

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

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I want to begin by extending a hearty welcome to each of our Synod Commissioners; those returning for a second term, and to those of you who are serving as a commissioner for the first time or returning after a few years hiatus. I believe you will find your time here enlightening and fulfilling. The Synod of the Pacific is unique in the way we support the mission and ministries of our presbyteries/mission units and our congregations. You received a preview of this in the Commissioner Orientation held earlier today. As you immerse yourselves in the work of the Synod committee's, you will begin to see the important mission and role of the Synod in this region of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.

These are challenging times in the life of our beloved denomination. As much as I would prefer to use this time to talk about the positive things happening throughout the church, I feel compelled to speak to current events taking place within our synod and across our denomination.

Like the roar of the wind coming across the delta unimpeded against my office window as I wrote this report, the post-Birmingham General Assembly activities and verbal discourses by individuals, affinity groups, governing bodies, various staff writers, columnists, and denominational leaders related to the passing of the Theological Task Force Report on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, have continually increased in volume and intensity since June. Many Presbyterians believe the passing of the PUP Report changed our constitution as it relates to standards for ordination and/or installation. After many conversations with colleagues throughout the country and persons in leadership positions at OGA, it is my belief and understanding that the constitution was not changed. Ordination standards are the same as they were prior to the 217th General Assembly, including Section G-6.0106 b. of the *Book of Order* which addresses one of the most controversial areas of concern within the church. Letters and "musings" issued by the Office of the General Assembly, as well as conversations with OGA Constitutional Services staff, seem to support this understanding.

If the *Book of Order* was not changed by the 217th General Assembly on matters related to ordination and installation, why is there so much angst amongst many of our sisters and brothers throughout our denomination? As I listen to their concerns, the source of their frustration seems to lie in the words "standards, essential tenets, and scruples". In its recommendations to the church, the report by the Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity (PUP) stated that "Section G-6.0108 of the *Book of Order* requires all candidates adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity as expressed in the *Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government. Ordaining bodies may not dispense with the church's standards or promulgate their own." In addition, the recommended Authoritative Interpretation (AI) as stated in the PUP Report "seeks to retrieve and clarify long-established Presbyterian principles of decision-making in matters of ordination to and installation in church offices."

The historical practice the Report and AI lifts up is that G-6.0108 puts "faith and polity"--belief and behavior--on an equal footing. The problem the AI is intended to help address is the reality that our standards for ordination include ideals of the highest nature--perfect obedience to Scripture, something all candidates for church office should aspire to, but can never achieve. Therefore, and this is where I see the focus for those who are frustrated and concerned about the approved PUP Report, it is the responsibility of the ordaining/installing body to determine what departures can be

tolerated and which departures would compromise the essential matters of faith and practice. It is at this point that some argue that a governing body may decide that a particular departure from faith and practice by a candidate is acceptable when, in reality, it may not be acceptable.

Some individuals and governing bodies are looking at ways to address their concerns with this part of the PUP Report. They are considering developing predetermined questions for candidates that would specifically ask a candidate's belief and practice regarding standards they deem critical to ordination or installation. According to a musing distributed by the Constitutional Services of the Office of the General Assembly, it is permissible for a governing body to "have a list of questions it asks of every candidate for office." However, they warn that pre-determined questions "can be detrimental to an adequate examination of candidates for it often discourages an ordaining body from doing helpful and necessary follow-up to the pre-determined questions." Therefore, it is expected that governing bodies will examine candidates as individuals exploring their faith, belief and understanding of scripture on a case-by-case basis.

So what happens if a candidate, during examination, declares a "scruple" regarding a mandatory provision? Can that candidate still be ordained and/or installed? I believe the answer is "it depends." According to the folk in Constitutional Services, "a candidate has a right to hold views contrary to the constitution of the PCUSA (i.e. a scruple) but, for the sake of order, actions contrary to the constitution are not sanctioned." The musing "reminds the church that ordaining bodies are responsible for applying nationally approved standards to the manner of life and beliefs of individual candidates."

Now you may be asking yourself why the Synod of the Pacific should be concerned about this matter if ordination and installation of individuals to church office are generally the responsibility of presbyteries and sessions. Although this is true, the Synod has constitutional responsibilities as well as collegial/partnership responsibilities. It is important for the Synod of the Pacific to understand the approved PUP Report in order to fulfill these constitutional and collegial responsibilities in an appropriate and effective manner. At the end of the report, the Task Force makes this comment: "The success of this proposal is dependent upon all governing bodies taking all standards of the church seriously and applying them rigorously in the examination process. All governing bodies are encouraged to develop resources to ensure that this happens." What resources should our Synod develop in an effort to assist our presbyteries and congregations in understanding the implications of the PUP Report?

Hopefully, we all want to see the resolution of concerns regarding this matter handled in a peaceful, prayerful, and cooperative fashion, rather than by judicial process, if at all possible. Christ calls us to be in community with one another. The connectional nature of the PCUSA is one way we can be faithful to that call. As a Synod, we should encourage and assist individuals and groups to work peacefully within our constitution to hold gatherings where all persons are welcome to discuss the PUP Report and its implications. Therefore, it is imperative for the Synod to make a concerted effort to understand the complexities of this matter in order to effectively fulfill our responsibilities.

The PUP Report has as its premise that a season of discernment is due in the church. May God grant our Synod the grace, humility, compassion, and love to act faithfully and cooperatively with all our Presbyterian sisters and brothers in discerning God's will in this matter.