

Containing Diversity: How the Report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church was Received by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

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There has always been controversy and competition in the Presbyterian Church. For the past generation, though, the church has been in a permanent cycle of conflict which has spawned a host of special interest organizations of the left and right, an endless string of judicial cases, and an annual battle of overtures to amend the church's constitution. In 2001 the General Assembly created a Task Force to discern a way to bring about the peace, unity, and purity of the church. In 2005 the Task Force made its report to the church. After almost a year of opposing views, and following significant debate at the General Assembly, the Peace, Unity, and Purity (PUP) report was adopted in June 2006.

What is the Task Force and what was it supposed to do?

In the Presbyterian Church's competition between the opposing wings of the church for the hearts and minds of the church's center, two of the enduring issues have been the precise authority of the Bible and the exact nature of Jesus' divinity. These issues play out somewhat differently in different eras. Since the 1970s there has been a running argument in the church over the authority and interpretation of Scriptural passages which appear to condemn homosexual behavior. This controversy has been especially acute over whether sexually active homosexuals can be ordained as ministers and elders. In the year before the Task Force was created, there was also a short-lived controversy over whether Christ was the only way to salvation, or just one way among many. The way these controversies were fought out led some to see the church as being driven more by power politics than by faithfulness to the gospel.

With these controversies as background, this was the mandate of the Task Force:

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 that 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.).

The Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church was created by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 2001. The Moderator of the General Assembly, Syngman Rhee, and his two predecessors, Jack Rogers and Freda Gardner, named the members. The twenty members, equally divided between ministers and elders, would represent the whole church. It included well-known activists on both sides of the controversial issues in the church, and people not identified with either side who were active in their local congregations and other church bodies. The co-moderators were the Rev. Gary Demarest and Elder Jean (Jenny) Stoner. They were given four years to do their work, later extended to five because the PCUSA voted to have General Assemblies every two years instead of annually.

The Task Force, as it understood its mission, was not supposed to solve the problems that the church has been fighting about, but to lead the church in a process of spiritual discernment. The Task Force decided early on to begin with Scriptural and theological reflection in order to create a broad foundation of agreement, rather than trying to jump right in to the most contested issues. The Task Force worked hard to model and provide supporting resources for this conversation. They urged the church at all levels, especially in each presbytery, to undergo a similar discernment process.

What is the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)?

The church's constitution consists of the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*. The *Book of Confessions* contains 11 confessions and catechisms, from the ancient Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed to the recent Brief Statement of Faith. Nearly half of the *Book of Confessions* consists of the Westminster Confession of Faith and its related Larger and Shorter Catechisms.

The *Book of Order*, which is Part II of the church's constitution, consists of the Form of Government (sections beginning with the letter G), the Directory of Worship (W), and the Rules of Discipline (D). Most controversies in the Presbyterian Church in recent years have centered on attempts to amend the Form of Government.

What did the Task Force report say?

In September 2005, the Task Force issued its final report, "A Season of Discernment." The report contains the fruit of their Scriptural and theological exploration, as well as seven recommendations for action. The final report was to be acted on by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in the June 2006 meeting in Birmingham.

Theological Background

The first job of the Task Force was "to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century." The first half of the

report, therefore, is devoted to the theological background defining Presbyterians. The diverse group that made up the Task Force found that the theological convictions they shared were bigger than the issues and conclusions that still divided them.

The ground of our faith is that God loves us. This is the first point of the Task Force report, and is, surveys show, the most widely held theological conviction of most Presbyterians. The God who loves us, continues the Task Force report, is the triune God, the God of Israel who raised Jesus Christ bodily from the dead. This is the identity and faith of Presbyterian Christians. “This one faith is diverse but not divided.” There is room for diversity on secondary points, but the church, and the Task Force, are united in proclaiming the core faith of God’s love through Christ.

Is Jesus Christ the only Savior?

One of the four issues that the Task Force was especially charged to deal with was the question of Christology, of the nature and role of Christ. This question has been especially important in recent years in the face of other world religions. The world, and increasingly the United States, is religiously diverse. Some argue that this diversity means we should embrace pluralism, the idea that there are many equally good religions or paths to truth. Yet the Bible and the Reformed tradition proclaim that Christ is the unique revelation of God, and the only way to salvation. The Task Force forthrightly affirmed the biblical claim that Jesus is “the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through [him]” (John 14:6, emphasis added) and “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The Task Force also reminded the church of the great Reformed insight that “salvation rests not in any merit of our own but in the sovereign love of God that has been made known to us in Jesus Christ.” Jesus is the one way, but only God knows exactly how that works. It is not the church’s job to answer that question, just to be faithful. The Task Force reminded readers that God’s greatness and Christ’s uniqueness give Christians no reason to boast, but on the contrary that we are sinners needing grace – and humility.

How should we understand power?

The Task Force was sensitive to differences of power in the church. It tried to model a thoughtful process in which the leaders did not dominate the agenda, each member was listened to, and decisions were arrived at by consensus. The group wanted the church to use a similar process in considering its report, and in general to consider alternative modes of decision making in addition to Robert’s Rules of Order and majority rule.

The Task Force affirmed the Reformed emphasis on God’s sovereign power in Creation. Our identity, they write, comes from God adopting us through grace, not from our own achievement or merit. The Holy Spirit empowers us, especially in understanding God’s Word. And because “divine power makes itself felt among us,” our understanding of power in the world is changed, too. The love of God, they write,

is not confined to the people of one religious perspective, or of one social or economic class, or of one race or ethnicity, or of one gender or gender orientation. Such is the love of God that for those who are in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

Biblical authority, interpretation, and ordination – how much freedom do we have?

No issue has been more contentious in recent church history than the question of what the Bible says, and how much latitude potential church officers should have in interpreting it.

The Task Force made clear that proclaiming the Word of God is crucial to Christian identity. They quoted the *Book of Confessions* in taking a traditional position on the Bible's authority: “we believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God.” They acknowledged that even among Presbyterians who honor Scripture's authority there is heated debate over biblical interpretation. Christians, they contended, are bound in conscience to interpret Scripture through its witness to Jesus Christ, not according to ideological convictions.

All members of the church have freedom of conscience in interpreting Scripture. Even the officers of the church – its ministers, elders, and deacons – are not asked to suspend their consciences. However, such freedom is “subject to standards (*Book of Order*, G-6.0108a) and must be exercised within constitutional bounds (*Book of Order*, G-6.0108b).” Becoming an officer of the church is itself a free act, which includes the decision to accept the standards of the church. There is still room for different theological interpretations, especially on secondary points, but officers are called on to act decently and in order, and that includes accepting the constitution's limits.

This is what the *Book of Order* sections, cited above, actually say:

G-6.0108a. Freedom of Conscience -- Individual and Corporate

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.

In other words, if you are called to be an officer of the Presbyterian Church, you are expected to *want* to embrace the church's standards, respect the rights of others, and promote the church's orderly government. Claiming freedom of conscience against the church's standards should be the rare exception, and cannot be on essential points.

G-6.0108b. Freedom of Conscience -- Within Certain Bounds

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 by the individual concerned but ultimately becomes the responsibility of the governing body in which he or she serves.

Congregations call ministers, elders, and deacons. Presbyteries ordain ministers, and elders and deacons are ordained by sessions. The church as a whole, through its constitution, decides what the ordination standards of the church are. As we have seen, though, there is some room for diversity of interpretation within these standards and within our reading of Scripture. The crucial issue is “whether a person has departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity.” The ordaining body – the presbytery or the session -- makes that judgment.

Christian identity comes from what Christians do, as well as what they believe

The action that unites all Christians, not just Presbyterians, is baptism. “Our relationship to one another in the household of God,” wrote the Task Force, “is grounded in this identity alone.” While most of the controversies in the church recently have been about what standards church officers must uphold, the report emphasized that to be a member of the church one need only confess Christ and be baptized.

The sacrament that unites Christians is communion. The Task Force read communion in an unusual way, one which makes unity out of diversity: “The ultimate consummation proclaimed in this meal dignifies our diversity, seals our unity, and even reverses our assumptions about our own and others’ acceptability.”

Baptism and communion unite Christians in all ages. Christians are also called to discern God’s will and serve the Lord in a particular time and place. For these acts of discernment and service, a church must “seek the will of God revealed in the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit as we discern our unique calling in these unique times.” One denomination's calling may be a bit different from what other people and other ages of the church were called to do. We can be certain, though, that what any church is called to do will be within the bounds of Scripture’s witness to Jesus Christ.

Presbyterians can best deal with the church’s controversies by sticking to traditional Reformed faith and freedom in interpreting the faith

The Task Force urged the church to embrace the rich tradition of Reformed faith and practice *because* the Reformed tradition already has room for reasonable differences. They made an orthodox confession of the hope of salvation: “We confess that Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord, who has broken the power of sin, death, and evil.” They firmly embraced the core convictions of the Christian faith, both in its catholic (universal) form

and in the specific faith of the Protestant Reformation and the faith of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition.

Presbyterians have been especially devoted to the Bible as “our reliable guide in matters pertaining to salvation, our light in a world of moral obscurity, our measure of what is theologically truthful and spiritually life-giving.” Presbyterians also have a rich tradition of reasoning about what the words of the Bible meant in their context. It is very Presbyterian to see the Bible as the rule for faith and life; it is equally Presbyterian to see that Scriptural texts “also reflect the social, cultural, and intellectual conditions of their times, so the church approaches Scripture with historical and literary understanding as it engages in interpretation.”

The Presbyterian emphasis on God’s sovereignty helps people “to resist the temptation to substitute our own ideologies and forms of thought for the reality of God.” In the face of the persistent attempts to polarize the church the Task Force made the powerful claim that “God refuses to live on one side or the other of these humanly conceived boundaries.” Christians have too often embraced divisive teachings. In humility, therefore, the church should “step back from controversies that threaten the peace, unity, and purity of the church and to take time to seek the truth together.” They called for the church to embrace social justice as a gospel calling.

The Task Force pointedly did not attempt to address the substance of the controversy about homosexual ordination. The one direct reference to the issue continued this theme of reconciliation. Evenhandedly, they noted that many have experienced alienation and contempt as a result of the fight, regardless of their stance on the issue. As a result, the Task Force had “heard a call to seek God’s forgiveness for our sin and our hurtful attitudes and actions.”

The Task Force appended a Study Guide to their report. There they reported two strong conclusions, which they printed with emphasis. First, they reported on their own experience as a group in the church, which they hoped would become a model for the whole church in dealing with controversy:

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.)

Second, on the most divisive issue in the church today, they not only did not offer a simple solution, they urged the church to avoid trying to find a simple solution:

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.

The Theological Reflections of the Task Force report offered a traditionally Presbyterian confession, with a traditionally Presbyterian generosity about the interpretation of that confession. They urged all readers to embrace the church's shared theological foundations, before taking up the report's potentially divisive recommendations.

What did the Task Force recommend?

The Task Force report made seven recommendations to the General Assembly. After briefly touching on the seventh, we will consider recommendations one through four as a group. The bulk of our discussion will consider the fifth and sixth recommendations, and the reactions to them.

The seventh recommendation was a technical provision, asking the 2006 Assembly to consider the Task Force report a sufficient answer to requests that had been brought to the 2000, 2001, and 2002 Assemblies.

Why a Task Force?

A task force is a special kind of committee. It was created by the General Assembly to investigate the peace, unity, and purity of the church. It does not have the power to act on its own, as a commission would. This is why the task force can only make recommendations, which the General Assembly can then act on as it chooses. The original proposals called for setting up this group as a commission, with the power to put their conclusions into practice. However, in the Presbyterian Church (USA), commission members must be either ministers or elders. Practicing homosexuals cannot be ministers or elders of the church, so could not serve on a commission. Since the ban on homosexual ordination is one of the contested issues before the church, the moderators who named the peace, unity, and purity group wanted to be free to appoint some practicing homosexuals to the team – which they did. Hence the Task Force.

Recommendations 1 – 4: Promoting Peace and Unity

1. That it encourage “every member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to witness to the church’s visible oneness, to avoid division into separate denominations that obscure our community in Christ, and to live in harmony with other members of this denomination, ...”

This recommendation may sound like a boilerplate call for everyone to be nice to one another. However, there are serious calls, from liberals and, especially, conservatives, for a “gracious separation” – a polite schism that would divide the left and right wings of the church into separate denominations. Each side usually expects that the middle would come with it. The Task Force took a strong position in favor of keeping the church

together, despite its sometimes-contentious diversity. They rejected all calls for schism.

2. That it urge “governing bodies, congregations, and other groups of Presbyterians to follow the example of the task force and other groups that, in the face of difficult issues, have engaged in processes of intensive discernment through worship, community building, study, and collaborative work.”

The Task Force deliberately included people with opposing views, though each was personally civil and willing to work with those they disagreed with. As a result, they decided to spend the first few years of their work focused on the process of hearing and understanding one another, and building unity in the group. Very unusually for a church committee, the Task Force urged the church to create similar groups in every presbytery to go through a similar process of discernment. Their hope was that if people with opposing views talk, study, and pray together, they would be less likely to fight.

Ordination and the Governing Bodies

The Presbyterian Church has four layers of organization: the congregation, the presbytery, the synod, and the general assembly. These are the governing bodies of the church (formerly called judicatories). The local congregation is governed by a session made of elders. The pastor is usually the moderator of the session. Ministers are not members of local congregations, but are members of the regional group of congregations, the presbytery. The three higher levels of the church – presbytery, synod, and general assembly – are governed by equal numbers of ministers and elders. Elders are examined and ordained by the session; ministers are examined and ordained by presbyteries. In both cases, ordination is for the whole church; however, the local governing body has to make a separate decision before an ordained elder or minister can “labor within the bounds” of the congregation (for elders) or the presbytery (for ministers).

3. “Commend for study the Theological Reflection that heads the task force report.”

The Task Force spent years of their labors together working through the points of theological agreement that unite the church. They concluded that the points of agreement outweigh the points of disagreement in the church. These points of agreement were represented in the theological reflections that constitute the first half of the report. The Task Force worried that if readers go right to the recommendations (as many issues groups have done), they will miss the reasoning behind the Task Force’s recommendations.

4. “Direct the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly, and urge those who plan and moderate meetings of other governing bodies, to explore the use of alternative forms of discernment and decision-making as a complement to parliamentary procedure, especially in dealing with potentially divisive issues.”

The Task Force adopted consensus decision making as a conscious response to their diverse, even adversarial, composition. They became sold on the method, and urged the whole church to experiment with it in other contexts. Part of the evidence they offered for the value of consensus procedures is this report itself: whereas almost all previous church reports touching on sexuality have come from divided committees which issued both majority and minority reports, the Task Force issued its conclusions unanimously.

Recommendations 5 and 6: the compromise on purity

The most difficult challenge facing the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church was in establishing a standard of purity. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a diverse denomination composed of millions of members spread across a large nation. In the end the Task Force settled on a compromise: preserve the constitution as it is, but clarify the way in which governing bodies applied it in ordaining officers for the church through a new “authoritative interpretation” of the constitution.

Authoritative Interpretations and Constitutional Amendments

The church’s constitution, especially the *Book of Order*, tries to offer clear guidance to all governing bodies. Sometimes, though, situations arise which expose ambiguities in the constitution's language. In such cases, the General Assembly may adopt an “authoritative interpretation” of what the constitution means. A constitutional amendment, by contrast, changes the actual text of the church’s constitution itself.

The best-known authoritative interpretation began with a 1978 decision by the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the old northern Church. In that year, the General Assembly determined that "unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination set forth in the Form of Government." The Assembly issued this judgment as a “definitive guidance” on how to interpret the church’s constitution (a phrase that means the same things as “authoritative interpretation”). In 1993 the re-united Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) re-affirmed this guidance as the “authoritative interpretation” of the constitution.

In 1997 the church took a step beyond the authoritative interpretation of the constitution, and amended the constitution itself. The *Book of Order* now reads:

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.

This amendment is now section G-6.0106b, but is sometimes still referred to as “Amendment B,” the name that was used when it was being voted on by the presbyteries.

Recommendation 5 is complex. We will consider each section one by one.

The Task Force called on the General Assembly to:

Approve the following authoritative interpretation of section G-6.0108 [dealing with a church officer's freedom of conscience, which we considered earlier] of the *Book of Order*:

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

This means that there is one central standard for ordination, determined by the whole church. Local ordaining bodies cannot make up their own standards.

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

The church's constitutional standards for ordination are made by the General Assembly together with at least a majority of presbyteries. They cannot be established by the General Assembly alone, nor by a presbytery or a combination of presbyteries acting alone. The General Assembly, or its Permanent Judicial Commission (the church's "supreme court") can issue authoritative interpretations of the constitution.

- c. Ordaining and installing bodies, acting as corporate expressions of the church, have the responsibility to determine their membership by applying these standards to those elected to office. These determinations include:
 - (1) Whether a candidate being examined for ordination and/or installation as elder, deacon, or minister of Word and Sacrament has departed from scriptural and constitutional standards for fitness for office,
 - (2) Whether any departure constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity under G-6.0108 of the *Book of Order*, thus barring the candidate from ordination and/or installation.

The local ordaining bodies – presbyteries for ministers, sessions for elders and deacons– have to make two determinations. First, whether the candidate does or does not meet the constitutional standards for office, *and* second, if not, whether the candidate's mismatch with the church's standards involves an essential element of Reformed faith and polity, or only an inessential one.

This may be the most significant of all the Task Force recommendations. The church does not have an official list of “essential tenets of the Reformed faith and polity,” so each ordaining body has some leeway in applying the church’s constitutional standards to any particular candidate. This recommendation would restore the church’s traditional standard, which had been established by the Adopting Act of 1729.

The Adopting Act of 1729

When the first two presbyteries of the American church, New York and Philadelphia, came together in 1729 to create the nation’s first Presbyterian synod, they discovered that they had different standards for church officers. The stricter Philadelphia presbytery expected all officers to fully embrace the Westminster Confession and its Catechisms. The looser New York presbytery wanted no standard for officers except confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. The compromise they worked out was that all officers were expected to accept the Westminster Standards, but if they had “scruples” about any part of that creed, they could explain their reasons to the ordaining body. If the ordaining body thought these scruples did not involve any essential tenet of the Reformed faith, the ordination and installation could go ahead. The church did not have an official list of essential tenets, so presbyteries and congregations could vary from one another a bit in their ordination standards, though all had to stay within constitutional bounds.

The power of ordaining bodies to apply the church’s standards is sometimes called “local option.” This is a bit misleading, though, because the local body does not really have the option to decide what the constitutional standard is; rather, the presbytery and session have some leeway in *applying* the church-wide standards. The Adopting Act was the norm for the church for two and a half centuries. In 1978, as a result of the “Kenyon case,” the northern Presbyterian Church narrowly passed Amendment L to the *Book of Order*. This section of the constitution (G-14.0201) requires local governing bodies to include women in all offices in the church. In effect, Amendment L declared that there may not be local option about ensuring that women are represented in all levels of church office. Ironically, it was largely liberals who abolished local option (or more exactly, local application); now the shoe is on the other foot, and it is largely liberals who wish to restore the church’s traditional practice. *The proposed Authoritative Interpretation would, in effect, restore the Adopting Act of 1729.*

- d. Whether the ordaining/installing body has conducted its examination reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately in deciding to ordain a candidate for church office is subject to review by higher governing bodies.

Though the proposed Authoritative Interpretation encourages the church to trust the local ordaining bodies in applying the church’s standards, all ordination decisions by the local body would still be subject to review by the higher governing bodies.

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

The Task Force, throughout its report, tried to build peace and unity in the church by restoring trust. Here they make their strongest plea to everyone in the church to trust that the existing structures of the church will make and apply the church's standards with enough purity to best serve the church and God.

Recommendation Six, by contrast, is simple. If the General Assembly adopted the Authoritative Interpretation in Recommendation 5, then the Task Force encouraged

- a. The 217th General Assembly (2006) to approve no additional authoritative interpretations, to remove no existing authoritative interpretations, and to send to the presbyteries no proposed constitutional amendments that would have the effect of changing denominational policy on any of the major issues in the task force's report, including Christology, biblical interpretation, essential tenets, and sexuality and ordination.
- b. All church members to acknowledge their traditional biblical obligation, as set forth in Matthew 18:15-17, Matthew 5:23-25, and in the Rules of Discipline in the *Book of Order*, "to conciliate, mediate, and adjust differences without strife" prayerfully and deliberately (D-1.0103) and to institute administrative or judicial proceedings only when other efforts fail to preserve the purposes and purity of the church.

How was the Task Force report received prior to the General Assembly?

The Task Force report inspired more discussion in the church than any report in a decade. Unlike an amendment to the church's constitution, though, there were no official actions, such as presbytery votes, on the report until the General Assembly in June of 2006.

Still, some high-level responses to the Task Force's recommendations appeared soon after the report was released. Early support for the report came from an unusual joint statement by the current moderator and 25 former moderators of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This group included every moderator since the reunion of the northern and southern Presbyterian Churches in 1983 except 3, as well as two pre-reunion moderators. In addition, the presidents of all 12 seminaries associated with the PC (USA) endorsed the Task Force report – the first time that group had unanimously supported any proposition not directly related to theological education. Clifton Kirkpatrick, the church's Stated Clerk, likened the Task Force to the biblical Council of Jerusalem. He said they “offer us fresh guidance, deeply grounded in Presbyterian principles, about how to uphold the essentials of our faith and practice with a pastoral spirit, while respecting freedom of conscience.”

Left, Right, and Center

Most Presbyterians do not belong to special interest groups, and do not consider themselves on the far left or far right of the church. According to the Presbyterian Panel, the denomination's ongoing survey of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the members, elders, and pastors who make up 99.5% of the church form a right-leaning bell curve on most issues – a big middle, small extremes, and the rest more conservative than liberal. On the particular issue of ordaining practicing homosexuals, all three groups are solidly opposed, with nearly three quarters of each group against. Only the “specialized clergy” – ministers who are not in congregations, but serve as chaplains, counselors, or in other kinds of ministry – are more liberal than conservative. Typically, Presbyterians in the center are loyal to the church they know, the local congregation and the denomination's current, familiar practices. It is only rarely that this loyalist center gets mobilized enough to choose a path for the church out of a crisis.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is rich with special interest groups, almost all of which are clearly liberal or conservative – or to use their own terms, progressive or orthodox. Two groups go back decades: the liberal Witherspoon Society, and the conservative Presbyterian Lay Committee, publisher of *The Presbyterian Layman*. Most of the other prominent liberal organizations – That All May Freely Serve, More Light Presbyterians, and the Covenant Network of Presbyterians – were created to promote the ordination of homosexuals in the church. There are many more conservative organizations, and not all of them have taken a position on the gay ordination controversy. In addition to the Presbyterian Lay Committee, the most notable are the Presbyterian Coalition – which functions as the opposite number to the Covenant Network – and the slightly older Presbyterians for Renewal. A recent group, The New Wineskins Initiative, is attempting to define the essential tenets of the Reformed faith for use as an ordination standard.

Almost all of the principal liberal and conservative special interest organizations in the church quickly criticized the report.

A group of 11 conservative “renewal ministries,” including the Presbyterian Coalition, the Presbyterian Lay Committee, and Presbyterians for Renewal, issued a joint statement

rejecting the Task Force's report. They opposed recommendation 5, the proposed authoritative interpretation, on the grounds that "local option" would in effect mean that the church had no binding ordination standards. Conservative critics of the report are particularly worried that more liberal presbyteries and sessions would ignore the "chastity and fidelity" section of the *Book of Order*. Indeed, some liberal leaders have said that they believe more practicing homosexuals would be ordained if the Task Force report were adopted. Beyond that issue, some conservatives fear that the proposed Authoritative Interpretation would make all of the church's standards subject to decisions by the local ordaining bodies.

The conservative joint statement did not mention recommendation 6, though they implicitly agree with its endorsement of the church's current official standards.

As proof that their fears of local option are well grounded, conservative groups point to the decision of Redwoods Presbytery early in 2006 that Rev. Jane Spahr acted within her ministerial "rights of conscience" in performing several same-sex marriages, despite an explicit ban in the church's constitution. Spahr, a well-known "lesbian evangelist," had courted the trial as a test case of the constitution and a presbytery's power to interpret the limits of ministerial dissent. The case is on appeal,

More than a dozen overtures were sent to the General Assembly, most of them opposing Recommendation Five.

Closer to the Assembly, 35 "tall steeple" pastors, who head some of largest and most influential congregations in the denomination, released a letter to express their "deep concern" that adopting the PUP report would lead to local option in ordination standards, thus accelerating the ongoing decline of the church. Some conservative groups also predicted that the Presbyterian Church might split if the report were adopted, but no aboveground body in the church called for separation.

At the same time, three liberal groups – the Witherspoon Society, More Light Presbyterians, and That All May Freely Serve -- rejected the report, though for reasons opposite to the conservatives. They are committed to overturning the constitution's chastity and fidelity provision, the former Amendment B, and actively encouraged presbyteries to submit "delete B" overtures. More than a dozen presbyteries did so. The liberal Covenant Network of Presbyterians expressed disappointment with the report, but was officially neutral – the only major Presbyterian issues group not to reject the Task Force Report outright.

The discussion focused on the Task Force's recommendations to the General Assembly. The Task Force itself hoped that equal attention would be given to the theological background to those recommendations. However, none of the church's special interest groups made a full statement on the report's theological background.

What happened at the General Assembly?

The opening event of any Presbyterian General Assembly (GA) is the election of the Moderator. Who is elected, and why, often gives a good clue to the Assembly's tenor. Moderator candidates are nominated by their presbyteries months before the GA. The pattern in recent years has been to have three candidates, one clearly liberal, one clearly conservative, and the third aiming for the middle.

This year, there were four candidates. On paper, one might read Deborah Block as the liberal – a pastor from Milwaukee Presbytery, a board member of the liberal umbrella group the Covenant Network. Likewise, Tim Halverson looked like the main conservative – pastor of a Florida megachurch, father of seven kids. Joan Gray, an Atlanta interim minister and author of a well-known polity book, would therefore be left with the center. The wild card was Kerry Carson, the pastor of a little church in Iowa.

Yet all four moderatorial candidates ran as centrists. None of them ran against the PUP report. Block's pitch was as a sensitive bridge builder. Carson, as a pastoral uniter. Gray? A healing leader. Tim Halverson, in his published platform, said, "in a left-right world, we have forgotten the center," while in his speech he said that if elected he would "lead from the center." Each candidate, after a short speech to the Assembly, answered questions from the commissioners for an hour.

A youth delegate bluntly put the decisive question, in my view: do you favor the ordination of practicing homosexuals? Block said yes, Carson said no. Halverson said no, but dreamed of a day when the church would judge officers by the content of their characters, not their sexual orientation. Joan Gray gave one of the few unexpected answers of the night: she respects gays and lesbians who want to serve, but that she had "not been able to get my mind around the idea that homosexuality is God's intention." The Moderator, she went on, is an officer of church, and stands on the constitution. As Moderator, she would fully support the constitution, and would only consider changing her position if the Holy Spirit moved the church as a whole to change the constitution.

In my opinion, Joan Gray ultimately won election with that answer.

The voting itself was fascinating. Here are the percentages won by each candidate on the first, second, and third ballots:

Block	28	32	31
Carson	22	14	4
Gray	28	41	62
Halverson	22	14	4

The center of the church had spoken. Centrism won.

The Ecclesiology Committee

The action then shifted to the Ecclesiology Committee, where the Peace, Unity, and Purity report, as well as the overtures critical of it, had been sent for initial debate. In the committee's first day of hearings, the most hopeful word came from people in divided presbyteries who reported that their arguments became more civil and less hurtful after they adopted some of the discernment, consensus, and simple listening methods that Task Force members had brought to them.

San Francisco is one the most liberal presbyteries, especially on the homosexual ordination issue, yet that body has a strong conservative minority that threatens to bolt. Cincinnati Presbytery, on the other hand, had a well-known case in the church of a dissident liberal congregation that had to be disciplined by the presbytery for defying the constitution. Both were places where feelings were running high. In both cases, people who were strong partisans on the contested issues nonetheless came to thank the Task Force for helping them stay together and argue more civilly.

When the committee came to recommendation 5, a member proposed deleting the Authoritative Interpretation altogether. And the competition was on. The committee argued, civilly, for hours. Nearly every member of the group spoke. When the vote finally came, the motion to delete 5 failed, 23 –37. Motions to gut recommendation 5, or to refer it to the presbyteries for comment, failed by similar margins.

On the third and final day of committee work Ecclesiology approved the Peace, Unity, and Purity report, 41 to 22. They had made a couple of minor changes, but basically passed it as the Task Force wrote it. The one real addition that the committee made to the report strengthened its centrist character. The relevant section of recommendation 5 read:

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

d. Whether the ordaining/installing body has conducted its examination reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately in deciding to ordain a candidate for church office is subject to review by higher governing bodies.

This last point disturbed some people, who read section d as limiting judicial review of local decisions to the process that the locals used, but not the substance of the decision. If, for example, a presbytery ordained an atheist, the General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission could only look at whether the presbytery used proper process, but not stop the ordination because the candidate was an atheist.

The Task Force, and the representative of the church's Advisory Committee on the Constitution, were repeatedly questioned on this point. In their reading, "reasonably" and "responsibly" covers the substance, as well as the process, of an examination. The ACC representative said this language was taken from judicial decisions of the church courts, which have already interpreted this standard to include substantive judicial review.

Nonetheless, the plain words do invite misunderstanding, at least. So the Ecclesiology Committee amended section d to read:

d. Whether the examination complies with the Constitution of the PCUSA, and whether the ordaining/installing body has conducted its examination reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately in deciding to ordain a candidate for church office is subject to review by higher governing bodies.

Thus the PUP report, with this minor amendment, was passed to the plenary session of the General Assembly for final action.

The opponents of the PUP report on the Ecclesiology Committee sent a minority report, signed by 17 members, to the full Assembly. The minority report simply asked the Assembly to approve 6 and 7, but delete 5.

When Assembly finally began consideration of the Peace, Unity, and Purity report nearly a week after the opening session, they were ready to act. The first four recommendations, including the theological background and the call for alternative forms of discernment in decision-making, passed without discussion, with 91% of the commissioners voting yes.

The committee then moved to pass recommendations 5, 6, and 7 together, which led the minority to move its alternative as a substitute. The debate seesawed back and forth for hours. Proponents argued that the Authoritative Interpretation would revive the traditional way of examining church officers, while opponents argued that it would turn standards into aspirations and create confusion in the church. One unexpected moment came when an opponent argued that allowing "local option" would mean more open homosexual ordinations, which would alienate Korean Presbyterians, the largest racial-ethnic minority in the denomination. Former Moderator Synghman Rhee, the creator of the Task Force and the most prominent Korean in the church, rose to warmly dispute this claim, insisting that Koreans were loyal to the church for the long haul.

The minority report, which would have deleted recommendation 5 altogether, failed on a vote of 45% to 55%. The opponents, clearly by prior arrangement, then moved to delay the adoption of the PUP report by referring recommendations 5 and 6 to the presbyteries for comment. After some debate, this motion failed by an identical margin.

The time had arrived to vote on the main motion, to adopt the Authoritative Interpretation and a moratorium on changing the constitution further. The report passed, 57% to 43%.

The debate was all about conservative attempts to prevent the Authoritative Interpretation from taking effect. There were no liberal efforts to stop the two-year moratorium on amending the constitution. One of the most remarkable features of the whole Assembly debate was the complete absence of liberal opponents, even though all the liberal groups were opposed to the moratorium on changing the constitution. They had prudently concluded that they would fail in this Assembly if they tried. Indeed, an overture to delete the constitution's chastity and fidelity provision was rejected by 81% of the Assembly.

The Presbyterian Panel, Like the Assembly, Supports PUP

The Presbyterian Panel, the denomination's ongoing representative sample of Presbyterians, was surveyed just before the General Assembly about some big issues before the church, especially the report of the Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. The results of that survey were withheld until after the Assembly at the request of the Office of the Stated Clerk. The Panel gives us a look at how members, elders, pastors, and specialized clergy (those not serving congregations) think about PUP.

The PUP report began with a traditional theological foundation, and the survey shows that the church agrees. In response to the basic Christian claims, overwhelming majorities of members, elders, and pastors – over 90% -- agree that "my faith is in the God of Israel who raised Jesus Christ bodily from the dead." Likewise, over 80% of each group agree that "Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through him." Most specialized clergy, always the most liberal group of the four, also agreed with both traditional claims, though at a lower level (84% and 64%, respectively). Above 80% of each group believe that the Bible is the true Word of God, reaching more than 90% among pastors

The church also strongly endorses the idea that God loves everyone. Even for the most contested category – "God loves everyone regardless of sexual orientation" – and among the most conservative group – the elders - only 7% disagree. Clearly, the contention over sexual orientation in the church is not driven by hate.

To find the opinion of the church on the Authoritative Interpretation, the Panel was asked, "when an ordination candidate disagrees with one of the church's constitutional standards, ordination should still be allowed to proceed if the disagreement is not over an essential tenet of Reformed faith or polity." The answers to this question were closer than were the theological affirmations. About a third of the laity were neutral, suggesting that not all were confident they understood the subtle polity issue involved. In each group, though, significantly more Presbyterians agreed with this "local application" standard than disagreed with it. For members, the agree/disagree ratio was 39%/28%; for elders, 37/32; for pastors, 49/33; and for specialized clergy, 56/27.

The complement to local application of national standards is judicial review by the higher bodies, in those cases in which the locals make a mistake. The Panel was asked to agree or disagree whether "higher governing bodies have a right to review whether lower governing bodies were reasonable, responsible, prayerful, and deliberate in examining candidates for ordination and installation." Judicial review by higher bodies was supported by 70% of the laity, and over 80% of the clergy. The one substantive amendment that the General Assembly made to the PUP report expanded this specific section to make clear that judicial review could address the substance, as well as the procedure, of local examinations.

The test of recommendation 6 came in this question: "The 2006 General Assembly should not change current denominational policy on any of the major issues being contested in the church today, including Christology, biblical interpretation, essential tenets, and sexuality and ordination." Among members, elders, and pastors, twice as many favored keeping the constitution as it is to changing it. Only among the specialized clergy – who represent less than half a percent of the church as a whole – did more favor change than wanted to keep the constitution as it is.

The Panel was also asked their opinion on deleting G 6.0106b, the "chastity and fidelity" provision of the constitution. A majority of members, elders, and pastors wanted to keep that section of the constitution. Once again, only among the specialized clergy was there a liberal majority, almost two-thirds of whom wished to eliminate this rule.

One clear message to come from the Presbyterian Panel: most Presbyterians want the church to have real standards. In answer to the question, "a church that is not clear about what it believes is not worth belonging to," nearly two-thirds of members, elders, and pastors agreed or strongly agreed.

Most of the church supports the principles of the Peace, Unity, and Purity report, Now that the church has adopted the report, though, most Presbyterian will want it to really deliver more peace within the church's constitutional standards.

Beyond Birmingham

By my reading, the PUP report marks a return to the great centrist principle of the Adopting Act of 1729. This is the standard the church has returned to again and again after major conflicts. The Adopting Act requires all officers to subscribe to the church's standards, explaining any "scruples" they might have about particular parts of the constitution. If the ordaining body judges that those scruples do not touch essential matters, then the officer is ok. This judgment by the locals is subject to review by the higher bodies. But everyone is better off if, in the words of the PUP report, all parts of the church "outdo one another in honoring" the judgments of the other parts of the church. The Authoritative Interpretation says that the church does not have to change its constitution to adopt this standard of judgment, because it has been there in the constitution all along.

The PUP report says that it will promote "local application" of national standards. Opponents say that the AI will lead to "local option" or, in more heated moments, "local license," in which the locals will simply make up their own standards.

I believe that the PUP report is a centrist measure. Restoring the Adopting Act rule will take a little doing – we don't have one confession any more, and we don't have the same track record about how scrupling applies to the rules of order as it does to the confession of faith. Nonetheless, I am hopeful that the effect of the PUP report will be to promote the peace of the church.

To do that, though, we need to have the locals apply the national standards justly. Nearly all presbyteries and sessions will be just and honorable. A few, though, have already demonstrated their determination to simply defy the constitution and the rest of the church. Most of this open defiance has been on the left, especially about gay ordination. A few conservative congregations, though, have long resisted ordaining women, in defiance of the very clear standards of the church. And one or two conservative presbyteries have come close to threatening defiance if the PUP report were adopted.

To make local application work, the national church will have to clearly discipline defiance on the right and the left. It will only take a few judicial cases, or a few public rebukes, and maybe a few firings. The church as a whole can only trust that the standards are really standards if they are enforced in egregious cases. They have the rules – all the church leaders need is the will.

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