

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

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

37 A. *God Loves Us: The Ground of Our Faith*
38

39 What do we know about the identity of God? And what is the Christian identity that flows
40 from this saving knowledge that we receive through faith?
41

42 1. *As Presbyterian Christians, we are a people whose identity is centered in the love of the*
43 *triune God*—the God of all times and all peoples, the God of grace whose love and judgment
44 extend to every creature. God our Savior has pursued us in our waywardness like a shepherd who
45 ventures into the wilderness to recover the sheep that is lost, like a woman who searches for a
46 lost coin and rejoices upon finding it, like a waiting father who longs to welcome a prodigal child
47 home (Luke 15).
48

49 As the Nicene Creed teaches, this one God is the triune God: eternally Father, Son, and Holy
50 Spirit. Belief in the Triune God runs throughout the confessional tradition of the church, and the
51 renewal of Trinitarian conviction has been a major theme of theology in our time. Presbyterians
52 look to the church’s historic confessions to nourish that conviction. The task force urges the
53 church to continue to renew this core commitment of the faith.
54

55 Our faith is in the God of Israel who raised Jesus Christ bodily from the dead. This is the one
56 faith confessed by the people of God: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of
57 all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:5–6). This one faith is diverse but not
58 divided. The Reformed family of churches believes that there is no teacher but Jesus Christ.
59 Therefore, unlike other communions that have a single teaching office or a single confession,
60 Reformed churches have embraced across the centuries many confessions as a cloud of witnesses
61 to one true faith. All creeds and confessions are subordinate to and grounded in Scripture, which
62 speaks afresh in every age.⁴ It is by following Jesus Christ, as attested for us in Scripture, that the
63 unity of our faith will be made visible today as it has been in the past. It is this one historic faith
64 that will carry the church into the missional future that God is setting before us.
65

66 The church’s mission flows from God’s gracious act of reaching out to welcome, redeem,
67 and recreate us in Jesus Christ through the work of the Spirit. It is in sharing this good news with
68 all the world that we grow into our identity as the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the
69 Fellowship of the Spirit. Because God has welcomed us in the power of the gospel, we in turn
70 share that gracious and transforming welcome with a suffering world in need of the gospel. We

⁴ 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.

71 are not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who have faith
72 (Rom. 1:16).

73
74 As the church works together to discern the particular shape of its mission in the 21st
75 century, many questions are being raised about religious pluralism, about the nature of religious
76 truth, and about the reach of salvation in Jesus Christ. In responding to these questions, we must
77 remember that the truth of the gospel rests on the power of God, not on the power of the church.
78 Therefore, in addressing questions of pluralism, truth, and salvation, we must emphasize both the
79 necessity and sufficiency of the grace by which God is for and with the world in Jesus Christ
80 through the power of the Holy Spirit. With confidence in this divine grace, we affirm: “[Jesus] is
81 the *way*, and the *truth*, and the *life*. No one comes to the Father except through [him]” (John
82 14:6, emphasis added) and “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under
83 heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). At the same time, as
84 Reformed Christians, we must remind ourselves and others that salvation rests not in any merit
85 of our own but in the sovereign love of God that has been made known to us in Jesus Christ.

86
87 2. *We are a people whose identity is rooted in God who adopts us through grace.* Through
88 Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit we have been adopted into God’s family (Rom.
89 8:15, 23; Gal. 4:5–6). We worship and serve a covenant-making God, the God of Israel, whose
90 unbreakable covenant with Abraham, Sarah, and their progeny is now, by the raising of Jesus
91 Christ from the dead, extended to the Gentiles. The Gentiles are grafted into the covenant by
92 God’s mercy and made to be children of Abraham only by God’s grace. In this covenant we have
93 a new vision of what the human family is called to be. Because of the obedience of Jesus Christ,
94 even unto death, we no longer define power as domination over others, for we experience
95 strength made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9; 1 Cor. 1:18–2:13). In the light of the cross, we
96 can no longer accept a hierarchical or patriarchal view of how divine power makes itself felt
97 among us. Our relations to others are transformed and reoriented, because the love of God is not
98 confined to the people of one religious perspective, or of one social or economic class, or of one
99 race or ethnicity, or of one gender or gender orientation. Such is the love of God that for those
100 who are in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no
101 longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

102
103 3. *We are a people whose identity is expressed through the proclamation of the Word.* As
104 Reformed Christians, “we believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and
105 apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of
106 themselves, not of [human beings]” (*The Book of Confessions*, Second Helvetic Confession,
107 5.001). The Scriptures, inspired and illumined by the Holy Spirit, form our identity and teach us
108 who we are, whom we worship, and how we exist in the world as the body of believers.

109
110 We acknowledge that there is heated debate over biblical interpretation among Presbyterians
111 who honor the authority of Scripture. In the midst of these debates it is important to remember
112 that the consciences of us all are bound by the witness of Scripture to Jesus Christ. Even as it is
113 important to preserve freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture, such freedom is

114 subject to standards (*Book of Order*, G-6.0108a) and must be exercised within constitutional
115 bounds (*Book of Order*, G-6.0108b).⁵

116
117 4. *We are a people whose identity is sealed in the waters of baptism.* Baptism “in the name
118 of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19) initiates us into the community
119 of faith and attests to a God-given identity that can never be erased. This is an identity more
120 enduring than all other identities we ourselves or others may give us. Our relationship to one
121 another in the household of God is grounded in this identity alone.

122
123 5. *We are a people whose identity is nurtured in the sharing of bread and cup.* Just as we
124 have been baptized into Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, so also are we sustained in our life
125 together through Christ’s presence in the sharing of the Lord’s Supper. This meal of
126 thanksgiving is a place where we receive the grace of God and confess our sins before God and
127 one another. At this table we continually embrace the reconciliation that is ours through the death
128 of Christ, enact our unity in Christ’s body, and anticipate the great feast to which people shall
129 come from north and south and east and west to be welcomed and to sit at one table with Jesus
130 Christ as host (Luke 13:29). The ultimate consummation proclaimed in this meal dignifies our
131 diversity, seals our unity, and even reverses our assumptions about our own and others’
132 acceptability, for in that day “some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last”
133 (Luke 13:30; cf. Matt. 8:11–12).

134
135 6. *We are a people whose identity is strengthened through discernment and service.* God
136 created us all in God’s very image, and though we are sinners, God’s Spirit is restoring us in the
137 image of Christ. To that end, God has firmly established our Christian identity in election. We
138 are not elected to an elevated status but to a special service—to embody God’s purposes in and
139 for the world. Our given Christian identity, however, requires ongoing discernment. Although
140 God knows us fully, we do not always think and act as though we know God. Embodying God’s
141 purposes in our time and place requires that we rely on God’s grace and cultivate wisdom,
142 committing ourselves to faithful prayer, study, worship, and works of mercy and justice. We

⁵ “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 the 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. (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)”

143 must seek the will of God revealed in the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit as we discern our unique
144 calling in these unique times.

145
146 B. *God Saves Us: The Object of Our Hope*
147

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

153
154 Holding firm to this confession, we commit ourselves to the core convictions of Christian
155 faith in the church’s traditional teaching documents: the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, the Lord’s
156 Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. Guided by Chapter II of the *Book of Order*, we embrace
157 the faith of the church catholic (universal), the faith of the Protestant Reformation, and the faith
158 of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition (*Book of Order*, G-2.0300–.0500), as witnessed in
159 our historic confessions.

160
161 1. *We confess the faith of “the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.”* We receive its
162 canonical Scriptures. We accept its ecumenical creeds. We embrace the mystery of the triune
163 God and the truth of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. He was fully human and fully divine,
164 shared the exposed and vulnerable condition of all humankind, and gave himself, once and for
165 all, to redeem us from sin and restore us to righteousness.

166
167 2. *We confess the faith of the Protestant reformation*, including the doctrine of justification
168 by grace through faith, “so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). From this doctrine, we know
169 that all things, including peace, unity, and purity, are gifts that the church receives by faith in the
170 saving work of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.⁶ As heirs of the Protestant reformation we
171 also acknowledge that the Bible gives us the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ
172 (*Book of Order*, G-14.0801g), divine Word mediated and spoken through inspired human words.
173 These writings are our rule of faith and life (*The Book of Confessions*, Westminster Confession,
174 6.002)—our reliable guide in matters pertaining to salvation, our light in a world of moral
175 obscurity, our measure of what is theologically truthful and spiritually life-giving. These words
176 also reflect the social, cultural, and intellectual conditions of their times, so the church
177 approaches Scripture with historical and literary understanding as it engages in interpretation.

178
179 3. *We confess the faith of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition*, with its core vision of
180 the majesty, holiness, and providence of God. From this tradition flow the themes of election,
181 covenant, stewardship, and the recognition of the human tendency to idolatry. This vision impels
182 us to resist the temptation to substitute our own ideologies and forms of thought for the reality of
183 God (*Book of Order*, G-2.0500a(4)). Guided by the ancient creeds and confessions, we are a

⁶ 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.

184 church continually being reformed in accordance with God’s Word. Instructed by the
185 confessions of more recent years, we seek to be a church that pays attention to what God is
186 continually doing in our midst.⁷ Living in expectation of God’s reign, we not only look to Jesus
187 Christ as our Lord and the Lord of the church but proclaim him the Lord of all. As a pilgrim
188 people, we await the day when “every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth, and every
189 tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10–11).

190
191 4. *God calls us, in light of our confession, to embrace “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,*
192 *the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit”* (2 Cor. 13:13). Too often, we deny the
193 gift of the grace of God. In conflicts between nations and peoples, in strategies that offer win-
194 lose options only, in the separations by color and class, we alienate ourselves from one another.
195 We do this even as we worship on the Lord’s Day. God refuses to live on one side or the other of
196 these humanly conceived boundaries. Instead, God works in and through our differences to bring
197 us into the promise of reconciliation, healing, liberation, and redemption.

198
199 Through grace we are also enabled to recognize and to confess our fallibility and our
200 capacity for distorting truth. Christians and churches have too often authored or endorsed false
201 and damaging teachings.⁸ The humility this engenders should lead us to step back from
202 controversies that threaten the peace, unity, and purity of the church and to take time to seek the
203 truth together. In so doing, we make room for the living God to lead us and guide us by the
204 Spirit. This can occur every time we meet for worship, study, and service.

205
206 *C. God Empowers Us to Proclaim the Gospel: The Source of Christian Love and Witness*

207
208 What does the Spirit of Christ empower us to do? Christian identity and confessional witness
209 call us to proclaim and bear witness to the gospel throughout the world.

210
211 1. *We proclaim the gospel by preaching, teaching, and serving.* Just as God sent Jesus
212 Christ into the world for us and for our salvation, so also God sends the church into the world to
213 bear witness to God’s judgment and grace. God entrusts us with the privilege of participating in
214 God’s mission to carry out the great ends of the church: the proclamation of the gospel, the
215 preservation of truth, the nurture of God’s people, the worship of God, the promotion of social
216 righteousness, and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world (*Book of Order*, G-
217 1.0200. Through our faithful response to the blessing that God has given us in Jesus Christ, God
218 may in turn use us to become a blessing to others.

219

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

⁸ 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.

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

230
231 3. *We proclaim the gospel by our commitment to peace and reconciliation.* We are living in
232 a war-torn world. The church acknowledges diverse traditions on the morality of war,⁹ but all
233 these traditions recognize a just peace as the ultimate will of God and contain a presumption
234 against violence. We also live in a world where many are afflicted by poverty and injustice. As a
235 North American church, many of whose members are among the most affluent even while many
236 others are not, we recognize that the blessings of prosperity bring with them a sacred obligation
237 to care for the needy both at home and abroad. This can be done not only by acting charitably but
238 also by working for justice. Having been forgiven by God, we are committed to forgive those
239 who have wronged us and seek the forgiveness of those we have wronged. Because controversies
240 over sexuality and ordination have been a special focus of the task force's work, the task force
241 has become aware of how much alienation and contempt many have experienced. The task force
242 has heard a call to seek God's forgiveness for our sin and our hurtful attitudes and actions. In
243 gratitude for the good news of the gospel, the task force prays that God will grant the whole
244 church the grace of reconciliation, especially with those who have been wronged.

245
246 4. *We proclaim the gospel by seeking the righteousness and justice of God.* The terrible
247 crises of the twentieth century provide a framework and direction for our mission in the twenty-
248 first. With the church at Barmen we believe that "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy
249 Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in
250 life and in death" (*The Book of Confessions*, 8.11). Members of the church in Korea resolved
251 "that we will follow the footsteps of our Lord, living among our oppressed and poor people,
252 standing against political oppression, and participating in the transformation of history, for this is
253 the only way to the messianic kingdom." The church at Belhar affirmed "that the church as the
254 possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the
255 wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged
256 who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others." We stand with these
257 churches in confessing a gospel that looks to God alone for salvation, that upholds justice and
258 promotes righteousness, and that excludes no one from the offer of God's judgment and grace.¹⁰

⁹ The two most prominent are pacifism and the just war tradition.

¹⁰ 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

259
260 Our love and concern for the church are deeply connected to our love and concern for the
261 world. During the years the task force has met, the world, like the church, has experienced
262 intense conflict.¹¹ Conflict forms the context in which our discernment of Christian identity now
263 takes place. How can the church bear witness to the conviction that our future lies in God and not
264 in our own efforts to secure our lives? In a world of divisiveness and violence, it is essential for
265 those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord to show the reason for the hope that is within us by
266 dealing differently with one another (1 Pet. 3:15), for in Jesus Christ, the church has been called
267 to a transformed way of living. Today especially, as Jews, Christians, and Muslims—the children
268 of Abraham—are as much enmeshed as any other people in ongoing conflict in the world, our
269 prayer to the God of Abraham is to hasten the promised days of messianic peace and to enable
270 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in faith, hope, and love, to be an instrument to that end.

271
272 *Gracious God, may we look back upon this time of trouble, in repentance and hope, and see*
273 *that in coming together to confront our differences, we found a new measure of the peace,*
274 *unity, and purity that were already ours in our loving Savior, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*
275

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

277 278 A. *Plan of Work*

279
280 The plan that the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church adopted
281 for its work was in keeping with its broad mandate to help the church discern its identity for the
282 21st century, as well as the specific charge to address four issues that have been the focus of
283 controversy and conflict: biblical authority and interpretation, Christology, ordination standards,
284 and power. The plan was also the outworking of goals adopted at the task force's first meeting as
285 a way to further the mandate:

- 286
287 • to deepen our understanding of our Christian and catholic identity and clarify key themes
288 of the Reformed theological and constitutional heritage;
- 289
290 • to study and evaluate the sources of health and promise as well as the causes of
291 dissension and unrest in the church;
- 292
293 • to recommend ways for the church to move forward, furthering its peace, unity, and
294 purity.

295
296 The plan of work to achieve these goals called for
297

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.

¹¹In 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.

- 298 • extensive study of theological issues, Presbyterian history and polity, as well as the topics
299 named in the mandate;
- 300
- 301 • ongoing reflective encounter with Scripture;
- 302
- 303 • prayer and worship, including the celebration of the Lord’s Supper at every meeting;
- 304
- 305 • use of a variety of processes for communal discernment and careful listening to each
306 other;
- 307
- 308 • ongoing consultation with governing bodies and other groups in the church.
- 309

310 Two features of the plan proved to be especially helpful. One was the decision to lay a
311 groundwork of general theological understanding and engagement before taking up the more
312 sensitive and difficult specific topics. The other was the determination to seek to understand
313 positions other than our own by studying some of the best written presentations of different
314 perspectives by respected scholars and earlier committees and commissions of the church. We
315 commend these practices to the whole church. Study and prayer together, deliberate efforts to
316 build community, and time spent in informal conversation proved to be essential to addressing
317 difficult issues. Analysis of thoughtful published presentations of positions on issues contributed
318 a great deal to mutual understanding.

319

320 For those who may want to borrow or adapt our plan of work, we have appended a meeting-
321 by-meeting narrative, which shows how the elements were interwoven. Here, however, by way
322 of introduction to our report, we want to emphasize two facets of our spiritual progress as a
323 group.

324

325 B. *Spiritual Progress*

326

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

329 1. *Pain and Penitence*

330

331

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

335

336 We knew when we first convened that the task force was created because the Presbyterian
337 Church (U.S.A.) was struggling. We were asked to consider how the peace, unity, and purity of
338 the church might be built up because many had concluded that these elements of church life were
339 compromised and in short supply. At that early point, we, the members of the task force, shared a
340 tendency that is widespread in the church: to blame others, especially those with whom we
341 disagree, for the church’s troubles. Our process and the covenant we adopted to guide our work

342 together, however, emphasized careful listening as much as self-expression.¹² In the course of
343 our work we began to understand that our own actions as much as others' have offended God,
344 wounded the body of Christ, and caused pain to other Presbyterians.

345
346 Some examples of what we learned from each other about the consequences of our attitudes
347 and actions include the following.

~~348~~
350 • Those of us associated with the Anglo traditions that have dominated the Presbyterian
351 Church (U.S.A.) came to understand how much alienation and pain we have caused by past
352 oppression of other racial and ethnic groups and by currently maintaining barriers to the full
353 inclusion of those groups' members, cultures, and gifts.

354
355 • Those of us who identify our views as liberal came to understand how alienating it is for
356 conservatives and evangelicals when their passionate commitment to holy living and upright
357 conduct are labeled rigid and judgmental.

358
359 • Those of us who identify our views as conservative came to understand how alienating it
360 is for liberals when their passionate commitment to justice and compassion are labeled
361 unbiblical.

362
363 • Those of us who identify our views as moderate came to understand how alienating it is
364 when those with passionate concerns on either end of the theological spectrum are labeled
365 extreme and divisive.

366
367 • Many of us came to understand how alienating it is for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and
368 transgender persons to be so regularly identified as a major threat to the peace, unity, and purity
369 of the church.¹³

370
371 • Many of us also came to understand how alienating it is for those who support a ban on
372 the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian persons to be accused of prejudice, and how
373 alienating it is for those who oppose such a ban to be accused of moral laxity.

374
375 • All of us came to see that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in its current factionalized
376 state that we have all created together by our mutual stereotyping and misuse of power, fails to
377 offer a suffering world a sign of the peace, unity, and purity that is God's gift to us in Jesus
378 Christ.

379
380 Though we know that by stereotyping and demeaning each other we have hurt not only our
381 opponents, but also ourselves and the whole church, we cannot claim that we have recognized all
382 the ways we have damaged the church and hurt one another. Nor can we claim that we have

¹² See Appendix ?????

¹³ The task force did not discuss the issues raised by bisexual and transgender 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.

383 amended our lives adequately to signal full repentance for the harm we have done. What we can
384 report is that as we became more deeply acquainted with one another's thinking and life
385 situations, we were chastened and humbled by the recognition that insofar as the body of Christ
386 in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) is broken, we have all played a part in betraying and denying
387 our Savior and in inflicting the damage from which the church, as His body, is suffering today.
388 The recognition that the travail of the church is our fault as much as it is others' sobered and
389 saddened our task force but also brought us closer together.

390
391 *2. Gratitude and Joy*

392
393 *Second, in the course of our work, we have become increasingly grateful for the gift of the*
394 *church and for the ways that other persons and perspectives make the whole body stronger.*

395
396 As we observed the disciplines of listening and reflection that became foundational in the
397 task force process, we heard more than the echoes of our sins of omission and commission. We
398 also heard the gospel anew and felt the spirit of Christ in the words and deeds of our fellow task
399 force members. Repeatedly, we found ourselves moved and impressed by the depth and truth of
400 statements made by our colleagues, including those whose backgrounds and experiences are very
401 different from our own. Most surprisingly, our faith was enriched and strengthened by the
402 contributions of those whose views on contested issues we do not share.

403
404 The task force was not, of course, exempt from the strains and pressures that afflict most
405 groups. There were edgy interchanges among us and moments of tension and misunderstanding.
406 The disciplines of listening and discernment that we used regularly helped us at these junctures.
407 On some occasions we made use of permission from the General Assembly to discuss sensitive
408 theological issues in closed session, which relieved some of the pressure of intense scrutiny from
409 the press and other observers. Like any other group that works hard together over time, however,
410 our proceedings included moments of discomfort and difficult encounters.

411
412 Nor did we overcome all our differences and reach agreement on all the issues about which
413 the church continues to disagree. *We have not compromised our basic convictions or*
414 *commitments.* We still hold most of the views and perspectives we brought to the task force.
415 From the beginning, some of us had ties to affinity groups (groups in the church that have
416 specific stands on some task force issues) and have maintained those ties during the life of the
417 task force.

418
419 But still it is a fact that all of us have been greatly enriched and changed by our work
420 together. This has been a season of intense discernment for every member of the task force. Our
421 experience of Christian faith and life has been extended and expanded. Our trust in other
422 Presbyterians and our respect for differing perspectives has deepened. Most of all, our joy in
423 believing has been greatly increased by the work of the Holy Spirit. Our gratitude for the church
424 has grown because of the honesty, humility, and faithfulness of the other members of the task
425 force. As a result, our hopes for the future of the church have been confirmed. In our preliminary
426 report, we affirmed the peace, unity, and purity of the church that are God's gift in Christ. We
427 can give thanks with full hearts for the gift of the church we have already received because we

428 have so intensely experienced this gift in our encounters with one another. *Over our time*
429 *together, a common conviction has grown among us: different as we are, God has called us all*
430 *to be part of the body of Christ as it is manifested in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).*

431
432 C. *The Structure of This Report*
433

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

437
438 The prologue (Section I) sets forth our theological affirmations. It grew out of the studies and
439 discussions in which the task force engaged “to deepen our understanding of our Christian and
440 catholic identity and clarify key themes of the Reformed theological...heritage.”

441
442 This section (II) gives an account of our plan of work and our progress in completing it.

443
444 The following section (III) summarizes how our thinking about the controversial issues
445 named in the task force mandate has developed in the course of our studies and discussions.

446
447 Section IV outlines resources we discovered for dealing with the issues assigned to us. Some
448 of these resources are found in the constitutional traditions of the church; others are drawn from
449 processes for discernment and decision-making that are unfamiliar to many Presbyterians.

450
451 Section V contains the task force’s practical recommendations for how the peace, unity, and
452 purity of the church may be preserved and promoted.

453
454 Section VI offers a final word from the task force.

455
456 To complement these sections of our formal report, we have included discussion resources by
457 individual task force members. These are the work of their authors. Other task force members
458 had an opportunity to make suggestions to the authors, but the documents have not been adopted
459 or approved by the whole task force. They are provided because they proved very useful in
460 stimulating the task force’s thinking and may serve the wider church as a resource for study.

461
462 **III. The Issues Before the Task Force**
463

464 The task force was charged to lead the church “in spiritual discernment of our Christian
465 identity in and for the 21st century.” Four issues were named for specific attention: *Christology,*
466 *biblical authority and interpretation, ordination, and power.* The task force was not asked to
467 resolve all the controversial issues in the church or to relieve the church of all conflict. Rather,
468 the task force was asked to help the church deal with current and future conflicts more faithfully.

469
470 To this end, the task force has studied the assigned topics, reading relevant documents and
471 engaging in discussion under the guidance of task force members who are skilled in teaching and
472 group leadership. Drawing on these sessions, we have produced a variety of resources. We also

473 sent to the 216th General Assembly (2004) a preliminary report that expressed our shared
474 conviction that the church’s peace, unity, and purity are the results not of human efforts but
475 rather of what God has given in Jesus Christ through the gracious work of the Spirit. (See
476 *Minutes*, 2004, Part I, pp. 617–18, 638–43.) The task of the church is to live into the fullness of
477 that gift. The General Assembly received that report and commended it to the church for study.
478 Now, in this final report, we address the specific issues in our mandate, building on the
479 theological affirmations in the first section. Below we outline our points of agreement about
480 three issues in our mandate. These points of agreement, given the range of our differences, may
481 provide help for the church to work toward shared positions on the topics of Christology, biblical
482 interpretation, and ordination standards and human sexuality. The fourth issue, the broad topic of
483 power, required multiple approaches. We address it in the next section on ecclesiology, polity,
484 discernment, and decision-making processes.

485

486 A. *Christology*

487

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

497

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

501

- 502 • We were inspired by the power that the affirmation “Jesus *is* Lord” and other traditional
503 Christological formulas have to shape faith and discipleship in our day.

504

- 505 • We were instructed by a breadth and variety of Christological affirmations that have been
506 accepted as Christian and Reformed doctrine and chastened about our own tendencies to
507 oversimplify our claims about Jesus Christ in contemporary debates.

508

- 509 • We were encouraged by the witness of Reformed Christians in Germany, South Africa,
510 Korea, and other parts of the world who risked their lives in the twentieth century to confess that

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵Theological 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.).

¹⁶ Refer to footnote 10.

511 Christ is alive in contemporary events. We were equally encouraged by Christians who continue
512 today to witness to Christ’s work in the world.

513
514 We found wide and deep common ground in our study of the church’s confessional tradition
515 concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. We have given voice to our shared convictions
516 in the theological reflection that heads this report. We have seen the reflection of Christ’s glory
517 in one another. Our growing awareness of this common faith in Christ has become the basis of
518 our unity and of our fear of the consequences of losing one another. This faith gives us hope,
519 indeed, assurance that we should hold on to one another and bear with one another as we grapple
520 with the other difficult issues before the church.

521
522 B. *Biblical Authority and Interpretation*

523
524 The task force addressed differences about biblical interpretation and authority, which many
525 Presbyterians believe are a root cause of other disagreements, in three ways. First, we engaged in
526 Bible study throughout every meeting—indeed, on almost every day of every meeting, focusing
527 on texts pertinent to our other discussions. Second, we reviewed different models of biblical
528 authority and interpretation that our Presbyterian forbears employed to read the Bible faithfully
529 and that continue to coexist to this day. We also reviewed classic guidelines for interpretation
530 that Presbyterians share despite diversity of perspective on the nature and authority of Scripture.
531 These include:

- 532
- 533 • The centrality of Jesus Christ
 - 534
 - 535 • The priority of the plain sense of the text
 - 536
 - 537 • Interpretation of Scripture by Scripture
 - 538
 - 539 • The rule of love
 - 540
 - 541 • The rule of faith¹⁷
 - 542

543 Last, we analyzed in detail two essays by scholars that offered biblical perspectives on
544 human sexuality, in order to understand how the Bible is used in making theological arguments
545 and why different interpreters come to different conclusions from their study of it.¹⁸ The articles

¹⁷“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.

¹⁸ 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.

546 led us to examine Romans 1 and other texts that have played significant parts in the debate over
547 human sexuality.

548

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

550

551 • In order to allow the Scriptures to speak to us clearly and fully, the Reformed approach
552 continues to embrace a variety of models of biblical authority and interpretation, each
553 highlighting values that Presbyterians have historically held to be important.

554

555 • There is a surprising measure of agreement about guidelines, methods, and resources for
556 biblical interpretation. Often church members agree on what Scripture says and many points of
557 interpretive detail. Some of the most serious disagreements focus on what constitutes faithful
558 pastoral application of scriptural teaching or on which passages of Scripture are relevant to a
559 particular question.

560

561 • Studying the Scriptures together enriches our understandings, corrects our
562 misunderstandings, and helps us wrestle with God’s Word more deeply and honestly.

563

564 • Because God alone is Lord of the conscience and because conscience is bound by the
565 witness of Scripture, it is important within these bounds to respect one another’s deep
566 convictions of conscience and to exercise mutual forbearance, as together we seek to discern
567 God’s will.

568

569 Each of us became firmly convinced that all the members of the task force honor the
570 authority of Scripture, embrace it as “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the
571 Church universal” (*Book of Order*, G-14.0207[b]), and seek earnestly to be faithful to that
572 witness. We who disagree on some matters can learn much from one another as we mine
573 together the Scriptures we love. This is further reason for Presbyterians, who share such rich
574 traditions of biblical interpretation, to continue together in fellowship. *The task force is*
575 *convinced that Scripture has the power to shape and transform us as the community of faith.*

576

577 C. *Sexuality and Ordination*

578

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

582

583 We explored a range of opinions on issues of human sexuality. Though we have shared some
584 of our personal opinions and positions, we focused our studies primarily on the written work of
585 Christian scholars and denominational commissions and assemblies. We read and discussed a
586 diverse collection of theological and biblical writings on these topics.¹⁹ We benefited greatly
587 from this way of grappling with issues and we commend it to the church. Before articulating
588 personal perspectives, groups that find themselves in conflict over issues might attempt what we

¹⁹ For a list of materials the task force studied, see Appendix ????

589 did: close and careful reading, in a group setting, of carefully selected texts that represent a
590 variety of perspectives.

591
592 Our study of human sexuality yielded several major insights:
593

594 • The theological and biblical literature on human sexuality in general and same-gender
595 sexuality in particular is diverse, subtle, and complex. It could not readily be divided into the two
596 categories—either approval or disapproval of same-gender relationships and practices—that are
597 assumed to anchor much of the conflict in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today. In one
598 session, a member of the task force offered a typology of six positions. Each position conveyed a
599 distinctive view of sin, reconciliation, and redemption. We acknowledged that other analysts
600 might approach the material differently and provide alternative interpretations.²⁰
601

602 • Methods of biblical interpretation, theological traditions, and policy conclusions did not
603 line up neatly in the work we studied. As the teaching paper “title” demonstrates, scholars and
604 writers who reached different conclusions often based their work on similar theological
605 premises.²¹
606

607 • Further, opinions about ordination and sexuality did not always correlate precisely with
608 particular theological positions. Writers associated with a particular theological perspective
609 sometimes reached conclusions different from what is often assumed to be their party’s “line” on
610 the witness of Scripture; the morality of covenantal, same gender relationships; and the
611 permissibility of ordination. For instance, some writers who believe that same-gender
612 relationships are wrong nevertheless believe pastoral acceptance should be extended to gay and
613 lesbian couples; some writers who believe that the full witness of Scripture supports the
614 possibility of covenantal relationships between persons of the same gender nevertheless
615 acknowledge that where Scripture speaks explicitly of same-gender acts it disapproves them.
616 These were only two of a number of combinations and permutations of theological, biblical, and
617 polity perspectives on the broad topic of sexuality and the narrower one of same-gender
618 relationships.
619

620 Amid all the rich complexity of these studies, all of us deepened our understanding of our
621 own perspectives as well as those of others. Perhaps most important, all of us found gospel
622 themes and biblical witness in the work of scholars and writers whose theological and polity
623 conclusions on the subject are different from our own.
624

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

²⁰ [REFERENCE TO THE FORTHCOMING PAPER “THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN SEXUALITY”]

²¹ 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.

627 • One model of Christian leadership that is consistently offered throughout the New
628 Testament is servant leadership. Christians are to imitate Christ in a posture of self-giving and
629 service, and to “outdo one another in showing honor” to others (Rom. 12:10) by respectful
630 attention and loving care.

631
632 • Reformed theological tradition emphasizes:

633
634 —the common Christian vocation of the entire body, the “priesthood of all believers,” in
635 which all members are called by God to promote the ongoing health and maturation of the body
636 of Christ.

637
638 —that certain members of the body of Christ are called by God through the voice of the
639 church to lead and nurture the body in its spiritual growth and in mission. These ordained
640 officers must adhere to confessional, governance, and disciplinary standards not required for
641 membership.

642
643 • Beyond these themes, Scripture does not provide a thoroughly developed theology of
644 ordination, and a theology of ordination has not been clearly and consistently articulated in the
645 development of Reformed and Presbyterian doctrine.²² As one might expect, then, ordination has
646 been a source of some confusion and a matter of controversy in our history. From the outset of
647 American Presbyterianism to the present, denominational conflicts have often centered on
648 matters of fitness for ordination.²³ The current controversy regarding issues of human sexuality
649 and ordination is the latest example of this recurring pattern.

650
651 The task force was not asked to take a position on human sexuality or ordination and we have
652 not attempted to do so. We did invest considerable time and energy in conversation, seeking to
653 understand one another’s points of view. We did not try to convince fellow task force members
654 of our own perspectives or to decide whether the church’s current position should be changed.

655
656 At the same time, we found we could reach ready agreement on several points²⁴:

657
658 • It is a grave error to deny baptism or church membership to gay and lesbian persons or to
659 withhold pastoral care to them and their families.

660
661 • Those who aspire to ordination must lead faithful lives. Those who demonstrate
662 licentious behavior should not be ordained.

663

²² 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.

²³ 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.

²⁴ 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 statements in documents approved by the General Assembly. [cite documents]

664 • Sexual behavior is integral to Christian discipleship, leadership, and community life. It is
665 not a purely personal matter.

666

667 • Sexual orientation is, in itself, no barrier to ordination.

668

669 The foregoing agreements left the task force with a wide range of theological views and
670 positions before it, all of which seemed to have some grounding in the theological affirmations
671 that head this report. Members of the task force reflect this range of views personally. Some
672 strongly support the church's current position; others strongly question it or want to change it;
673 others are still forming their thinking about sexuality and ordination. Having heard a presentation
674 to the task force [reference to Johnson's presentation], many believe that, instead of beginning
675 with the question of ordination, it would be more profitable first to explore a more basic
676 theological question: How does God's gracious drama of creation, reconciliation, and
677 redemption work itself out in the lives of baptized gay and lesbian persons who are committed to
678 exclusive, covenanted relationships?²⁵

679

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

685

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

695

696

IV. Resources for Peace, Unity, and Purity

697

698 Recent debates about sexuality, ordination, Christology, and other controversial topics have
699 been especially contentious, but the dilemma these issues pose is not unique. Most of the debates
700 that have threatened to break the church apart in the past have followed a similar pattern: A
701 range of possible positions exist on the issue at hand, but pressure to make decisions, especially
702 about eligibility for church office, forces the choice into a binary format that divides governing
703 bodies into two parties. Each party, often substantial in size, struggles long and hard for control

²⁵ 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.

704 of the policy of the whole church. The result is a church both preoccupied with and weary of
705 conflict.

706
707 Are there alternatives to constant, often bitter, contention that creates factions and rivalries?
708 The task force has searched Presbyterian tradition and other sources for models of constructive
709 engagement for moments like the present, when the church is segmented into parties that are in
710 almost constant conflict. We have discovered valuable resources that may allow those who hold
711 different positions on important issues to maintain the bonds of Christian fellowship, respecting
712 both the will of majorities and the conscience of minorities in a spirit of charity and mutual
713 forbearance. Using these resources, conflict can be transformed into creative and constructive
714 engagement in which those who disagree can seek together to know and follow the will of God.
715 In this section, we share the results of our search for such resources in the theology, history, and
716 polity of our church as well as in certain practices we have incorporated into our life together
717 that have strengthened us as a Christian community.

718
719 *A. Resources for Understanding Our Situation: Reformed Theology of Church Governance*
720

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

729
730 Potential church conflicts arise at times when sincere efforts to attend to God's Word and
731 Spirit lead various segments of the church to differing conclusions over contested issues. In
732 finding this to be the case among ourselves, the experience of the task force has mirrored that of
733 the church at large.

734
735 The task force is convinced that differences represented within its own membership result
736 from attempts on all sides to be faithful to the Word of God given in Scripture. These differences
737 are serious because they revolve around important topics. The differences are difficult to settle,
738 because each of the divergent conclusions attracts substantial numbers of faithful adherents who
739 are persons of sound qualification, good character, and strong faith. Such situations are not
740 uncommon in the history of the church. They require disciplines of patience, mutual forbearance,
741 and dedicated communal discernment to reach faithful resolution as we trust Jesus' promise that
742 the Holy Spirit will ultimately lead the church into all truth.

743
744 The task force in its own life has drawn from Reformed tradition in cultivating these
745 disciplines of patience, forbearance, and communal discernment that characterize the church as a

²⁶ *Book of Order*, G-4.0300d.

746 community governed by Christ through Word and Spirit. Among the practices that have drawn
747 us closer to God and one another are:

- 748
- 749 • Sincere self-examination, mutual confession, and repentance of ways in which all of us
750 have undermined the church’s calling and faithfulness.
- 751
- 752 • Joint participation in worship and in the sacrament of unity, the Lord’s Supper.
- 753
- 754 • Communal study of the Bible that seeks common and mutually enriching understanding
755 across dividing lines.
- 756
- 757 • Honest dialogue that seeks first to understand differing viewpoints before criticizing
758 them.
- 759
- 760 • Careful study of foundational aspects of church history, theology, confessions, and polity
761 that bind us together as Presbyterians.
- 762

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

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

767 Presbyterian polity is an expression of deep theological convictions about the church’s...

- 768
- 769
- 770
- 771 • Unity: Christ is not divided. We give witness to our oneness under Christ, the head of the
772 church, by good-faith participation in a disciplined and ordered life together.
- 773
- 774 • Purity: Truth, holiness, and righteousness matter as pathways to discipleship, in both the
775 life of the church as a body and the lives of its members. Ultimately, the church cannot simply
776 agree to disagree on important matters of faith and practice. Church polity must provide ways for
777 serious disagreements to be resolved. But resolution by merely technical or legal means will not
778 endure because it does not address the conflict of convictions that gave rise to the disagreements
779 in the first place. Only a resolution with theological integrity can be sustained.
- 780
- 781 • Peace: The pursuit of truth takes place in a community where differing voices are not
782 only respectfully engaged but also honored as full partners in our common pursuit of God’s will
783 for the church.
- 784

785 Historically, Presbyterian polity has been neither static nor singular. The denominational
786 traditions that have formed the current PC(USA) placed different emphases on the particular
787 dimensions of polity that they viewed as most distinctively “Presbyterian.” Yet they all sought to
788 maintain equilibrium between certain principles of governance that theologically distinguish
789 Presbyterian church life and discipline from other Christian communions.

790
 791 Four pairs of principles or “points of balance” have been particularly important in shaping
 792 the polity of the PC(USA). A full account of these points of balance, with historical illustrations,
 793 is provided in the paper “Principles of Polity,” available on the task force’s Web site. Here it is
 794 enough to note that when held in constructive tension, these points of balance have allowed
 795 Presbyterians to live in relative concord while engaged in vigorous debate and faithful ministry.
 796 When equilibrium between these shared theological commitments collapses, however,
 797 disagreements have been difficult to resolve, and ruptures in our communion have sometimes
 798 resulted.

799
 800 Presbyterians have regularly sought
 801

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

802
 803 *1. To honor communal discernment of God’s will and the Spirit’s leading while also recognizing*
 804 *that God alone is Lord of the conscience under the authority of Scripture*
 805

806 During the earliest days of American Presbyterianism, the need arose to find ways to connect
 807 these two basic principles. The standard of faith to which the church adhered, the Westminster
 808 Confession, acknowledged that councils of the church may err.²⁷ Therefore, throughout its

²⁷ “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*.

809 history the church has affirmed “the rights of private judgment in all matters that respect religion
810 are universal and unalienable.”²⁸ At the same time, Reformed Christians have always insisted
811 that Christ’s way is not a solitary one. The first Presbyterian courts and councils recognized that
812 faithful witness to the unity of the body requires mutual accountability and communal
813 discernment of the working of the Spirit. These are strenuous disciplines. They require both
814 forbearance in love and respect for the will of the body in one of two forms, either acquiescence
815 to its decisions or, if that is not possible, peaceful withdrawal.²⁹

816

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

820

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

829

830 The question of freedom of conscience under Scripture emerged immediately, however,
831 because some ministers of the synod considered certain articles in the standards to be at variance
832 with, or at least not explicitly enjoined by, Scripture. The synod resolved this conflict of
833 conscience by permitting these ministers and, later, candidates for the ministry to declare their
834 disagreements (“scruples”) with particular articles of the Westminster standards. It then
835 delegated to the examining body the responsibility for determining whether the candidate’s
836 disagreement concerned an essential article of the church’s “doctrine, worship or government.”³⁰
837 Although the Adopting Act was later modified, it established a precedent that has heavily
838 influenced American Presbyterians’ understanding of their confessional commitments to this
839 day. Therefore, the church has consistently maintained that certain beliefs and practices are
840 indispensable for the church’s theological integrity. At the same time, “differences have always

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

²⁹ 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.).

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

841 existed and been allowed ... as to [the] modes of explaining and theorizing within the metes and
842 bounds of one accepted system.”³¹

843
844 *3. To maintain a distinctive Presbyterian and Reformed witness to the world while also*
845 *engaging in mission with Christians of other traditions*
846

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

854
855 One dramatic instance of early cooperation and later division between representatives of
856 these two viewpoints was the Plan of Union contracted between Congregationalists and the
857 PCUSA in the 1800s. Initially, the General Assembly supported this plan, but the hybrid
858 character of the churches and presbyteries formed under the plan alarmed traditional Calvinist
859 Presbyterians. In 1837, this group, which had come to be called the “Old School,” declared the
860 synods, presbyteries, and churches formed under the Plan of Union no longer part of the church.
861 The “excised” delegates withdrew and regrouped as a church with the same legal name, but
862 popularly known as the “New School.”

863
864 In 1870, the northern Old School and New School churches reunited in a spirit of “mutual
865 confidence and love.” The reunion agreement carefully integrated themes of both “schools” by
866 seeking “guarantees for orthodoxy...and Christian liberty” combined in a spirit of “diversity and
867 harmony, liberty and love.”³²

868
869 *4. To uphold the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that have original jurisdiction in*
870 *church governance while also sustaining the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that*
871 *have the power of oversight and review*
872

873 Another disagreement that dates from the church’s earliest days concerns the powers of
874 governing bodies. The first gathering of an American presbytery (1706) was composed of
875 ordained officers with differing views of what constituted faithful church governance. One group
876 from New England, led by Jonathan Dickinson, favored limiting the power of all governing
877 bodies. Scripture alone, they believed, provided all that was necessary for the whole work of
878 ministry. Another group, from Scotland and Ireland, also acknowledged Scripture as an
879 “infallible rule” and the possibility that church councils would err. They insisted, however, that

³¹ *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.

³² *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.

880 the “bare letter” of Scripture must be interpreted by widely representative assemblies that could
881 be trusted to guide the church by devising creeds, by adopting statements of confession, and by
882 ordering the church’s common life.³³ This view prevailed in 1797, when the General Assembly
883 of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was organized.
884

885 This high view of the General Assembly’s authority was reinforced when the United
886 Presbyterian Church in North America united with the PCUSA in 1958. The authority of
887 “higher” governing bodies in American Presbyterian tradition has been balanced, however, by an
888 equally strong emphasis on the rights of those governing bodies (sessions and presbyteries)
889 where pivotal decisions in the church’s polity originate. This view has deep roots in the
890 denomination’s history as well, because presbyteries existed long before the General Assembly
891 was formed and the *Constitution* adopted. It was most pronounced, however, in the PCUS
892 tradition where the powers of all governing bodies—especially those above the presbytery
893 level—were severely limited. The PCUS recognized the General Assembly as the court of final
894 appeal in specific cases. Yet its General Assembly was circumspect in offering general
895 deliverances, and when it did provide them, it regarded them as “didactic, advisory, and
896 monitoring.”³⁴ The reunion in 1983 of the PCUS and the UPCUSA reinforced those elements in
897 both streams that had upheld the rights of presbyteries over against the General Assembly.
898

899 Presbyteries and sessions have the right and responsibility to examine and ordain their
900 officers and to decide who may be admitted to membership in congregations and presbyteries. In
901 addition, lower governing bodies may petition higher ones by overture to take action.
902 Presbyteries have the additional right to confirm (or veto) changes in the church’s constitution.
903 In turn, the General Assembly, synods, and presbyteries, acting as “higher” governing bodies,
904 have the duty of oversight and the right to review lower governing bodies’ decisions in specific
905 cases. Such rulings have the power of precedent for lower governing bodies that are deciding
906 similar matters.
907

908 The task force has concluded from its study of polity that:
909

³³Is 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.

³⁴[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.

910 • The discipleship of maintaining a healthy tension within these four sets of
911 complementary commitments has always been a strenuous and complex exercise. The
912 Presbyterian church has consistently looked to the Holy Spirit speaking through Scripture for its
913 compass in navigating a faithful course to God’s kingdom. But simply charting a course has
914 never been sufficient. The opportunities and temptations of the culture that the church inhabits,
915 discord over controversial issues, and other factors internal and external to the church can push
916 the church to one side of the polity balance or the other. In certain situations they can even
917 threaten to capsize the ship of faith by collapsing the necessary tension between its guiding
918 principles. The church’s calling in the face of such a challenge has been to seek flexible
919 equilibrium rather than static and perfect balance. It achieves this goal by weighting its polity for
920 a time in favor of those principles neglected by current trends in culture, controversy, theology,
921 or practice. Such temporary maneuvers are essential to right the ship, but they too can endanger
922 its faithful forward course if they are taken to be permanent or irreversible. When conditions
923 change, equilibrium between the complementary commitments described above should be
924 restored.

925

926 • The church, as Reformed traditions are acutely aware, is situated in human culture. This
927 has both positive and negative implications:

928

929 —The inclusion of Christians from different cultural backgrounds has already and can
930 again open new vistas of faithfulness that strengthen the fabric of Presbyterian polity and the
931 vibrancy of Presbyterian life together. In the colonial period, a vigorous, uniquely American
932 form of Presbyterian life in community was spawned from the mix of its earliest members’
933 differing convictions about church government, which were derived from their various cultural
934 backgrounds in the British Isles. Similarly, today, the inclusion of non-Anglo communities’
935 traditions is expanding and revitalizing the church’s vision of faithfulness for the era ahead.

936

937 —Because the church is composed of fallen human beings, it remains susceptible to sin.
938 Sin has the power to disrupt the balance between principles of polity that the church has long felt
939 called by Scripture to maintain. Any contemporary polity is, inevitably, only an approximation of
940 its ideals and is, therefore, a candidate for reform. But at its best, the church’s maintenance of a
941 faithful equilibrium between its polity principles keeps the ship of faith righted and progressing
942 toward the full reign of God on this earth.

943

944 • Church government, with the help of the Spirit then, can aspire to be a visible
945 embodiment of a communion’s understanding of Christian life in community.

946

947 • Obedience to Presbyterian church polity is a condition of ordained leadership, even as
948 church members acknowledge the necessity of the ongoing reform of church structures,
949 disciplines, and policies.

950

951 • A church’s polity cannot live up to its calling unless it provides ways for conflicts within
952 the church to be addressed theologically. Technical or merely political solutions to serious

953 controversies rooted in sincere theological differences will not hold for long. In our
954 denomination, this integral relationship of theology and polity has been strained in recent history.

955

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

957

958 Presbyterian polity and traditional patterns of decision-making have great strengths. History
959 and experience have shown, however, that not all situations faced by the church are most
960 effectively addressed by the parliamentary procedures on which Presbyterian church law relies.
961 In particular, decision-making by up-or-down vote, in which the winning majority takes all, may
962 be ill-suited to situations in which there is a sizable minority or a persistent, substantial division
963 on important aspects of its common life. In such situations, parliamentary methods may
964 exacerbate political infighting and escalate conflicts rather than resolve them. Adversarial debate
965 tends to set positions in opposition to one another and to mask the needs, values, interests, and
966 concerns that underlie those positions. Participants in a debate are tempted to defend their
967 positions at all costs and to resist attentiveness to other views, mutual submission in love, and the
968 leading of the Holy Spirit through collaborative exploration.

969

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

976

977 The task force has made use of a variety of approaches for discernment. It has deliberated as
978 a “committee of the whole” and employed disciplines such as mutual invitation, polarity
979 management, consensus building, and other tools for structured communal discernment. These
980 tools, plus approaches used by some other bodies within the church, are discussed in more depth
981 in the resource, “Discernment and Decision-Making.” The task force has come to believe that the
982 whole church at every level, including the General Assembly, would be well served by more
983 regular use of communal efforts to discern the mind of Christ through the Scriptures, nurturing
984 communal attitudes and practices that allow us to live faithfully with difference while we
985 seriously engage in the quest for common understanding.

986

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

988

989 In this section we have looked back into Presbyterian history and then beyond Reformed
990 traditions for resources that might help the church in its current difficulties. In order for these
991 resources to point the way to resolutions of problems and to promising future directions, we as a
992 communion must learn how to pass along more than the simple storyline of our tradition’s
993 biography or the legal codes of its discipline. We must also school ourselves in the foundational
994 theological commitments and the practical wisdom that flows from them—what we have called
995 “points of balance”—that gave rise to that storyline and discipline in the first place. It is these
996 points of balance that have allowed Presbyterian churches at their best to remain grounded and,
997 at the same time, flexible and open to alternative means within and beyond their history and

998 practice. This “balanced” posture is not easy to achieve, but it is essential if a Presbyterian
999 church is to maintain the faithful equilibrium to which Reformed understanding aspires.

1000
1001 There is a third source of help and renewal for the church today, one that has impressed the
1002 task force again and again: the church’s own members and organizations, many of which are
1003 pioneering new ways of working together that build bridges among parties and factions, deepen
1004 mutual understanding, and build up the body in love. One of the goals adopted by the task force
1005 was to study the health and promise of the church. In the midst of the difficulties and challenges
1006 that the denomination faces, we have found much health and strength to celebrate.

1007
1008 Some projects seeking the ends of increased understanding and stronger bonds among
1009 Presbyterians were begun in response to the General Assembly’s call in 2004 for theological
1010 reflection groups, but many of them were already underway and, indeed, pre-existed the task
1011 force itself. Many congregations have sought to educate themselves in disciplined and thoughtful
1012 ways about the issues troubling the church. Presbyteries have created dialogue groups and drawn
1013 congregations together in mission. Ministers have organized diverse groups of colleagues who
1014 offer each other insight and support. The entities and offices of the General Assembly have
1015 launched innovative efforts to draw diverse Presbyterians together for study, reflection, dialogue,
1016 and service. Even the affinity groups, which have distinct theological positions and political
1017 goals, have contributed to this effort. Most of them host educational events that attract members
1018 of organizations that take different stands on controversial questions. On one recent occasion,
1019 two very different groups cosponsored a meeting for prayer and repentance.

1020
1021 In addition to these deliberate efforts to bridge differences, there is significant change in the
1022 structures and practices of church life. There are many signs that, on a changing cultural
1023 landscape, old models are breaking down and new forms of denominationalism in the United
1024 States are developing at local, regional, and national levels. There is, for instance, new emphasis
1025 on congregations, on local denominational structures, on mission, and on forms of worship and
1026 program that might attract people with little experience of church life. Some of these changes
1027 create anxiety, but others bring a heightened sense that God may be doing new things with the
1028 church.

1029
1030 Task force members have read communications from those engaged in this wide range of
1031 efforts and learned from presbyteries, congregations, and other groups that are already promoting
1032 the church’s unity, purity, and peace.³⁵ These experiences are heartening. They demonstrate that
1033 the progress the task force seeks to foster by this report and its recommendations will not be a
1034 new experience for the church, but an extension of attitudes and practices into which the church
1035 is already living. This report is not a new or different word to the church, but a summary of the
1036 longings and aspirations that many Presbyterians have already expressed and acted upon.

1037
1038 Peace, unity, and purity are gifts of the Spirit to the church. They are also hard won virtues
1039 for any church, as our review of Presbyterian history reminds us. Presbyterians have regularly
1040 and sometimes vehemently disagreed about fundamental features of our confession, order, and

³⁵ Reference to recent issue of the Outlook that describes some of these efforts.

1041 discipline. How we deal with one another in controversy—especially how we accept judgment
1042 and reconciliation won for us in Christ—is a challenge to our discipleship, a test of our faith, and
1043 our most convincing witness to the truth and power of the gospel we proclaim.

1044 1045 **V. Recommendations**

1046
1047 Seeking the peace, unity, and purity that God offers us in the work of our loving Savior, the
1048 task force offers the following seven recommendations.

1049 **1. The task force recommends that the General Assembly strongly encourage:**

1050
1051 **a. every member of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to witness to the church’s**
1052 **visible oneness, to avoid division into separate denominations that obscure our community**
1053 **in Christ, and to live in harmony with other members of this denomination, so that we may**
1054 **with one voice together glorify God in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit; and**

1055 **b. all sessions, congregations, presbyteries, and synods to renew and strengthen**
1056 **their covenanted partnership with one another and with the General Assembly.**

1057 1058 *Rationale*

1059
1060 The task force believes that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is called to hold together in one
1061 body. We do not deny that differences in the church are deep and important. Even in our small
1062 task force, we are far apart on some issues despite intense engagement together in discernment
1063 over nearly four years. At the same time, both in our own fellowship and in the church whose
1064 diversity we were chosen to represent, we have discovered more agreement than disagreement.
1065 Core convictions about the gospel draw Presbyterians together. The task force found it possible
1066 to state these core convictions in one voice. Our gratitude and joy for the privilege of confessing
1067 the faith together convince us that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) must not let its differences
1068 pull it apart. Each of us on the task force still thinks that some positions others among us hold are
1069 incorrect, even damaging to the church and the clarity of its message. Yet we have come to
1070 respect the integrity with which theological views different from our own are held, and we have
1071 seen that many others in the church have the same capacity to perceive the biblical basis and
1072 Christian credibility of other perspectives.

1073
1074 Therefore, the task force has concluded that, despite disagreements, the Presbyterian Church
1075 (U.S.A.) should make every effort to prevent schism. What protections are there against bitter
1076 division? The task force, diverse in its makeup, has gained some practical wisdom about what it
1077 required for unity while important differences remain. Our pattern of life together, our
1078 experiences of the results of sustained study and regular worship, and our review of history and
1079 the principles of polity have convinced us that there are Presbyterian traditions and habits, some
1080 of which have been underutilized, that may enable the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) not only to
1081 avoid a division, but to grow closer in Christ as its members struggle together to live out the
1082 gospel. The following recommendations, which are means to this end, commend the use of the
1083 resources we have discovered to the whole church.

- 1086 **2. The task force recommends that the General Assembly urge governing bodies,**
1087 **congregations, and other groups of Presbyterians to follow the example of the task force**
1088 **and other groups that, in the face of difficult issues, have engaged in processes of**
1089 **intensive discernment through worship, community-building, study, and collaborative**
1090 **work.**

1091
1092 *Rationale*

1093
1094 The task force was directed to devise “an instrument and a process” by which means the
1095 church can discern and discuss matters that unite and divide it. By the grace of God and with the
1096 Spirit’s help, the task force grew into a Christian community. We also discovered that we were
1097 not unique, that numerous groups in the church were also seeking mutual understanding, using
1098 the disciplines of study, sharing of joys and sorrows, and prayer that paved the way. We
1099 commend to the church the methods that the task force and others have used to pave the way to
1100 discernment: deep reflection on Scripture; serious study of basic theological doctrines; intensive
1101 review of the history of the church, the currents of conviction that created and resolved conflicts,
1102 and the practical wisdom it has gained from its experience over time; regular prayer and worship;
1103 use of texts written from a variety of perspectives as an introduction to the discussion of
1104 potentially divisive issues; and work together toward important goals. Taken together, these
1105 disciplines form part of the “instrument and process” the task force commends to the church.
1106

1107 To assist other groups that want to use methods the task force employed, discussion
1108 resources that helped us shape our thinking are included with this report. In addition to
1109 educational resources produced by the task force, a complete bibliography of materials we have
1110 read is available (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity). Before June 2006, we will publish
1111 curricular materials that help church leaders, members, and groups make use of the educational
1112 resources we have prepared or used ourselves.
1113

1114 The intent of this recommendation, however, is to invite the whole church to participate in a
1115 season of discernment, not to mandate any particular format or approach. The task force
1116 resources may be helpful starting points. We urge others to share the plans and materials they
1117 have used, and we encourage all who decide to pursue mutual understanding to bring all the
1118 imagination and creativity they can muster to the process.
1119

- 1120 **3. The task force asks the General Assembly to commend for study the Theological**
1121 **Reflection that heads the task force report.**

1122
1123 *Rationale*

1124
1125 The task force was directed to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in “spiritual
1126 discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century.” We began our discernment
1127 process by studying core doctrines of the Christian faith. Toward the end of our time together, as
1128 we began to draft this report, we summarized what we have come together to believe about who
1129 we are called to be as Presbyterian Christians facing an uncertain, challenging future. That
1130 summary, the Theological Reflection that begins this report, affirms biblical faith, foundational

1131 Christian and Reformed teachings, and helpful ways that contemporary believers express the
1132 faith in a world hungering for meaning and truth.

1133
1134 The Theological Reflection is not, however, intended to be an official doctrinal statement of
1135 the church, much less a new confession of faith. It is the work of one group whose members
1136 were chosen, as we have said, not because we are experts but because we are typical of the range
1137 of backgrounds and views of church leaders and members. The fact that the task force, in all its
1138 diversity, has been able to agree on so much will, we hope, be an encouragement to the church.
1139 What we hold in common is far greater than those things that divide us. Many readers of the
1140 Theological Reflection will want to restate portions of it or add to it. We encourage them to do
1141 so. We urge that the Theological Reflection be studied, not as a finished or perfect product, but
1142 as a starting point for other groups that seek the experience, which we have found so valuable, of
1143 grappling with basic theological issues in the company of those who bring different perspectives.
1144 Listening to how our presumed opponents understand God, Jesus Christ, the work of the Spirit,
1145 the mission of the church, and other centrally important features of the faith has done more to
1146 deepen our discernment and mutual understanding than any other activity. Such theological
1147 searching, we believe, should be an early step in any process of discernment meant to foster
1148 purity, unity, and peace.

1149
1150 **4. The task force recommends that the General Assembly direct the Committee on**
1151 **the Office of the General Assembly and urge those who plan and moderate**
1152 **meetings of other governing bodies to explore the use of alternative forms of**
1153 **discernment and decision-making as a complement to parliamentary procedure,**
1154 **especially in dealing with potentially divisive issues.**

1155
1156 *Rationale*

1157
1158 The other element of “an instrument and process” the task force commends to the church is
1159 the wide variety of processes of discernment and communal decision-making the task force used
1160 in its deliberations. These processes are alternatives to the mode of debate, in which opposing
1161 sides emphasize the strength of their own position and the weaknesses of the other. In
1162 discernment, members of the body work together to generate and weigh options. Advocacy is
1163 complemented by inquiry. This can lead to cohesion in the body as well as discernment of the
1164 will of Christ. These methods can be used under *Robert’s Rules of Order* [the primary
1165 framework for decision-making in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)] in modes such as
1166 “committee of the whole” before proceeding to a vote. The alternative approaches that were most
1167 effective for the task force as it sought insight, understanding, and cohesion in Christ are
1168 described in detail in “Discernment and Decision-Making,” one of the discussion resources that
1169 is part of this report, in video resources the task force produced, and in additional resources
1170 posted on our Web site.

1171
1172 The task force, having gained so much from these approaches and methods, strongly
1173 commends them to the church. Such methods are easily integrated into the proceedings of small
1174 groups like the task force. They also can be used by larger decision-making groups. In the

resources noted above, examples are provided of how all deliberative bodies, including large assemblies, can integrate some of these alternative means of discernment into their life and work.

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 standards 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.

Rationale

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

If adopted, this authoritative interpretation would restore a greater degree of both rigor and flexibility in ordination decisions. The authoritative interpretation would accomplish this by

1219 clarifying provisions of G-6.0108 that stem from long-established principles of Presbyterian
1220 polity:

- 1221
- 1222 1) Standards for ordination are determined by the whole church by constitutional
1223 process. Acting on their own, local governing bodies cannot set their own standards
1224 or set aside the church's standards.
 - 1225 2) Ordaining and installing bodies are empowered and duty-bound to apply the church's
1226 standards and to determine the fitness for office of those elected to office. This
1227 responsibility includes determining, on a case-by-case basis, whether officers-elect
1228 adhere to essential and necessary articles of doctrine, discipline, and government.
 - 1229 3) Ordaining/installing bodies and higher governing bodies are partners in the ordination
1230 process. Higher governing bodies oversee the decisions of lower ones. Ordaining and
1231 installing bodies determine fitness for office. Partnership requires mutual respect of
1232 each other's decisions.
- 1233

1234 *Why is an authoritative interpretation needed?*

1235

1236 The function of an authoritative interpretation is to clarify potentially ambiguous words or
1237 phrases in the *Book of Order*. (See lines 1392-1410.)

1238

1239 G-6.0108 was added to the *Book of Order* in 1983. It requires that all candidates for office
1240 adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity (G-60108a, sentence one) as expressed in
1241 *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government. Ordaining bodies may not dispense with
1242 the church's standards or promulgate their own. G-6.0108 also requires the application of the
1243 standards with integrity. It insures freedom of conscience in interpretation of Scripture within
1244 certain bounds, requires ordaining/installing bodies to determine whether there is a "serious
1245 departure" from standards (G-6.0108a, sentence two), and makes an important distinction
1246 between "standards" and "essentials."

1247

1248 Standards are aspirational in character. No one lives up to them perfectly (for this reason, G-
1249 6.0108 permits "departures" from standards that are not deemed essential). Essentials, by the
1250 terms of G-6.0108b (third sentence), are those matters of faith and polity that the officer-elect's
1251 governing body discerns are indispensable for ordained service. Essential doctrines are those that
1252 are required for a person's beliefs to fall within the bounds of Reformed understandings of
1253 Christian faith. Essentials of polity are those that are required for a person's ordained service to
1254 fall within the bounds of Reformed understandings of church governance. Essential practices are
1255 those that are required for a person's life to fall within the bounds of Reformed understandings of
1256 Christian discipleship.

1257

1258 In recent years, the relationship between G-6.0108 and other *Book of Order* sections on
1259 ordination has become unclear. Some ordaining/installing bodies have maintained that the
1260 *Constitution* gives them the right to overlook or dispense with certain churchwide standards.
1261 Others have considered adopting their own version or distillation of essential standards, to be
1262 applied to all officers-elect. Some interpreters have insisted that some provisions of the

1263 *Constitution*, such as those that govern sexual behavior, supersede the right of ordaining and
1264 installing bodies to determine fitness for ordination in all cases.

1265
1266 This authoritative interpretation addresses all these points of confusion, by reaffirming the
1267 wisdom in G-6.0108, as it holds together key historical and theological principles—the need for
1268 the establishment of standards by the whole church and the duty of ordaining and installing
1269 bodies to apply those standards in determining fitness for office and compliance with essentials.
1270 If the authoritative interpretation clarifies current confusions about ordination and installation, it
1271 will, we believe, contribute to the peace, unity, and purity of the church.

1272
1273 *What is new or different about the proposed authoritative interpretation?*

1274
1275 No elements of the proposed authoritative interpretation are new. In fact, both G-6.0108 and
1276 this interpretation represent a reemphasis of traditional principles that, as we demonstrated in the
1277 previous section, have been held in constructive balance and tension in the past.

- 1278
- 1279 • *The power of the whole church to set standards is affirmed.* This power was first
1280 conferred in 1729, when the General Synod adopted the Westminster standards as the
1281 confessional basis for all ministers. The principle established then and confirmed in this
1282 authoritative interpretation do not permit the kind of “local option” arrangements that
1283 some have proposed, in which each ordaining and installing body sets its own standards.
1284 Such a procedure would be new, and it would be un-Presbyterian.
 - 1285 • *The authoritative interpretation also emphasizes the traditional respective*
1286 *responsibilities of various persons and bodies.* Officers-elect have the duty to conform to
1287 essentials of faith and polity and the right to freedom of conscience within bounds.
1288 Ordaining and installing bodies have the duty to apply standards and the right to discern
1289 which are essential for ordained service. These two principles were also established in
1290 1729, when ministers were given the opportunity to dissent from articles of the
1291 Westminster standards (“declare a scruple” was the language of the time) and ordaining
1292 bodies were given the right to determine whether the “scrupled” article was an essential
1293 tenet.
 - 1294 • *The authoritative interpretation emphasizes as well the power of higher governing bodies*
1295 *to review ordination and installation decisions if they are challenged,* determining
1296 whether examinations were lawfully and fairly conducted and whether the matter of
1297 essentials was adequately grappled with. This, too, is a tradition of Presbyterian polity,
1298 dating from the adoption of a constitution and the establishment of the General Assembly
1299 in 1789.

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1301 By emphasizing traditional principles, the authoritative interpretation might, however,
1302 introduce at least two changes in current practices of ordination.

- 1303
- 1304 • Though current practices vary from session to session and presbytery to presbytery, it is
1305 often reported that examinations lack rigor by not fully investigating the scope of each
1306 officer-elect’s beliefs, practices, gifts, willingness to uphold the governance of the
1307 church, and scruples. *The authoritative interpretation lifts up the obligation of the*

1308 *ordaining or installing body to gain the broadest visions of each officer-elect's faith,*
1309 *manner of life, and promise as it applies standards and makes determinations about*
1310 *essentials.*

1311 • The authoritative interpretation also lifts up a feature of G-6.0108 that is grounded in
1312 history but has fallen out of current practice. *G-6.0108 puts "faith and polity"—belief*
1313 *and behavior—on an equal footing, as they were in 1729, when scruples were permitted*
1314 *in matters of "doctrine, discipline and government."* Over time, an imbalance has
1315 developed, with flexibility afforded in matters of doctrine and strict compliance required
1316 on all points of conduct and polity. By implication, this confers greater authority on the
1317 "Form of Government" than on the confessions and the Scripture they interpret. The
1318 proposed authoritative interpretation restores the balance, grounded firmly in the
1319 Reformed theological insight that faith and action are inextricably related. Faith is not
1320 only mental assent but also a pattern of life lived in the presence of God. The test and
1321 fruit of faith are change of heart and amendment of life. Therefore, officers-elect must
1322 comply with essentials of polity and practice as well as faith. Ordaining and installing
1323 bodies may exercise judgment in the application of standards of both belief and practice
1324 that are deemed by those bodies to be non-essential.

1325
1326 In a word, the proposed authoritative interpretation introduces no innovations, but it does
1327 seek to retrieve and clarify long-established Presbyterian principles of decision-making in
1328 matters of ordination to and installation in church offices.

1329
1330 *How would the authoritative interpretation address current critical issues in the church?*

1331
1332 The authoritative interpretation we have proposed is intended to clarify constitutional
1333 principles and decision-making procedures in any church controversy that affects ordination
1334 standards, as so many Presbyterian disputes have done in the past. It is not designed to settle a
1335 particular issue but to clarify the common framework within which all ordination decisions are
1336 made. The problem on which it focuses is a perennial one. Because Presbyterian standards for
1337 office are ideals, including the highest ideal, perfect obedience to Scripture, all candidates for
1338 office will depart from them in some ways, in both belief and practice. There never have been or
1339 will be perfect officers-elect. Thus every ordaining/installing body, in every case, must decide
1340 what departures can be tolerated and which are so serious that essential matters of faith and
1341 practice are compromised. The interpretation proposed here makes clear that standards may not
1342 be compromised merely because they are unpopular in a particular locale. At the same time,
1343 ordaining/installing bodies, which have the most direct connection and responsibility for people
1344 seeking to enter their membership, have the responsibility for making judgments about whether
1345 these actual, fallible human beings have the self-awareness, commitment, and capacity to
1346 exercise faithful ministry.

1347
1348 At the present moment, however, many will ask how the proposed interpretation may affect
1349 several issues that have been the focus of recent conflicts about ordination, including the use of
1350 theological standards in the ordination process, the application of G-6.0106b, the respective
1351 powers of governing bodies, and the status of authoritative interpretations.

1352

- 1353 • *Theological standards*: The proposed authoritative interpretation emphasizes what the
 1354 *Constitution* already requires: the examination of officers-elect according to the standards
 1355 of Scripture, the confessions, and the Form of Government. Ordaining/installing bodies
 1356 may not ignore any existing churchwide standards or adopt additional standards to be
 1357 imposed on all candidates. The proposed authoritative interpretation further emphasizes
 1358 the duty of ordaining/installing bodies to determine whether the officer-elect accepts the
 1359 essentials of faith and polity. If the candidate cannot accept the essentials of Reformed
 1360 faith and polity as determined by the examining body, the ordination cannot proceed.
 1361
- 1362 • *G-6.0106b*: It is not the intention of this proposed authoritative interpretation of G-6.0108
 1363 to change existing ordination standards, including the standards of G-6.0106b, which was
 1364 added to the *Constitution* in 1997, and authoritative interpretations addressing its
 1365 concerns.³⁶ The task force was not asked to adjudicate the issues named in its mandate,
 1366 including the questions about sexuality and ordination that are the focus of G-6.0106b.
 1367 Rather, the task force was instructed to propose ways for the church to live faithfully
 1368 while dealing with those issues. The task force recognizes that the debate over G-6.0106b
 1369 may continue for many years. The authoritative interpretation the task force proposes is
 1370 designed to help the church maintain peace, unity, and faithfulness to scriptural and
 1371 theological principles while that debate continues.
 1372

1373 The proposed interpretation requires ordaining and installing bodies to examine
 1374 carefully both the doctrinal views and the manner of life of those elected to office. If an
 1375 ordaining or installing body determines that an officer-elect has departed from G-
 1376 6.0106b, a manner-of-life standard, the ordaining/installing body must then determine
 1377 whether this departure violates essentials of faith or polity. If so, the candidate may not
 1378 be ordained. If the departure is judged not to violate the essentials of Reformed faith and
 1379 polity, after the ordaining/installing body has weighed the departure in the full context of
 1380 a candidate’s statement of faith and manner of life, then there is no barrier to ordination
 1381 (though there also is no requirement that the person be ordained). As at present, the
 1382 ordaining/installing body would make the decision, with the help of the Spirit, about
 1383 whether to ordain and/or install and based on all the evidence before it.
 1384

³⁶ “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 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 of obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historical 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 Word and Sacrament.”

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- *Review of decisions:* The interpretation reaffirms long-standing principles of review of lower governing bodies by higher ones. Decisions about who meets standards of fitness and whether those elected to office are in compliance with essentials of faith and polity belong to the ordaining/installing body, but whether the ordaining body has adequately exercised its duties, including whether it has adequately grappled with the question of what constitutes essentials for ordination, is subject to review. Prior judicial commission rulings have specified that examination of candidates must be reasonable, responsible, and deliberate and that it must be thorough enough to ensure compliance with essentials. This interpretation conforms to the letter as well as spirit of those earlier judgments.
 - *The status of authoritative interpretations:* The proposed authoritative interpretation would clarify an issue that has caused considerable confusion: how authoritative interpretations of ordination standards function. The *Constitution* gives the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission the power to issue authoritative interpretations of constitutional provisions and stipulates that such interpretations are binding on lower governing bodies (G-13.0112 and G-13.0103r). Ordination standards are constitutional provisions, and thus are subject to authoritative interpretation. At the same time, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission has established that higher governing bodies may not prevent lower bodies from carrying out their constitutionally mandated responsibilities. The conjunction of these two principles means that, if an ordination standard has been authoritatively interpreted, (1) ordaining/installing bodies must interpret the standard as the General Assembly and its Permanent Judicial Commission have authoritatively directed, and (2) ordaining/installing bodies have the power to determine whether any officer-elect's departure from the interpreted standard compromises essentials of Reformed faith and polity and thus should constitute a barrier to ordination. In short, an authoritative interpretation binds how an ordaining/installing body interprets a standard, but it does not override that body's power to judge which matters are essential and whether any departure from non-essentials is sufficiently serious that a candidate will not be ordained or installed.

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

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Admittedly, this measure will stimulate some vigorous debates and possibly dissension in sessions and presbyteries about critical issues. Groups that meet together regularly have, however, many more opportunities to engage conflicts constructively than do large national bodies like the General Assembly whose membership changes from meeting to meeting and

1430 often finds itself under sustained pressure from opposing interest groups. And what about purity?
1431 Some will object that the approach we propose will lead to variations in the actual judgments
1432 made by ordaining bodies and will permit persons to be ordained who do not meet the church's
1433 standards. There is already considerable variation in the judgments of ordaining and installing
1434 bodies; and no candidate perfectly conforms to the church's standards. We predict that the
1435 authoritative interpretation, by bringing renewed emphasis to the process of examination and
1436 application of standards, will in fact lead to more careful and balanced decisions about fitness for
1437 ordination, thereby promoting the purity of the church and the quality of its leadership.
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1439 *Finally, it is essential to note that the proposed authoritative interpretation is meant to serve*
1440 *these purposes—peace, unity, and purity—no matter what standards are in place in the future.*
1441 Some current standards, particularly G-6.0106b, are controversial. If that provision were to be
1442 removed, or others were to be added, the authoritative interpretation, with its emphasis on the
1443 right of ordaining/installing bodies to apply the standards in a given case, would continue to
1444 ensure that an ordaining body could not be forced to ordain a person whose faith or manner of
1445 life it deems to constitute a departure from essentials of Reformed faith and practice established
1446 in *The Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government in the *Book of Order*.
1447

1448 We submit that the authoritative interpretation proposed here answers many pressing needs
1449 of the church and will continue to do so in years to come. At the same time, we acknowledge that
1450 there are no perfect solutions to the challenge of living with a common confession of faith and
1451 deep difference about particular issues. Some will be disappointed that we have not adjudicated
1452 the controversial issues of the moment, making recommendations on behalf of one side or
1453 another. We have understood our mandate to be broader and farther reaching: to seek ways for
1454 the church to live the gospel joyfully and productively amid inevitable disagreement. We believe
1455 that the recommendations we have put forward, including this authoritative interpretation, will
1456 facilitate that.
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1458 **6. If the 217th General Assembly adopts Recommendation 5, the task force strongly**
1459 **encourages**
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- 1461 a. **the 217th General Assembly to adopt no additional authoritative**
1462 **interpretations, to remove no existing authoritative interpretations, and to**
1463 **send to the presbyteries no proposed constitutional amendments that would**
1464 **have the effect of changing denominational policy on any of the major issues**
1465 **in the task force's report, including Christology, biblical interpretation,**
1466 **essential tenets, and sexuality and ordination.**
1467 b. **all church members to acknowledge their traditional biblical obligation, as**
1468 **set forth in Matthew 18:15-17, Matthew 5:23-25, and in the Rules of**
1469 **Discipline in the *Book of Order*, "to conciliate, mediate, and adjust**
1470 **differences without strife...prayerfully and deliberately" (D-1.0103) and to**
1471 **institute administrative or judicial proceedings only when other efforts fail to**
1472 **preserve the purposes and purity of the church.**
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Rationale

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

Although the task force has affirmed commonly held convictions of Presbyterians on the issues the General Assembly named in the task force’s mandate, it has not taken positions on disputed issues whose resolution might necessitate constitutional change. Nor has it debated various measures that have been or may be sent to the General Assembly at which this report will be received. We believe it would create confusion and further conflict to attempt to make major constitutional changes to section G-6.0106 or on other controversial issues before the church has reacquainted itself with the time-tested principles of the proposed authoritative interpretation. In the same period, additional measures are required to create a climate for discernment. Whenever possible, personal engagement, mediation, and conciliation should be used before either administrative or judicial action is considered.

7. Finally, the task force recommends to the 217th General Assembly that this report answer the following: Overture 01-33, Commissioner Resolutions 00-28, 01-23, and Item 02-10.

Rationale

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

VI: A Final Word

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

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

Life together in a discernment mode has the potential to be more constructive and less difficult than our current pattern of head-to-head confrontation over issues. The purpose of discernment, however, is not to minimize critical issues in order to get on to other matters, much less to make life more pleasant. The purpose, rather, is to know, in our very being as a church,

1520 the peace, unity, and purity that have been given to us in Jesus Christ, and to show that peace,
1521 unity, and purity to the world we have been commissioned to teach and serve.

1522
1523 Therefore, our denominational struggle to live into the fullness of the gift we have in Jesus
1524 Christ is not a diversion from our true mission, as some would claim, but integral to our vocation
1525 to proclaim the truth of the gospel. On the night before he died, in the longest prayer recorded in
1526 the Gospels, Jesus prayed for us, the church of the future, lifting our names and our troubled
1527 church before God in prayer. And chief among his petitions in our behalf was his prayer that we
1528 “may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the
1529 world may believe that you have sent me. . . . By this everyone will know that you are my disciples
1530 [he said], if you have love for one another” (John 17:21; John 13:35). How is the world to be
1531 challenged to know the truth about God? The world needs not only to hear our witness to the
1532 gospel, but also to see and experience the embodied witness of a community joined in love of
1533 one another.

1534
1535 Jesus does not, it should be noted, pray that we may all be the same or that we all agree.
1536 Indeed, one of the most compelling reasons to continue to hold on to one another is to persuade
1537 one another of the truth as God has given us to know it. Another is to strengthen and support one
1538 another, different as our vocations and life circumstances may be, in personal holiness and in
1539 service to a world riddled with suffering and injustice. Nevertheless, even as we differ and even
1540 as we contend with one another, Jesus prays that we may all be one, that we might love one
1541 another despite many differences that threaten to divide us. At a time when people readily kill
1542 one another over their differences, a church that lives and works for that kind of witness will
1543 capture the attention of a polarized world. What besides the mystery of divine love could give us
1544 the capacity to love those whose goals and views differ from, even contradict, our own?

1545
1546 The task force is convinced that the world is watching the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and
1547 other denominations as we engage in highly publicized debates. To be one is not to say that we
1548 will be the same, that we will all agree, that there will be no conflict, but as the church listens to
1549 Jesus pray, all its members are reminded that the quality of our life together—our ability to make
1550 visible the unique relationship that is ours in Jesus Christ—is compelling testimony to the truth
1551 and power of the gospel we proclaim.