1324 peace, unity, and purity, it seems advisable to all members of the task force, whatever their  
1325 personal positions on issues, that the task force's recommendations be considered and  
1326 weighed in a spirit of discernment, and that they also be given an opportunity to work.

1327 Although the task force has affirmed commonly held convictions of Presbyterians on the  
1328 issues the General Assembly named in the task force's mandate, it has not taken positions on  
1329 disputed issues whose resolution might necessitate constitutional change. Nor has it debated  
1330 various measures that have been or may be sent to the General Assembly at which this report  
1331 will be received. We believe it would create confusion and further conflict to attempt to make  
1332 major constitutional changes to section G-6.0106 or on other controversial issues before the



1333 church has reacquainted itself with the time-tested principles of the proposed authoritative  
 1334 interpretation. In the same period, additional measures are required to create a climate for  
 1335 discernment. Whenever possible, personal engagement, mediation, and conciliation should be  
 1336 used before either administrative or judicial action is considered.

1337 **7. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends to the**  
 1338 **217th General Assembly (2006) that this report answer the following: *Overture 01-33,***  
 1339 ***Commissioners' Resolutions 00-28, 01-23, and Item 02-10.***

1340 *Rationale*

1341 These items referred to the task force by previous General Assemblies are answered by  
 1342 this report.

## 1343 *VI. A Final Word*

1344 This entire report has as its premise that a season of discernment is due in the church, one  
 1345 that all the task force's recommendations are intended to support. We have

- 1346 • recommended that the church remain united and strengthen its internal partnerships;
- 1347 • suggested that Presbyterians form and support communities of discernment;
- 1348 • offered a Theological Reflection that is the result of our own search for Christian  
 1349 identity;
- 1350 • urged governing bodies to use a variety of methods, the better to discern the will of  
 1351 God;
- 1352 • recommended a return to traditional methods of making ordination decisions that put  
 1353 discernment at the center; and
- 1354 • suggested that if these measures are approved, the church seek to create new patterns  
 1355 of interaction and to increase mutual understanding before engaging in processes of  
 1356 constitutional change.

1357 Life together in a discernment mode has the potential to be more constructive and less  
 1358 difficult than our current pattern of head-to-head confrontation over issues. The purpose of  
 1359 discernment, however, is not to minimize critical issues in order to get on to other matters,  
 1360 much less to make life more pleasant. The purpose, rather, is to know, in our very being as a  
 1361 church, the peace, unity, and purity that have been given to us in Jesus Christ, and to show  
 1362 that peace, unity, and purity to the world we have been commissioned to teach and serve.

1363 Therefore, our denominational struggle to live into the fullness of the gift we have in  
 1364 Jesus Christ is not a diversion from our true mission, as some would claim, but integral to our



1365 vocation to proclaim the truth of the gospel. On the night before he died, in the longest prayer  
1366 recorded in the Gospels, Jesus prayed for us, the church of the future, lifting our names and  
1367 our troubled church before God in prayer. And chief among his petitions in our behalf was his  
1368 prayer that we “may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in  
1369 us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. . . . By this everyone will know that  
1370 you are my disciples [he said], if you have love for one another” (John 17:21; John 13:35).  
1371 How is the world to be challenged to know the truth about God? The world needs not only to  
1372 hear our witness to the gospel, but also to see and experience the embodied witness of a  
1373 community joined in love of one another.

1374 Jesus does not, it should be noted, pray that we may all be the same or that we all agree.  
1375 Indeed, one of the most compelling reasons to continue to hold on to one another is to  
1376 persuade one another of the truth as God has given us to know it. Another is to strengthen and  
1377 support one another, different as our vocations and life circumstances may be, in personal  
1378 holiness and in service to a world riddled with suffering and injustice. Nevertheless, even as  
1379 we differ and even as we contend with one another, Jesus prays that we may all be one, that  
1380 we might love one another despite many differences that threaten to divide us. At a time when  
1381 people readily kill one another over their differences, a church that lives and works for that  
1382 kind of witness will capture the attention of a polarized world. What besides the mystery of  
1383 divine love could give us the capacity to love those whose goals and views differ from, even  
1384 contradict, our own?

1385 The task force is convinced that the world is watching the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)  
1386 and other denominations as we engage in highly publicized debates. To be one is not to say  
1387 that we will be the same, that we will all agree, that there will be no conflict, but as the church  
1388 listens to Jesus pray, all its members are reminded that the quality of our life together—our  
1389 ability to make visible the unique relationship that is ours in Jesus Christ—is compelling  
1390 testimony to the truth and power of the gospel we proclaim.

1391

1392 **Comment: The success of this proposal is dependent upon all governing bodies**  
1393 **taking all standards of the church seriously and applying them rigorously in the**  
1394 **examination process. All governing bodies are encouraged to develop resources to**  
1395 **ensure that this happens.**



## *Study Guide*

### *Introduction*

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

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

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

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

[www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/](http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### ***A. Christology***

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

- What does it mean to you that Jesus is Lord?

## B. *Biblical Authority and Interpretation*

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

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

## C. *Sexuality and Ordination*

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

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

## Section IV: *Resources for Peace, Unity, and Purity*

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

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

### B. Resources for Constructive Engagement: *Presbyterian Polity*

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

### C. Resources for Constructive Engagement: *Communal Discernment*

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

- Where do you imagine communal discernment to be most useful in the life of the church?

#### D. *A Concluding Word on Polity and Process*

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

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

#### **Section V: *Recommendations***

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

#### **Section VI: *A Final Word***

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

# *Covenant*

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

we will be in prayer for each other and for our work that we may faithfully serve God, follow Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, and be guided by the Holy Spirit;

we will seek to be guided by Scripture and will regularly study it together;

we will worship whenever we gather, inviting all who are present at our meetings to worship with us. With authorization, we will celebrate the Lord's Supper at each meeting as a sign that the peace, unity and purity we seek is God's gift to us in Christ;

we will speak the truth with love, expressing ourselves with candor and humility;

we will listen, endeavoring to understand each other, especially those whose views seem to differ from our own, maintaining a spirit of openness and vulnerability;

we will carry out our work among this community of believers, respecting confidences, showing faithfulness in our relationships, and trusting each other's motivations and dedication;

we will model a respectful, loving process of discernment and dialogue, seeking to reach consensus whenever possible, ever mindful of our responsibilities to all the members of our beloved Church;

we will communicate regularly and effectively with the whole church on the work of the task force in order to include them in the process;

we will work in good faith within the open-meeting policy of the General Assembly and welcome the press and other observers present at our meetings, as we seek to discover new and challenging ways "to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century." We trust the press to perform its part of this responsibility by reporting on our work in accordance with the published ethical standards of the Associated Church Press and the Evangelical Press Association.

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



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