

SYNOD OF THE PACIFIC (PCUSA) REPORT OF THE SYNOD EXECUTIVE

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As I am sure you are aware by now, the much anticipated report from the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity was published last month. It will be officially brought before the denomination at the June 2006 General Assembly in Birmingham, Alabama. If you have not read it as yet, it is available on the PCUSA's website, but be prepared to spend some significant time in your favorite chair as you pour over some 39 pages that delineate the task force's detailed explanation of its process and recommendations.

The work put before the task force was to discover ways, within a theological framework, in which the church could live more faithfully in the face of deep disagreements. In an effort to help the church discern its identity in the 21st century, the following four issues that have consumed much of our time and energy for several years were put before the task force: 1) biblical authority and interpretation; 2) Christology; 3) ordination standards; and 4) power.

I believe the average Presbyterian has known in his or her heart since the appointment of the Task Force that there exists no simple answers to these four issues which will completely satisfy the individuals and groups that exist within the theological continuum. On a more realistic level, I believe we were prayerful that the Task Force, by God's mercy, would make recommendations that could be seen as a way through this wilderness of diversity and disagreement to a place of discernment, faithfulness, hope, love, and community. In his book "Transforming Church Boards into communities of spiritual leaders," Charles Olsen makes this observation regarding members of sessions and church boards: "Members are on a journey together that may take them on paths to the wilderness, into the arenas of ambiguity and conflict, or to pleasant meadows of discovery, satisfaction, and delight." As members of the PCUSA, we are on a similar journey during which future decisions will be made in an effort to discover new patterns and forms of being the church. New models are needed to inspire individuals to actively participate in the life of the church. New ways of being in dialogue around the issues that we disagree on are needed in order for us to be the body of Christ despite our differences. New models that are both faithful to God, and meaningful to our current culture.

Alright, let's end the suspense and get to the recommendations that are being made by the task force? They have made five recommendations:

- 1) The task force recommends that the General Assembly strongly encourage:
 - a. every member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to witness to the church's visible oneness, to avoid division into separate denominations that obscure our community in Christ, and to live in harmony with other members of this denomination, so that we may with one voice together glorify God in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit; and;
 - b. all sessions, congregations, presbyteries, and synods to renew and strengthen their covenanted partnership with one another and with the General Assembly.
- 2) The task force recommends that the General Assembly 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.
- 3) The task force asks the General Assembly to commend for study the Theological Reflection that heads the task force report.
- 4) The task force recommends that the General Assembly 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.
- 5) The task force recommends that the 217th General Assembly adopt the following authoritative interpretation of section G-6.0108 of the *Book of Order*:
 - 1) 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.

- 2) 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.
- 3) 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:
 - a. 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 stands for fitness for office.
 - b. 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.
- 4) 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.
- 5) 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.

Several overtures are being submitted in response to the task force's report because some folks feel the report does not support and/or meet the needs of their theological position. At least one reason for this is there may be persons who feel some ambiguity of how to decide what is an "essential tenet", something that is indispensable for ordained service, and what is a "standard", things that are aspirational in character, terms used by the task force in their rationale for recommending the adoption of the authoritative interpretation.

It is imperative that we read and study this report. It will undoubtedly be part of our written history. But more importantly, it gives us an opportunity to look at the issues that have troubled us through the lense of the task force. The Synod has invited Gary Demarest, Co-Chair of the Task Force, to our February 2006 meeting to speak to the report and answer any questions you have. Examine the Task Force's approach, logic, and rationale, and see if you feel it provides away through the wilderness of diversity and conflict, to a meadow of Presbyterian discovery, satisfaction, and community. And, pray for the commissioners to the 217th General Assembly in Birmingham, that the Holy Spirit would help them discern God's will for how they will judge and vote on the recommendations put forth by the Task Force.