



A Visible Sign of the New Humanity

Report of the Ordination Task Force
to the Session of Westminster Presbyterian Church
Grand Rapids, Michigan, August 2008

"...I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him...he is Lord of all."

Acts 10:34, 36

The Church is called...

To a new openness to its own membership, by affirming itself as a community of diversity, becoming in fact as well as in faith a community of women and men of all ages, races and conditions, and by providing for inclusiveness as a visible sign of the new humanity...

THE BOOK OF ORDER, Chapter III:
The Church and its Mission, G- 3.0401b

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Session’s Charge to the Ordination Task Force 1

II. Task Force Members 1

III. Discernment: Seeking a Path Through the Briar Patch 1

IV. Seeking to Discern God’s Will for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons at Westminster by Reflecting on Current Realities Here 3

V. Seeking to Discern God’s Will for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons at Westminister by Reflecting on Scripture..... 6

VI. Seeking to Discern God’s Will for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons in Local Churches by Reflecting on PCUSA History, Polity and Values 9

VII. The Responsibility of Session to Apply the Confessional Standard of Fidelity in Marriage and Chastity in Singleness to Individual Candidates 14

VIII. Conclusion: Ordination and G-1.0305 – the Historic Church Principle of Mutual Forbearance 19

IX. Recommendations 22

APPENDIX I: A Dialogue Concerning God’s Word in a Changing World

APPENDIX II: The 217th General Assembly’s Authoritative Interpretation of Subsection G-6.0108 of the Book of Order Regarding Ordination

APPENDIX III: Bibliography

I. Session's Charge to the Ordination Task Force:

1. Study the 2006 report issued by the General Assembly's Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church (referred to as "the PUP Task Force" hereafter), together with materials gathered from the recent Covenant Network Conference;
2. Prepare recommendations to the Session regarding procedures to be followed in selecting nominees for the offices of elder and deacon;
3. Prepare a recommendation to the Session regarding the Inclusion Task Force's earlier recommendation that Westminster Presbyterian Church consider becoming a member of the Covenant Network.

II. Task Force Members

Bill Baguley	Randy Block	Sue Bylsma
Bruce Klein-Wassink	Alice St. Clair	Larry Slager (moderator)
Ken Tiews	Rev. Anne Weirich	Rev. Riley Jensen (to May 2007)

III. Discernment: Seeking a Path Through the Briar Patch

When the members of this Task Force began meeting and working together, we brought a variety of viewpoints to bear on our common task. Some of those views were firmly held while others were tentative and provisional. One of our first jobs was to explore these differences in viewpoint and consider how they might affect the group's work on the tasks set for it by Session.

"A Season of Discernment," the final report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church to the 217th General Assembly (2006) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) emphasizes the need for communal discernment within the church as a community governed by Christ through Word and Spirit.¹ In recent religious writing, "discernment" has come to designate a discipline or method for making decisions which

¹ "A Season of Discernment," the final report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church to the 217th General Assembly (2006) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 23.

emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating our hearts when God’s Word is sought in Scripture² and God’s presence is sought in the world³. Discernment, on this approach, results when we open ourselves to the inward work of the Holy Spirit. It is not something achieved by the power of our intellect alone in contemplating Scripture or world events. It is God’s gift of self-revelation to the attentive soul.

We found that this process of discernment served our purposes well. We intentionally incorporated a variety of spiritual practices into our meetings, including various forms of prayer, celebration of Holy Communion at the beginning of each task force meeting, times of quiet, and shared meals. While we encouraged open and spirited exchanges, these were continually supported by our wonder about what God’s desire is for Westminster Presbyterian Church and how we might uncover that place. We anticipated that the Holy Spirit would provide us with the direction and clarity we needed, if we were patient and willing to wait for that to emerge.

Study materials that we found helpful included selected sections of the PUP Report; *The Book of Order* and *The Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); the 123rd General Assembly’s position statement “Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture”; readings authored by members of the PUP task force; selected readings from both the Old and New Testaments; Jack Rogers’ 2006 book, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*; Lewis Smedes’ video on inclusion, the church, and homosexuality; and numerous essays exploring the historical context of relevant Biblical passages and varying approaches that have been taken to them. We also shared our unique faith stories, particularly as these stories related to the issue we are studying.

A lasting joy of service on this task force is the ease with which bonds of trust were formed, and the way they have sustained us in working together on difficult issues. What we did not foresee is that this method of accomplishing our joint work – the discernment of God’s desire for us in our place and at this time – would ultimately become the substance of one of our primary recommendations. This is explained more fully in Section V below.

Members of the task force have been meeting at least twice monthly since our beginning in

² *The Book of Confessions*, 6.001, 6.005, 6.052 (The Westminster Confession); 7.089 (The Shorter Catechism); 7.114 (The Larger Catechism)

³ *The Book of Confessions*, 6.051-054; 6.183-186 (The Westminster Confession)

February 2007.

IV. Seeking to Discern God's Will for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons at Westminster by Reflecting on Current Realities Here

When the Task Force reviewed Westminster Church's present approach to the nomination, election and ordination of deacons and elders, we asked ourselves whether the realities under review inspired our hearts with feelings of consolation (peace and a sense of being moved toward God) or desolation (distress and a sense of being moved away from God).⁴ We shared our individual experiences of the recent history of ordination at Westminster Church, and as we did so, feelings of consolation were not forthcoming. Rather, all of us concluded that the nomination, election and ordination of deacons and elders at Westminster appears to be misaligned with God's will and Word, in at least two respects.

- First, like the fearful servant in Christ's parable of the talents (Mat. 25:14-30), Westminster is squandering the spiritual gifts of gay and lesbian Christians whom God has sent to our congregation. Like that servant, we are burying the talent entrusted to us instead of returning it with interest to God's service. Like him, we are at risk of not entering into our Master's joy, and at risk of having our talent—the spiritual gifts and graces of our homosexual members—taken from our community of faith.
- Second, by excluding all non-abstinent gay and lesbian members from ordained service as deacons and elders, without regard to the depth of their faith and the strength of their call to service, the church is failing in its duty of Christian nurture, failing to fully include them in the life of the community of faith, failing to equip them “to live as commissioned disciples in the world.” *The Book of Order*, W-6.2001. It is curdling their Christian vocation instead of nurturing it.

⁴ Rev. Victoria Grace Curtiss, “Discernment and Decision-Making.” July, 2005.

The Task Force's perception, confirmed by personal accounts of affected persons, is that many of our gay and lesbian members joined Westminster believing they would be able to develop spiritually and live their faith through service. These hopes were dashed by the discovery that no one may be ordained as a deacon, elder or minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) without vowing to conform to the standard of fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness. This requirement is widely regarded by proponents and opponents alike as a bar to the ordination of sexually active gay, lesbian and heterosexual single persons from ordained service, even those in committed, Christ-centered relationships.

The Task Force knows, on the one hand, that some in Westminster's church family see the ineligibility for ordained office of church members in committed same-sex relationships as a devaluation of their Christian faith and Christian discipleship. They think it is wrong to have fitness for church leadership reduced to candidates' sexual relationships rather than the strength of their faith, the dedication of their discipleship and their love of Jesus Christ. Some gay and lesbian members have left Westminster in disappointment. Others who remain are in anguish of mind and spirit because of this discrimination, which theological justifications do nothing to assuage.

On the other hand, the Task Force knows there are also members in Westminster's church family who are troubled by suggestions that Scripture and the polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) may permit the installation of deacons and elders who are in sexual relationships with persons of the same sex. They do not understand how such relationships could be the "demonstration of the Christian gospel" required of church leaders by the *Book of Order*. (G-6.0106a). As they read Scripture, it plainly declares conjugal relations between persons of the same sex to be outside God's will for humankind, even if limited to two persons in a committed, Christ-centered union.

Most opponents to the ordination of gay and lesbian church members surely do empathize with their distress at being excluded from ordained service unless they abstain from same-sex relations, even in the context of committed relationships. They surely do recognize the spiritual gifts of our gay and lesbian members and their contributions to the life and mission of Westminster Church. Nevertheless, they maintain that Scripture, and not personal feelings of empathy, must be the rule of faith and life. The Task Force is persuaded that most, if not all, members of Westminster Church who oppose ordination of sexually active gays and lesbians are

primarily impelled by love for the Word of God and do not consider themselves lacking in Christian love for the men and women whom they want to bar from ordained service. Their message to those men and women, however, is that their inborn natures offend God and render them unfit for God's service unless completely suppressed. It is difficult for the recipients of this message to feel any warmth of Christian love in it.

Likewise, it seems that advocates of gay and lesbian ordination themselves may experience some weakening of Christian love over time for those within the Church who maintain that gays and lesbians do not truly love God and God's Word unless they suppress their inborn sexual affections.

Thus, reflecting on these current realities at Westminster and within our denomination, the Task Force does not feel consolation, that is a sense peace and a movement toward God. What it feels is desolation, a sense of distress and movement away from God.

How did we arrive at this dismal pass? How has our shared love of God fomented this discord among us? We all profess to be children of the God "who made all things to serve the purpose of his love." (*The Book of Confessions*, 9.15). We all aspire to be the community of believers "in which men are reconciled to God and to one another." (*The Book of Confessions*, 9.20). How did we go so far astray? And how do we begin moving back toward God?

One thing is clear: there is no way out of this briar patch, no movement back toward God, that leaves anyone behind. All of us go astray when we part company with our brothers or sisters in the quest for God's truth. For there is a paradox at the core of the Gospels: The moment we abandon any of our brothers and sisters over an issue of faith, because they refuse to join us on the true path toward God, in that very moment we stumble off the path ourselves. The reason is simple. Like a loving earthly parent, God wants us to look after each other. Matt.22.37-40. God wants us to bring all our brothers and sisters — all his children — safely home to Him. So how can Christians escape this paradox, when they all are striving earnestly to answer God's call, but pulling in different directions to do so? The Task Force believes it has discerned a way. The following sections of this report we will describe the route we traveled to it.

V. Seeking to Discern God’s Will for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons at Westminster by Reflecting on Scripture

References in the Bible to homosexuality are relatively few and scattered. Two are indirect, usually interpreted as expounding the pattern of conjugal relations between men and women intended by God in creating the sexes. (Gen. 1:26-27, Gen.2:20-24). All of the remaining references are usually taken to refer to male homosexual activity of one kind or another. (Lev. 18:22, Lev 20:13, Judges 19:1-30, Deut. 19:1-29, I Cor. 6:9, I Tim. 1:10, I Rom. 26-27, Jude 1:7). The Task Force reviewed these passages as well as several commentaries regarding them by scholars representing a range of opinion on the issue of gay and lesbian ordination. We consulted the *Book of Confessions* regarding Scriptural interpretation, especially the Scots Confession⁵ and The Confession of 1967.⁶ We reviewed a detailed position statement adopted by the General Assembly in 1983, published as a booklet under the title *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture*. Several guidelines are carefully discussed in that publication, but one in particular — The Rule of Love — helped to open all of us to God’s Word as we grappled with the ten Bible references cited above:

Any interpretation of Scripture is wrong that separates or sets in opposition love for God and love for fellow human being, including both love expressed in individual relations and in human community (social justice). No interpretation of Scripture is correct that leads to or supports contempt for any individual or group of persons either within or outside of the church.

Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture (The Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 1992), 20.

⁵ “We dare not receive or admit any interpretation which is contrary to the principal point of our faith, or to any other plain text of Scripture, or to the rule of love.” *The Book of Confessions*, 3.18 [The Scots Confession, Chapter XVIII].

⁶ “The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding.” *The Book of Confessions*, 9.29 [The Confession of 1967, Part I].

Instead of debating the 10 well-known Scriptural passages cited above, and mining them for texts to buttress our individual views, the Task Force made a deliberate effort to review them in the spirit of discernment described earlier. This approach yielded a result that none of us anticipated at the outset.

We had discovered early in our work that the divergence of opinion within Westminster and the PCUSA was mirrored to some degree within the Task Force itself. Starting with these different points of view, it was tempting to abandon discernment and slip back into the familiar modes of debate and advocacy when discussing references to homosexuality in the Bible. (For example: “It is significant how minor a concern homosexuality appears to be in Scripture, compared to core themes such as justice, peace-making or compassion for the oppressed.” Counter-argument: “As few mentions as there are to homosexuality in the Bible, none of them are positive.”)

Some Task Force members expressed difficulty understanding why Christians today cannot deal with the 10 passages cited above as we have dealt with equally straightforward passages permitting concubinage and slavery; commanding the death of adulterers and blasphemers; forbidding divorce; and opposing the equality of women within families, churches and society. If we no longer bar women (Paul), nor lame, blind or blemished men (Leviticus) from ministry, they asked, why must we still exclude gay and lesbian persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship and love of Christ as Savior solely because of their sexual relationships?

Other Task Force members raised concerns about selectively disregarding difficult passages of Scripture solely because they conflict with current cultural norms or personal inclination. If we can edit the Bible to suit our preferences or convenience, they ask, how can it be the foundation for anyone’s acceptance of Christ as Savior or anyone’s submission to Christ’s radical Gospel of love – which is as difficult for human nature to accept (in any era) as slavery or the subordination of women are today? If we are free to turn a blind eye to parts of Paul’s epistles that offend contemporary societal norms of sexuality, why aren’t we just as free to disregard the parts affirming the existence of God in history, the divinity of Christ and the imperative need to sacrifice our selfish will to the will of God?

Whether it is more accurate to describe this phase of the Task Force’s activity as “wrestling with Scripture” or “reflecting on Scripture”, its most notable result was to subtly direct us toward a path leading out of the ordination briar patch. Task Force members continued to hold divergent theological positions on the issue, but we began to discipline our individual impulses to use Scripture as a tool of persuasion. Instead, we started listening as a group for the voice of God that speaks “through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture”⁷. We did so without presuming that Scripture limits the power of the Holy Spirit to speak directly to the heart of each individual reader, as though God were merely a distant public speaker addressing a crowd and Scripture were merely a megaphone. Even though we listened for the voice of God in Scripture as a group, we accepted the possibility that “the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts”⁸ might act on our individual hearts in different ways. We learned how to open ourselves collectively to the Word of God in Scripture without infringing on the conscience of any individual member as regards homosexuality and Scripture. This approach enabled us to work productively as a group. We were freed from the mind set that our different responses to Scripture meant one or more of us had to be wrong. It became possible to regard them as evidence that human hearts refract the Holy Spirit’s illumination differently, like prisms in the same beam of sunlight casting different rainbow patterns on a wall.

Another most welcome and surprising insight came from this type of inner work. We asked, “We have freed ourselves from the misconception that our different understandings of Scripture mean some of us are right and some of us are wrong. Can’t this lesson also be applied to the ordination issue at hand? Is there a way to preserve the rights of private judgment on this issue while also preserving and furthering the peace, unity and purity of the church?”

After reflecting on the history, polity and values of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in a discerning spirit, as recounted in more detail in the next section, the Task Force can now state with strong conviction that:

⁷ *The Book of Confessions*, 9.29 (The Confession of 1967, Part I).

⁸ *The Book of Confessions*, 6.005 (The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter I).

Every church session may judge the fitness of unmarried persons to serve as elders or deacons, and decide for itself whether their self-acknowledged sexual relationships are Scripturally chaste or not: (1) without infringing on the consciences of dissenting church members or their freedom to vote on all nominated elders and deacons, and (2) without departing from the confessional standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). (Section VII below discusses chastity, abstinence and sexual purity as they relate to ordination standards.)

For a fuller – and livelier – discussion of what the Bible has to say about homosexuality, illustrating the “valid pluralism of methods of biblical interpretation and of theological thinking”⁹, the reader is referred to Appendix I of this Report.

VI. Seeking to Discern God’s Will for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons in Local Churches by Reflecting on PCUSA History, Polity and Values

We seek to discern God’s will in the life and history of the Church because that is where God the Holy Spirit is present and active in all times and places. In the Church universal, imperfect followers of Christ are regenerated, united, inspired and equipped to participate in God’s mission to the world, through the power of the Holy Spirit, by whom, “the Church will be preserved, increased, purified, and at last made perfectly holy in the presence of God.” *The Westminster Confession*, Ch. IX (*Book of Confessions*, 6.054, 6.186).

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its members have been trying for more than three decades to harmoniously resolve the issue of homosexuality and ordination. When those decades are viewed dispassionately, with confidence in the efficacy of the Holy Spirit to draw faithful men and women toward the Kingdom of God however radically they differ in their individual views, one may discern the emergence in the PCUSA of a “new openness to God’s continuing reformation of the Church ecumenical, that it might be a more effective instrument of mission in the world.” (*Book of Order*, Chapter III: The Church and its Mission, G- 3.0401d).

⁹ Report of the Work of the Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 109th General Assembly (1978), p. 252, discussed further below.

1. The Definitive Guidance of 1978. Thirty years ago, in 1978, the 109th General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church (as PCUSA was then known) received a report on the work of the Task Force to Study Homosexuality of the Advisory Council on Church and Society. A majority of the assembled elders and ministers voted to endorse the Task Force's Minority Recommendation. They announced a "definitive guidance" for all individual members, congregations and presbyteries regarding the ordination to ministry of homosexual men and women. Even though several portions of this guidance support the claims of gay and lesbian persons to legal rights in secular society, and even though it concludes by calling for continued dialogue within the church, the final decision of the 109th General Assembly was this:

We conclude that homosexuality is not God's wish for humanity. This we affirm, despite the fact that some of its forms may be deeply rooted in an individual's personality structure.

Policy Statement and Recommendation,
109th General Assembly (1978), p. 261.

Therefore our **present** understanding of God's will precludes the ordination of persons who do not repent of homosexual practices.

Policy Statement and Recommendation,
109th General Assembly (1978), p. 264
[emphasis added].

A majority of the ministers, scholars and other laity on the Task Force to Study Homosexuality came to quite a different conclusion in 1978, declaring that,

...no prohibition of the ordination of a self-affirming, practicing homosexual person currently exists in the explicit words of the Constitution [*Book of Order* and *Book of Confessions*]; that a valid pluralism of methods of biblical interpretation and of theological thinking currently exists within the church; and that it is the traditional duty and prerogative of presbyteries to make individual judgment concerning the fitness of a candidate for ordination.

Report of the Work of the Task Force to
Study Homosexuality, 109th General
Assembly (1978), p. 252.

Even though the task force majority's recommendation was not enacted by the General Assembly at the time, it seems to have been slowly germinating like a seed cast upon fertile soil over the intervening three decades since, as will shortly become clear.

2. 1997 - Adoption of Amendment B, explicitly declaring that fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness is one of the standards for ordained officers. Eleven years ago, a majority of PCUSA presbyteries ratified a revision to G-6.0106b of the *Book of Order*. This section describes the gifts to be displayed and the requirements to be met by all men and women called to the special functions of elder and deacon and minister of the Word and Sacrament. This amendment added the following language (indicated below by italics) to the pre-existing provision of that section:

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

Book of Order, G-6.0106b.

3. 2001 - Formation of the Theology Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church. Adoption of the “fidelity/chastity amendment” was followed by a season of heavy weather in the councils of the PCUSA:

- In 1997 a resolution was accepted by the General Assembly to replace the fidelity in marriage/ chastity in singleness standard in G-6.0106b with a standard calling for “fidelity and integrity in marriage or singleness” and submitted to the various presbyteries, which voted it down in 1998.
- In 1998 also, the General Assembly voted to approve the following position statement:

Standing in the tradition of breaking down the barriers erected to exclude people based on their condition such as age, race class, gender **and sexual orientation**, the PC(U.S.A.) commits itself not to exclude anyone categorically in considering those called to ordained service in the church **but to consider the lives and behaviors of candidates as individuals.**

Action on Overtures, 210th General Assembly (1998) [emphasis added].

- In 1999 a resolution to delete G-6.0106b altogether from the *Book of Order* was defeated by the General Assembly itself.
- In 2000 a resolution was approved by the General Assembly prohibiting same-sex unions and submitted to the presbyteries which voted it down.
- In 2001 the General Assembly accepted another resolution to delete G-6.0106b altogether from the *Book of Order* and submitted it to the presbyteries, which voted it down.
- In 2001, the General Assembly created the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church (the “PUP Task Force”) to find a way out of the recent theological disputes wracking the church, and gave it four years to perform its work.
- In 2003, the General Assembly declined to issue an authoritative definition of the term “chastity” as it appears in G-6.0106b . (Minutes of the 215th General Assembly, Item 04-07, Overture 03-12).

4. 2006 - Adoption of an Authoritative Interpretation of G-6.0108. Finally, in 2006 the PUP Task Force presented its report to the 214th General Assembly, which contained seven recommendations (partially set out in Appendix II). All of these recommendations were adopted, with a few minor revisions. One of them squarely addresses the recent controversy over the ordination of gay and lesbian church members as elders or deacons. It is a recommendation that the General Assembly approve an “authoritative interpretation” of G-6.0108 of the *Book of Order*. That section describes the freedom of conscience that candidates for ordained office must be granted with respect to interpretation of Scripture, and the bounds to their exercise of that freedom.

Acting on the PUP Task Force’s recommendation, the 214th General Assembly adopted the following authoritative interpretation of G-6.0108:

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

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

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

(1) Whether a candidate being examined for ordination and/or installation as elder, deacon, or minister of Word and Sacrament has departed from scriptural and constitutional standards for fitness for office,

(2) **Whether any departure constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity under G-6.0108 of the Book of Order, thus barring the candidate from ordination and/or installation.**

d. Whether the examination and ordination and installation decision comply with the Constitution of the PC(USA), and whether the ordaining/installing body has conducted its examination reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately in deciding to ordain a candidate for church office is subject to review by higher governing bodies.

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

Minutes of the 217th General Assembly (2006), pp. 514-515 [emphasis added].

In this manner the seed planted in 1978 by the Majority Report of the Task Force To Study Homosexuality has burgeoned into a new appreciation of how we can pull free from the unending battles over this ordination question caused by different interpretations of Scripture and rival theologies:

- first, by recognizing that the right to make decisions based upon the revealed will of God must, of necessity, “be lodged with fallible men” (*Historic Principles of Church Order, G-1.0307*);
- next, by recognizing “that a valid pluralism of methods of biblical interpretation and of theological thinking currently exists within the church” (*Majority Report of the Work of the Task Force to Study Homosexuality, 109th General Assembly (1978), p. 252*);
- third, by recognizing that, apart from certain fundamental truths essential to Reformed faith and polity, “there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good character and principles may differ” (*Historic Principles of Church Order, G-1.0305*), including

individual judgments by ordaining bodies as to whether candidates' lives have been lived in conformity to received standards for office, such as fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness; and

- lastly by honoring “the duty of both private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other” (*Historic Principles of Church Order, G-1.0305*) when they differ in good faith over such truths, and extend “the presumption of wisdom to ordaining/installing bodies in examining candidates and to the General Assembly, with presbyteries' approval, in setting standards.” (*Minutes of the 217th General Assembly (2006), p. 515*).

In reviewing this progression of polity within the PCUSA over three decades, the Ordination Task Force discerns the strengthening of a spirit of humility within the body of the Church regarding the fallibility of private human judgment on Scripture, theology and the revealed will of God, the strengthening of the same Spirit that inspired the prophet Micah to proclaim “...what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

VII. The Responsibility of Session to Apply the Confessional Standard of Fidelity in Marriage and Chastity in Singleness to Individual Candidates.

In February of 2008, the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly (GAPJC) struck down an attempt by the Presbytery of Pittsburgh to legislate that the “fidelity in marriage/chastity in singleness” standard is an essential of Reformed faith and polity. (*Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh, GAPJC 2008, 218-10*). The Commission's opinion clearly affirms that fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness is a specific standard adopted by the whole church which may not be waived or ignored by any body examining persons for ordination, such as the session of a church. What the Commission objected to was a governing body attempting to “paraphrase or restate provisions of the *Book of Order* and/or declare them as ‘essentials of Reformed faith and polity’ ...” (*Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh, GAPJC 2008, 218-10, p.1*).

...the broad reference in G-6.0106b to “any practice which the confessions call sin” puts the responsibility first on the candidate and then on the examining body to determine whether a departure is a failure to adhere to the essentials of

Reformed faith and polity and the remainder of G-6.0108(a) with respect to freedom of conscience. The ordaining body must examine the candidate individually. The examining body is best suited to make decisions about the candidate's fitness for office, and factual determinations by examining bodies are entitled to deference by higher governing bodies in any review process.

Bush et al v. Presbytery of Pittsburgh,
(GAPJC 2008, 218-10, p.7).

In other words, as regards the ordination of elders and deacons, it is a church's session (and its nomination committee, initially) which is primarily responsible (1) for applying all ordination standards to each unmarried candidate, including the standard of chastity in singleness and (2) for judging whether any candidate's departure from an ordination standard constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.

Standards articulated in the *Book of Order* are only added after careful study of Scripture and theology, intensive discussion and approval by the General Assembly followed by intensive discussion and approval by the presbyteries. It is to be presumed that words and phrases appearing in such standards were not products of ignorance or carelessness, and this presumption has guided this Task Force in attempting to discern how the Session of Westminster Church, and its Nominating Committee, should be instructed and led by G-6.0106b in selecting, ordaining and installing successive boards of elders and deacons.

Before a session or nominating committee can be instructed or led by any standard, it needs to have a clear idea of what the standard requires. So what—exactly—does the standard of chastity in singleness require? Supporters and opponents of G-6.0106b both seem to assume that it bars sexually active single persons – whether gay, lesbian or heterosexual – from being ordained. However, very few seem to have paid careful attention to the actual meaning of “chastity” in common speech or in the *Book of Confessions*. Supporters and opponents alike appear to take it for granted that “chastity” is a synonym for “sexual abstinence” or “celibacy”, or both. It only takes a moment's analysis, however, to reveal that these three concepts are quite different.

“Chastity” and “chaste” are derived from *castus*, the Latin word for pure. The related English word “chasten” means to subject to pain, suffering, or punishment for the purpose of

moral or spiritual improvement; to increase the purity or refinement of a thing. (“Whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth.” Heb 12:6) **Sexual purity** is the core meaning of “chastity”, and the first or primary definition of the word in most standard references involves sexual purity:

- “chastity - 1.a: abstention from sexual activity that is reprobated by religion or condemned by morality...” *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged Edition* (1966).
- “chastity - 1.a. Purity from unlawful sexual intercourse; continence.” *The Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition* (1989).
- “chaste - 1. morally pure; decent; modest. 2.a. Abstaining from unlawful sexual intercourse; virtuous. b. celibate...”
- chastity - the state or quality of being chaste or pure.” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1973).

“Abstinent” is derived from the Latin *ab* or *abs* (away from) and *tenere* (to hold). Its core meaning is holding back or away from participation or indulgence in passions or appetites. Abstinence is a much narrower and specific term than chastity. It may be one way for men and women to live chaste lives, but abstinence alone is not sufficient to fulfill the requirement of chastity. Persons who disagree about specific ordination standards will probably all agree that someone who refrains from all sexual contact, but still resorts to “unclean imaginations, thoughts, purposes and affections...corrupt or filthy communications, or listening thereunto, wanton looks...immodest apparel...lascivious songs, books, pictures, dancings, stageplays...” and so forth (The Larger Catechism, *Book of Confessions*, 7.249) is by no means chaste. Nor is abstinence a necessary condition for chastity, as that term is used in the Confessions of the PCUSA. Those Confessions require married persons, as well as single persons, to be chaste, but no one reads the Heidelberg Catechism, for instance, as forbidding sexual activity between married persons in the following passage:

Q. 108. What does the Seventh Commandment teach us?

A. That all unchastity is condemned by God, and that we should therefore detest it from the heart, and live chaste and disciplined lives, **whether in holy wedlock or in single life.**

Q. 109. Does God forbid nothing more than adultery and other gross sins in this commandment?

A. Since both our body and soul are a temple of the Holy Spirit, it is his will that we keep both pure and holy. Therefore he forbids all unchaste actions, gestures, words, thoughts, desires and whatever may excite another person to them.

Book of Confessions, 4.108-4.109 [emphasis added].

Apart from certain offshoots, such as the Shakers, our Reformed tradition has never held that the sexual union of husbands and wives violates their Christian duty to live chaste lives.

The historic confessions of the PCUSA do not, in other words, equate chastity with sexual abstinence. They present it as **purity in sexual matters**: ordering our sexual relationships as Christian disciples primarily to please God, and only secondarily to please ourselves and others. If two single persons can relate sexually to each other in a manner that is pleasing to God, then the standard of chastity would not require abstinence.¹⁰

“Celibacy” is another term, like “abstinence”, that is carelessly spoken of as a synonym for “chastity, with even less justification. “Celibate” is derived from *cealibatus*, the Latin word for single, unmarried. To construe chastity as celibacy would reduce the “chastity in singleness” standard to a meaningless (albeit easily fulfilled) requirement that single persons must remain unmarried while they are single. Obviously, the General Assembly had something a bit more stringent in mind when they amended G-6.0106b to specify the fidelity in marriage/chastity in singleness as one of the historic confessional standards of the church.

So, in taking G-6.0106b seriously, Westminster’s Session must presume that the words added to it in 1997 were chosen carefully, deliberately, and with full awareness of their common meaning and their usage in the church’s confessions. In taking G-6.0106b seriously,

¹⁰ This quotation from the Heidelberg Catechism and like passages in the *Book of Confessions*, the *Book of Order* and Scripture clearly show that the standard of “fidelity” for married ordination candidates demands more than simply restricting sexual activity to one’s spouse. The sexual relationship that married candidates have with their spouses must demonstrate fidelity to the Christian gospel as well as fidelity to their marriage promises. Suppose, for example, that a session discovers a married candidate for ordained office, while strictly monogamous, relates sexually to his or her spouse in a way that humiliates, or abuses or degrades that spouse. Proponents and opponents of G-6.0106b alike would certainly concur that such a candidate is not living in conformity to the confessional standard of fidelity within the covenant of marriage of one man and one woman.

Westminster's Session and its Nominating Committee needs to understand that "chastity in singleness" is not an "abstinence in singleness" standard, much less a "celibacy in singleness" standard. It is a "sexual purity in singleness" standard, according to which single persons are called upon to aim at pleasing God, rather than themselves, in ordering their sexual relationships.

By offering this analysis to the Session, the Task Force does not mean to propose any general definition or interpretation of the chastity in singleness standard. Much less is the Task Force proposing some alternative standard of its own devising to be used by Westminster's Nominating Committee. The purpose of this analysis is to explain why the Task Force is recommending to Session that application of the G-6.0106b "chastity in singleness" standard to unmarried gay, lesbian and heterosexual candidates for ordained office will need to shift from a cut-and-dried test (abstinence) to a deliberative process that calls for discernment on a case by case basis regarding each candidate's ordering of his or her sexual life.

Admittedly, sexual purity is not a simple standard to apply, but why should it be? The same degree of individualized discernment is required to determine whether nominated deacons or elders are "persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship" and whether their manner of life is a "demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world." (G-6.0106a) We have no litmus paper to test the strength of a person's faith or the dedication of a person's discipleship. Concerning such matters there is a valid pluralism of views within the Christian community.

As the Session and its Nominating Committee begin the process of clarifying their own understanding of the sexual purity requirement for officers-to-be, they may find it useful to consider the following consensus statement generated by the Task Force as an example of one of several views making up the "valid pluralism of views" about ordination and sexual purity:

Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit within us. (1 Corinthians 6:19) All bodily expressions of our human sexuality must be guided by this knowledge, and various bodily expressions of our human sexuality may be gifts from God. All of our choices, including the expressions of human sexuality we choose, are to be guided and evaluated by their affect on our primary relationship with Christ and

also by their affect on the relationships with Christ of those with whom we are sexually involved. When sexual relationships are characterized by fidelity, respect, mutual support and love, when they enhance the participants' relationships with God the Holy Spirit and with God the Son in Christ, then the Task Force believes that sufficient grounds exist to judge them sexually pure or chaste and in conformity with the historic confessional standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

VIII. Conclusion: Ordination and G-1.0305, the Historic Church Principle of Mutual Forbearance

Churches seeking to apply historic Presbyterian standards and principles of church order to the question of ordaining gay and lesbian members are hampered by a significant shortcoming in G-6.0106b. That provision of the *Book of Order* requires that persons called to ordained office in the church are to lead a life in conformity with the historic confessional standards of the church, but it only mentions two such standards: fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman and chastity in singleness. These standards, while relevant, are not the only ones to which Presbyterians are called upon to conform their lives. In judging the qualifications of church officers, there are several other standards that church sessions must take into consideration, all of which appear to be more central to Reformed faith than fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness, including:

- the fundamental standard of “ ‘The church reformed, always reforming,’ according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit” (G-2.0200) and a new openness to God’s continuing reformation of the Church ecumenical, that it might be a more effective instrument of mission in the world (G-3.0401d);
- the fundamental standard of “a new openness to [the Church’s] own membership, by affirming itself as a community of women and men of all ages, races and conditions, and by providing for inclusiveness as a visible sign of the new humanity” (G-3.0401b);

- the fundamental standard of full participation and giving “full expression to the rich diversity within [the PCUSA’s] membership, including persons holding “different theological positions consistent with the Reformed tradition” (G-4.0403)
- the fundamental standard of compassion, particularly the call “to engage those structures and systems which create or foster brokenness and distortion.” (W-7.3003);
- the fundamental standard of proclaiming, receiving and enacting reconciliation in Jesus Christ, and in particular peacemaking “in the Church universal fragmented and separated by histories and cultures, in denominations internally polarized by mutual distrust, and in congregations plagued by dissension and conflict” (W-7.4003a).

Above all, the specific standards of fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness are subordinate to the eight fundamental Historic Principles of Church Order set forth in G-1.0300 of our *Book of Order*, especially the principle declared in G-1.0305:

That, while...we think it necessary to make effectual provision that all who are admitted as teachers be sound in the faith, we also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.

This overarching principle of church order charts a careful course between two dangerous reefs: (1) the extreme of “idolatrously giving to the church the ultimate authority that belongs alone to the living God we come to know in Jesus Christ through the Bible,”¹¹ and (2) the extreme of exalting personal freedom over the confessional consensus of the church, which disjoins the members of Christ’s body and cuts them off from the church’s guidance.¹² Mutual forbearance is the Constitutional basis for the freedom of individual sessions within the PCUSA “to decide for themselves what acceptable loyalty to the confessions means in their particular

¹¹ Preface to *The Book of Confessions*, p. xx (“The Confessional Nature of the Church”).

¹² Preface to *The Book of Confessions*, p. xx (“The Confessional Nature of the Church”).

situation, without being bound to any “check list” prescribed by higher governing bodies of the church.”¹³

It is the unanimous opinion of this Task Force that the historic principle of mutual forbearance (G-1.0305) allows persons of good character and principles within the PCUSA to hold different but equally valid beliefs about the proper application of chastity as a confessional standard to committed relationships between single persons of the same or opposite sex. It is the unanimous opinion of this Task Force that the same principle, together with the General Assembly’s Authoritative Interpretation of G-6.0108 (Appendix II), authorizes different nominating committees within a particular church and different churches within the PCUSA, to hold and act on different views about the extent to which core doctrines of Reformed faith and polity must be taken into account in judging the eligibility of any candidate for ordination as a deacon or elder, including the core doctrines of continuing reformation, openness of the Church to its own membership, inclusiveness, full participation, compassion and reconciliation.

The principle of mutual forbearance is how we Presbyterians can do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God when theological disagreements threaten the peace and unity of our Church. It expresses our faith that God alone is the Lord of conscience¹⁴, whose Holy Spirit is present and active within all believers who allow Him into their hearts. This principle guards us against the opposite temptations of idolizing corporate consensus and idolizing personal freedom in matters of faith. In challenging times, mutual forbearance is how churches can “live the gospel joyfully and productively amid inevitable disagreement.”¹⁵

By practicing mutual forbearance, Westminster lives into its own Statement of Mission which declares us to be “a diverse community of believers gathered around a common faith.”

¹³ Preface to *The Book of Confessions*, p. xxvi (“The Confessional Nature of the Church”).

¹⁴ *The Book of Order*, G-1.0301 (The Historic Principles of Church Order).

¹⁵ The 217th General Assembly’s Authoritative Interpretation of G-6.0108 (Appendix II, p.vi).

Westminster can show forth that we “truly understand that God knows no partiality¹⁶,” in the way we select, elect and ordain deacons and elders who “give full expression to the rich diversity within its membership.”¹⁷ This is our path through the briar patch – a path away from polarity and mistrust – a path toward greater inclusiveness. It is the path this Task Force is advising the Session take, so that Westminster Church might become a visible sign in the world of the new humanity, “a new beginning for human life in the world” in which sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished the dividing walls of hostility are torn down,¹⁸ and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ.¹⁹

IX. Recommendations

Mindful that the Church is called to be open to all persons²⁰, to give full expression to the rich diversity within its membership²¹, to guarantee all members full participation and access to representation in decision making²², and to be open to such reformation of its institutional forms as may be required to make it a more effective instrument as God’s reconciling community in the world²³, the Ordination Task Force submits the following recommendations to the Session of Westminster Presbyterian Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan:

¹⁶ Acts 10:34.

¹⁷ *The Book of Order*, G-4.0403 (The Church and its Unity).

¹⁸ *The Book of Order*, G-3.0200b (The Church and its Mission).

¹⁹ *The Book of Confessions*, 6.054, 6.185 (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter I).

²⁰ *The Book of Order*, G-4.0402 (The Church and its Unity).

²¹ *The Book of Order*, G-4.0403 (The Church and its Unity).

²² *The Book of Order*, G-4.0403 (The Church and its Unity).

²³ *The Book of Confessions*, 9.31, 9.40 (The Confession of 1967, Part II).

1. That the discernment model of group deliberation become part of the training of this and all future Sessions and their Nominating Committees, and that a manual be developed to assist with that training.

2. That future Sessions and their Nominating Committees read this Report of the Ordination Task Force as part of their training.

3. That the process of identifying, reviewing and selecting nominees for election as elders and deacons be conducted on a year-long schedule, commencing shortly after the annual congregational meeting in January.

4. That the Bylaws of Westminster Presbyterian Church and Society be amended to set up multiple overlapping terms of service of two or more years on the Nominating Committee in order to facilitate the continuity of training and experience of committee members.

5. That the Nominating Committee (a) be reminded that elders and deacons are to lead lives in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church, (b) be reminded that one of the historic confessional standards specified by the *Book of Order* for use in reviewing candidates is fidelity within marriage and chastity in singleness, (c) be advised that the *Book of Order* gives church sessions and their nominating committees primary responsibility to apply this sexual purity standard to all candidates, and (d) be advised that the *Book of Order* likewise entrusts sessions and their nominating committees to determine what is required by this sexual purity standard.

6. That the Nominating Committee and the congregation at large be informed that these recommendations regarding the ordination of elders and deacons at Westminster Church are drawn from and fully comply with the Constitution of the PCUSA to the best of the Ordination Task Force's knowledge, information and belief.

7. That the Ordination Task Force's Report and Recommendations be communicated and explained to the congregation at large by such means as the Session deems most likely to promote understanding, peace and unity within the church.

8. That the mandate of the Ordination Task Force be extended for a period of time so that it might serve as resource to the Session and Nominating Committee during the implementation of these recommendations.

9. That the Session not enroll Westminster Presbyterian Church of Grand Rapids as a corporate member of the Covenant Network, in recognition of sincere differences of opinion within the congregation about the matters addressed in this Report, but assist individual congregants who are interested in the work and witness of Covenant Network to join as individuals, and also continue the Session's current contacts with that organization.

APPENDIX I

A Dialogue Concerning God's Word in a Changing World

The following conversation between two imaginary friends is meant to be a help to those who are wondering about how we, as a group of diverse believers, come to understand God's word to us in Scripture. This conversation covers this topic in general and in particular. The opening dialogue is an exploration of the two methods of interpretation that most Christians engage in - the more literal interpretation of Scripture and the more critical interpretation of Scripture. Most of us probably use both forms of interpretation without extreme consequences. But when "words collide" over particular issues, the divergence can be a stumbling block to unity and peace. The second part of the dialogue, then, will continue the conversation on a particular subject - sexual orientation.

The friends are named Pat and Chris. Pat is a member of a Presbyterian church with a moderate to progressive theology. Chris is a member of a Protestant church with a more traditional to conservative bent. They are old friends who meet from time to time to talk. Today they're meeting over lunch after church on Sunday...

Pat

Well - our pastor preached on the book of Revelation today. And it was quite a sermon. I can't say that I've ever heard anyone interpret that passage from the book of Revelation quite like that before. I heard a seminary professor say one time that Revelation was a good source for liturgy. And that's it. And I've always thought that those old stories were sort of useless to us - I can't get past all the references to angels and horsemen. It all seems too far in the past and full of superstition. But, now, I don't know...

Chris

I read the book of Revelation at least once a year. I think that there is something quite comforting about knowing that Jesus and the host of heaven is fighting a battle, protecting us behind the scenes at all times - at least that's what it means to me.

Pat

So, you're telling me that you believe the book of Revelation? You think that the things described there will come to pass?

Chris

Are you telling me that you don't believe that a new heaven and a new earth will come? Isn't that what Jesus gave his life to teach us?

Pat

Of course I believe in new life in Christ.

Chris

But is that the same as a new heaven and a new earth? Don't you believe Jesus will come again to judge us - separate us - the sheep from the goats?

Pat

Well - I believe all those things. But maybe not the way that it is talked about straight out of Revelation.

Chris

Pat, I worry that the way you see things might be wrong. I worry about your salvation. The Bible is the Word of God - and we have to trust in it completely or we won't hear the truth. We won't really know Jesus unless we believe that. The Bible is the only way to Christ - to salvation.

Pat

We believe that the Bible is God's Word. But, I guess I'd have to say that we don't believe that the Bible is God's words. For goodness sake - the Bible has come to us over thousands of years - many hands wrote it down and changed little things. Scholars have hundreds and hundreds of manuscripts - with many variations.

Chris

I've heard that. But, I have faith that God's true Word and the right interpretation is what is written in the King James Version of the Bible. If that's not true - then my whole faith is a lie - because that's where my faith came from. If you don't believe that the Bible is wholly and utterly true - then where does your faith come from? What do you have to stake your life on?

Pat

Wow. I think we'd better slow down here. I'm not trying to pull the rug out from under your faith - that's not what I want to do. In fact, I truly admire your faith. The way you put your faith into action puts me to shame sometimes. I know that you're out there in the community witnessing and testifying to your faith in words and with your volunteer work far more than I.

Chris

And I sometimes wonder why that is. I wonder if it all comes down to how we understand the Bible? Sometimes I think that people who don't believe the plain text are wishy washy - and that their faith must be wishy washy, too.

Pat

And sometimes I think that people who take the Bible literally - or believe only in a particular English translation of ancient texts - have started to worship the Book rather than God. And I also feel a sense of loss for you. For me, the Bible is still full of meaning because it is the Living Word of God. It can be looked at through the lens of our own times and our own struggles. New meaning can be reflected as we use the prism of our lives to focus the prism of the stories of our faith.

Chris

But then don't you make yourselves an idol, too? Isn't it sort of like the golden calf? You're able to manipulate your interpretation to serve your own truth if you leave the literal meaning behind. At least, that's how it seems to me.

Pat

I see your point. I know that can be a danger. Sometimes I feel that struggle - and I'm not sure that you're not right. But when I look back on some of the grave mistakes that Christians have made over the centuries - participating in slavery and the Holocaust - forcing Native Americans to be converted or be killed - even killing one another over issues of doctrine - I can't help but feel that it was the literal "truth" that was at fault. Haven't we changed our interpretations over time? Haven't we followed Jesus by reinterpreting old texts through our understanding of the law of love? He even provided the "authority" and the model for us to do this.

Chris

You are raising some good points my friend. And, I can't help but think that we really need one another to keep us honest. I think each one of us has a piece of the picture.

Pat

This is good that we're talking like this. I've learned a lot from listening to your beliefs - your truths. It's helped me to understand why these things are important to all of us. I'm wondering if we can keep talking about something my congregation is wrestling with...

Chris

Certainly - I'd be glad to talk with you - what's the issue?

Pat

Well - the broad topic is discernment and the specific issue is the ordination of gay and lesbian people to the offices of our denomination - deacon and elder. Most denominations only ordain their clergy. But for us Presbyterians, each congregation has the responsibility and call to ordain their spiritual leaders, too. So, I've been involved with a group that is studying the issue.

Chris

Well - I don't know that it needs any study. The Bible seems very clear to me on the issue of homosexuality.

Pat

We're not so sure. But the main reason we're studying the issue is that our General Assembly asked ordaining bodies to take some time to do so. Congregations and Presbyteries - who ordain clergy - all over the country are doing what we're doing.

Chris

That sounds good, then. Did you get any guidelines for this study?

Pat

Yes. The General Assembly had a task force that did its own study for about four years. They published their report with suggestions and some interpretation of the current ordination standards. There have been conferences and presentations by members of that task force and organizations that have given us lots of help with methodology and questions. The focus of all the discussion centers around the question of maintaining the peace, unity and purity of the church. And, there are folks upholding these standards in a variety of ways. Sadly, some congregations are withdrawing from the denomination as they see the standards sagging too low. Others seem to be proceeding a bit impatiently, which may result in some adjudication. And then there are others who are doing nothing.

Chris

You thought I might be of some help. But this all sounds very complicated and beyond me. I don't know enough about the process to be very helpful.

Pat

I'd like to keep talking with you about some of the Bible study we've been doing. Like you said, we need one another to keep each other honest. Part of our discernment process has been to study the seven or so passages that seem to be defining this issue.

Chris

I'd be glad to. Where do you want to start?

Pat

We started by learning the sort of "official" position of the PCUSA on Biblical interpretation. That might be helpful to you as well. The main things we kept in mind when we studied all the Bible passages were the guidance of our Confessions - especially one that was written in 1967. I don't remember the quote exactly. But the main point was the Scriptures, were given to us under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are the words of human beings. And therefore, the words of the Bible have been influenced and conditioned by the times and circumstances of the time they were written. Therefore, we have to approach the writings with an historical and literary understanding. We are sure this is appropriate, because God was not speaking in one time or place as the Bible stories were being written down - and we can say that God is still speaking in our time, too. God has always chosen the inspired Word in diverse ways - so we should try and understand it in diverse ways.

Chris

But what about the plain text? Like the billboard says, "God didn't give us the 10 suggestions."

Pat

That's true - we're to obey the commandments of God. But you have to admit that "Thou shall not kill" is only one of the commandments that has various meanings. Is it killing or murdering that is talked about? Is every soldier breaking the commandment? Is stem cell research involved in killing when it uses embryos? Sometimes it's plain, sometimes it isn't.

Chris

I don't see the argument. Killing is killing. Murder is murder. I can tell the difference. And I know what is right and what is wrong. To me, the rest is the story of the golden calf - we think we know better than God - so we make God smaller - God's Word smaller - so that what we want is what God wants, too. We lower the standards and we make our own judgments. God's standards are high - and if we don't acknowledge that we are sinners in need of God's help and God's judgment - then just anybody could be in leadership. The gifts for leadership are right there in the Bible. Paul writes about many of them. And that should be the plum line.

Pat

Well, I'm glad you brought up Paul. Because some of the things he wrote are certainly causing the controversy. But, first I want to respond to your comments about knowing right and wrong by the law. For, it was Paul who said to the Galatians, actually, he called them the foolish Galatians - Those who *believe* are the descendants of Abraham - not those who rely on the law. He was arguing against those who were requiring circumcision for the Gentiles who came into the early church. He was saying that *all* are heirs of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah, without having to commit to the law. Abraham received God's promise long before the law - and therefore - God graces all of humanity. He tells them God's Spirit gives faith, not works of law.

Chris

But Paul, of all people, holds the law very highly. He also tells the Galatians that we need the law to guard and protect us like a disciplinarian who guides a child. We need the law - we all need the law.

Pat

Yes, we do. But, not to be included in God's promise and covenant. Paul said it like this - no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Gentiles are beloved without having to become Jewish, women without becoming men, and perhaps we could say - homosexuals without having to become heterosexuals?

Chris

Paul also warns about self-indulgence though, too. He warns us not to use our freedom to live however we want. And choosing to live as a gay person could be seen as living by the flesh - an act of disobedience - lived outside the rules.

Pat

From your point of view, that might be true. But what if we believe that homosexuality is an expression of the self - in the same way that heterosexuality is an expression of God's image? Then, clearly, to exclude gay and lesbian people violates the law of love. And Presbyterians believe that "no interpretation of Scripture is correct that leads to or supports contempt for any group of people either inside or outside the church."

Chris

But is allowing for gay and lesbian people to express their sexuality loving or enabling? Sometimes pointing out sin isn't easy - but it is the most loving if we are truly concerned for the welfare of our brothers and sisters. The Bible is so clear on the sin of this lifestyle.

Pat

Well, I thought so, too. But, you know when we really started to study the translations and the context of the passages you are thinking of, I was quite surprised to find some ideas and interpretations that have not always been made clear.

Chris

I'd like to hear about those.

Pat

Well - I'm glad to go through them. But, we're going to go outside of the King James Version here - just so you're aware.

Chris

I'm open to listening.

Pat

I hope you'll do more than listen - I hope you'll listen critically, too. I want this to be an open discussion to help me discern what the Spirit is trying to say.

Chris

No problem. And I am curious to hear what you have to say - I like new things, new ideas. Just so long as we can stay true to the Bible, true to God's will for our lives.

Pat

Well - since we've been talking about Paul - let's start with him.

Chris

Actually - maybe it's better to start "in the beginning." (No pun intended) - For me it all starts with Genesis - with creation.

Pat

Well - okay - but when you say creation - which account of creation are you speaking of? Genesis 1 or Genesis 2?

Chris

Well - you mean to say there are 2 stories? I mean the one which we often use in Christian marriage ceremonies - where man is created first, woman second, to be his helper. And the man speaks of her as bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh and the Bible says, "They cleave together and they become one flesh." (Gen. 2:24)

Pat

Chris, that is the second creation story in Genesis. In the first story, God creates humankind - at least that is the Hebrew word used. And male and female were both created in the image of God.

Chris

Yes, and then God told them to be fruitful and multiply, right? Sounds like God ordered things right from the beginning.

Pat

But Chris, doesn't it make sense that a literal interpretation of these stories can not be held? After all - on the plain face of it - there are two stories! They can't both be held to be literally true. Maybe they were both included because they tell us something quite wonderful about human relationships.

Chris

Yes! That we were created in God's image and ordered by God's commands. What could be simpler? What could be more loving?

Pat

Well - the first story may tell us that all humanity was created in the image of God - that men and women persons are equals - something that has certainly been ignored in human history. But never-the-less it is there. Our equality is part of the image of God.

And the second story may tell us that all humanity was created in partnership or relationship. Life was not good until *adam* had *adamah* - or man had woman - a partner, a helper, in all things. And this tells us not just that we were made for each other - but because we were made for each other we can understand how we relate to God as well.

I don't see these as rules for how *all* people are interrelated, however. And even though Genesis 2 is often used in weddings, I don't think we can argue that this is what the story is trying to say is the only relationship called for by God.

Chris

But the order is plain - woman is made for man - and their purpose is to marry and have children. That's what God intends.

Pat

And that's what the church has taught for some time. But, you can't say that the church always believed this. Clearly, we read even in the Bible of many other arrangements for the human family - for human relationships. Think of all the wives of the kings - and the ability for men to divorce and remarry multiple times. And the requirement for brothers to marry their brother's widows and so forth. Clearly - the one man/one woman for all time message was not and is not contained in the creation story. Don't get me wrong - I don't disagree with marriage and monogamy. It's just that I don't think the case for it is contained in Genesis. Genesis is about how we are created and ordered in community - with and for one another - and by and for God.

Chris

Well - you have some interesting ideas. I'll have to think about this for awhile. And clearly, there are others who do not marry and I don't feel that they are any less a believer. I wasn't saying that marriage and family a good Christian make. Jesus wasn't married, after all. But it just seems that since that is the only practice mentioned in creation - there has to be a strong case for it as the way it should be if it is going to be.

Pat

And that is the question. Is that really so clear? Isn't the message much broader, much deeper, much more about God than about us?

Chris

Well - Jesus must have had it in mind when he prohibited divorce. And Paul must certainly have had it mind when he wrote about it homosexuality.

Pat

Let's take a look. Romans, Chapter 1 is usually the most cited passage.

Chris

That's a good place to start - but I think I'd better get my Bible out so we can see the details. If memory serves me, though, this ties right in with our conversation about creation. Ah, yes - here it is - Romans 1, verse 19 - "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made..."

Pat

Or as my Bible translates, "Ever since the creation of the world, his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen by the things he has made." In other words, we're back to our relationship with God. We understand certain articles of faith in God - because we are made in God's image. This really doesn't have anything to do with the issue of homosexuality then. In fact, if you look at the words Paul uses to describe the things that are proscribed by God as foolish and unwise - there in verse 23 - we see that he is talking about idol worship!

Chris

Yes - and these things that Paul lists - are lists of things that seem to be punishment for worshipping images of humans and animals. They are described as unclean and unnatural. Hmmmm - I wonder why he doesn't use the word sin?

Pat

Well, it's been noticed that the word that our translations render "unnatural" is also used in another place in Romans when Paul talks about God's actions in pruning the Gentiles from their wild olive tree, where they grew in their natural state, and the grafted them on to the cultivated tree of God's people Israel (Romans 11:24). So, some think that "against nature" actually is a synonym for "unconventional" or surprisingly, out of the ordinary. We can't say that God sinned - so perhaps these things are not against creation - and that may be why Paul doesn't speak of sin. But, I think we're splitting atoms here. For me - this is a warning against idolatry. To think of it as a warning against homosexuality that is free from exploitation and unnatural lust is going too far.

Chris

Well - what about the women. Oh - well, I guess that could mean any number of things - that is giving up the natural for unnatural. It's more likely this had something to do with how men used women in those days, right? But if this isn't convincing to you - what about the story of Sodom and Gomorrah? There can't be much confusion there. After all, God destroyed the city because of the sin of homosexuality, right?

Pat

Okay - let's go back to Genesis... Your remembrance is what most of us think happened. But, if we look at the whole story, what we find is that the true sin is one of inhospitality.

Chris

Inhospitality! You've got to be kidding! Don't you remember? The townsmen wanted to have sex with God's angels!

Pat

Yes - Remember Lot had moved to Sodom and Abraham to the plains of the Jordan. Three angels came to visit Abraham and Sarah on their way to see for themselves how the cities were. If the reports were true, and the sins against God were great, God was going to destroy the city. Then Abraham bargains with God and God agrees to spare Sodom if ten righteous men are found. The angels visit Lot, who welcomes them. But then, ALL the men of Sodom want Lot to give the three visitors to them so they may rape them. They were ALL unrighteous. And Lot, amazingly, offers his daughters instead. So strong was the feeling about male on male rape that it was preferable, in terms of hospitality, to give over one's daughters to be raped!

Chris

So you're saying that it was the state of Sodom beforehand that caused the destruction of the city? Not the actual incident at Lot's house?

Pat

Actually, for the time, Lot's actions in offering his daughters instead of his male guests was considered the righteous thing to do - and Lot was rewarded by God for this when he was allowed to escape destruction.

Chris

Hmmmm - I guess you're right about that. But we all know what a sodomite is.

Pat

Yes, but that is a distortion of the true meaning. Whenever the sin of Sodom is mentioned in the Bible - and it is referred to many times - the sins mentioned are never homosexual acts - forced or otherwise. It is always related to acts of injustice and inhospitality. And when Jesus speaks of Sodom - he is comparing that city to other cities who do not welcome his disciples.

Chris

So, when did that all start up - this identification of Sodom with sodomy?

Pat

Actually, the first English usage of the word "sodomite" was in the King James Version of the Bible printed in 1611. And I think the evidence is strong that this is a wrong interpretation. Not even the Bible uses the word Sodomite to refer to the people who lived there.

Chris

As long as we're in the Old Testament - what about the clear prohibitions in Leviticus? Look, here it is - in Chapter 18 verse 22, "Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind; it is an abomination."

Pat

Once again, we really need to look at the context here. This is a part of the holiness code of Israel. God called Israel to a long list of standards to protect her purity. The word which both of our translations has as “abomination” really means rendering someone ritually unclean. The same thing could happen if a couple had sex during menstruation. The idea here, too expresses the ancient disdain for a man to have any identification with being a woman. For us, these codes are antiques - part of our history - but not necessary in Christ.

Chris

How can you say, not necessary! There are also prohibitions against incest and many other vices. Are you saying we need to throw these out?

Pat

I’m not saying that at all. I’m saying that these rules no longer proscribe for us a list of “thou shalt,” or else “you are not my people.” We no longer understand ourselves as “clean” and “unclean” based strictly on a list of rules. Our cleanness is dependent upon our hearts. If we are staying within the law of love - and our relationships are based on mutuality and respect and love, then our actions are pure. When we place this ancient standard upon gay and lesbian people, we are asking them not only to stand up under the cultural conditions of today, but a code that no Christian today is asked to follow. We must...

Chris

But wait - if we throw out all of Leviticus, aren’t we in danger of throwing out some good things, too? Don’t we create a dangerous divide between the Jewish law and the Christian gospel?

Pat

Chris - once again, you’re right. We can’t throw out everything. But we must remember the context of these laws. Israel was in exile when they were written. Israel was just returning from Babylon at the time, as well. The people had been scattered, had intermarried and picked up customs and families from other cultures. Jewishness was in danger of being swallowed up. These rules set them apart from foreign, pagan culture and made them God’s people.

Chris

Sometimes I feel like we are still that people - needing to be set apart by our actions and obedience. Especially today when it seems like nothing is sacred.

Pat

That’s so true. But I think there is room for us all in that boat in a radical new way. I think the church needs to find ways to support gay and lesbian couples in loving relationships as a sign of our faith. To me, this is the new life - the new living as God’s people. I long for a broader inclusivity...

Chris

You are opening my eyes to some new ways of understanding all this. But I have to finish this up with Paul’s first letter to Corinth. Chapter 6, isn’t it? This is the passage in which Paul warns us that we may not be inheritors of God’s grace if we do not remain righteous. And then there is a list - fornicators, idolaters, and effeminate men, those who abuse themselves with mankind, thieves, and so forth.

Pat

Well - I'd say this is a time when the King James Bible gets a bit closer than my own translation. The NRSV lists the fornicators and idolaters and then says male prostitutes, and that slippery word, sodomites.

Chris

Hmmm - neither translation uses the word homosexual. Although, I hear that some translations do use that word.

Pat

Homosexual is a more modern word. And there is a danger in using it to translate the Greek. Greek is very particular in many cases - and our modern words can gloss over meaning. The two words that are translated so differently by our versions have literal and more linguistic meanings. The first one which the KJV translates as effeminate is the word for "soft" and is used to connote effeminacy. As we've talked about - this would have been seen as a moral failing in the Ancient Near East.

Chris

But, we don't see softness or effeminacy as a moral failing these days. But, what about the other word? What is its literal meaning? I see that the NRSV uses "male prostitute." Is that closer than my version?

Pat

Well - it is a compound word meaning male and bed. It is only used one other time in the Bible - in a similar context in 1 Timothy. So, scholars have looked around in other writings and have found that it probably means something like a male prostitute. It could have been something closer to gigolo, though. Someone who entices or manipulates others for sex, for money or power or position.

Chris

Once again - we're dealing with how we relate to one another aren't we? I'd have to agree that given these facts, it is harder to maintain these lists of Paul's are against homosexuality. They are more against exploitation and inequality aren't they?

Pat

I'm fairly convinced. But, it is very difficult to figure out. And so much of this so called misinterpretation is a part of our world. In fact, it has made us hurt our gay brothers and sisters immensely, hasn't it?

Chris

Well - I'm still not sure you're going in the right direction. But I am glad that we spoke about this. I've got some more digging to do - and need to think and pray about this. It makes me wonder what other parts of my faith, my beliefs are standing on shaky ground.

Pat

I know the feeling. And I respect your tender journey. There is good reason to stick to the rules. And there is good reason to always look to the situation at hand for guidance. Going through this process has made me aware that there seems to be a third way to look at all this, though.

Chris

I think so, too. We just sort of did it, didn't we? We talked about this and listened. And somehow, I think we both moved a little bit? I'm not convinced you're right. But I am convinced that you have done the work - that you are acting out of your faith.

Pat

At the very least, I hope that as we look closely at homosexuality, we will not forget that all of human sexuality is wrapped in a web of values and actions that can make it holy and good. Perhaps we can use Paul's lists of virtues to determine their quality.

Chris

So that where we see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in any relationship - there we see the blessing of God?

Pat

Just as Paul told the church in Galatia! And from my point of view - these things are not confined to relationships that are sexual. This is how we can all live - whatever our differences, whatever our relatedness. At least I think we can.

Chris

Sure we can, with the help of God. Maybe this is how our faith has managed to stay alive so long - it has many different facets to be looked upon and wondered about.

Pat

At least it gives us something to argue about! That's a sign of life, for sure. And it's our calling I think - not arguing for argument's sake - but arguing for discernment and wisdom. Remember from the first chapter of Isaiah - God is trying to call Israel back - it says, "Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord."

Chris

That's funny - my version says, "Come now, let us reason together, saith the Lord."

Pat

And here we go!

The dialogue is drawn from many personal and published resources – including many additional articles in several of the books listed in the bibliography, *Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, the Bible & the Church; Plain Talk About Tough Issues*, Ted A. Smith, editor, Covenant Network of Presbyterians: San Francisco, 2006 and *Claiming the Promise: An Ecumenical Welcoming and Bible Study Resource on Homosexuality* by Mary Jo Osterman, Reconciling Congregation Program: Chicago, IL, 1997.

APPENDIX II

THE 217TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY'S AUTHORITATIVE INTERPRETATION OF SUBSECTION G-6.0108 OF THE BOOK OF ORDER REGARDING ORDINATION

MINUTES 217th GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2006 PART I JOURNAL

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EXPLANATORY NOTE

Changes made by the 217th General Assembly (2006) to overtures, commissioners' resolutions, communications, recommendations, and resolutions of General Assembly entities appear as text enclosed in brackets. Bracketed text that is underlined was added by the assembly to the original text; bracketed text that is stricken was original text deleted by the assembly. This format serves to ensure a complete historic record of the actions of the General Assembly by noting both the original recommendation sent to the assembly and the revised text approved by the assembly.

* * *

[The assembly approved Item 06-01, Recommendations 5-7. with amendment and with comment. See pp. 28-29.]

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

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

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

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

(1) Whether a candidate being examined for ordination and/or installation as elder, deacon, or minister of Word and Sacrament has departed from scriptural and constitutional standards for fitness for office,

(2) Whether any departure constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity under G-6.0108 of the *Book of Order*, thus barring the candidate from ordination and/or installation.

d. Whether the examination and ordination and installation decision comply with the Constitution of the PC(USA), and] [W][w]hether 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.

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

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

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

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

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

Why is an authoritative interpretation needed?

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

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

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

Essentials of polity are those that are required for a person's ordained service to fall within the bounds of Reformed understandings of church governance. Essential practices are those that are required for a person's life to fall within the bounds of Reformed understandings of Christian discipleship.

In recent years, the relationship between G-6.0108 and other *Book of Order* sections on ordination has become unclear. Some ordaining/installing bodies have maintained that the *Constitution* gives them the right to

overlook or dispense with certain churchwide standards. Others have considered adopting their own version or distillation of essential standards, to be applied to all officers-elect. Some interpreters have insisted that some provisions of the *Constitution*, such as those that govern sexual behavior, supersede the right of ordaining and installing bodies to determine fitness for ordination in all cases.

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

What is new or different about the proposed authoritative interpretation?

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

- *The power of the whole church to set standards is affirmed.* This power was first conferred in 1729, when the General Synod adopted the Westminster standards as the confessional basis for all ministers. The principle established then and confirmed in this authoritative interpretation do not permit the kind of “local option” arrangements that some have proposed, in which each ordaining and installing body sets its own standards. Such a procedure would be new, and it would be un-Presbyterian.

- *The authoritative interpretation also emphasizes the traditional respective responsibilities of various persons and bodies.* Officers-elect have the duty to conform to essentials of faith and polity and the right to freedom of conscience within bounds. Ordaining and installing bodies have the duty to apply standards and the right to discern which are essential for ordained service. These two principles were also established in 1729, when ministers were given the opportunity to dissent from articles of the Westminster standards (“declare a scruple” was the language of the time) and ordaining bodies were given the right to determine whether the “scrupled” article was an essential tenet.

- *The authoritative interpretation emphasizes as well the power of higher governing bodies to review ordination and installation decisions if they are challenged,* determining whether examinations were lawfully and fairly conducted and whether the matter of essentials was adequately grappled with. This, too, is a tradition of Presbyterian polity, dating from the adoption of a constitution and the establishment of the General Assembly in 1789.

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

- Though current practices vary from session to session and presbytery to presbytery, it is often reported that examinations lack rigor by not fully investigating the scope of each officer-elect’s beliefs, practices, gifts, willingness to uphold the governance of the church, and scruples. *The authoritative interpretation lifts up the obligation of the ordaining or installing body to gain the broadest visions of each officer-elect’s faith, manner of life, and promise as it applies standards and makes determinations about essentials.*

- The authoritative interpretation also lifts up a feature of G-6.0108 that is grounded in history but has fallen out of current practice. *Section G-6.0108 puts “faith and polity”—belief and behavior—on an equal footing, as they were in 1729, when scruples were permitted in matters of “doctrine, discipline and government.”* Over time, an imbalance has developed, with flexibility afforded in matters of doctrine and strict compliance required on all points of conduct and polity. By implication, this confers greater authority on the Form of Government than on the confessions and the Scripture they interpret. The proposed authoritative interpretation restores the balance, grounded firmly in the Reformed theological insight that faith and action are inextricably related. Faith is not only mental assent but also a pattern of life lived in the presence of God. The test and fruit of faith are change of heart and amendment of life. Therefore, officers-elect must comply with essentials of polity and practice as well as faith.

Ordaining and installing bodies may exercise judgment in the application of standards of both belief and practice that are deemed by those bodies to be nonessential.

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

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

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

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

- *Theological standards*: The proposed authoritative interpretation emphasizes what the Constitution already requires: the examination of officers-elect according to the standards of Scripture, the confessions, and the Form of Government. Ordaining/installing bodies may not ignore any existing churchwide standards or adopt additional standards to be imposed on all candidates. The proposed authoritative interpretation further emphasizes the duty of ordaining/installing bodies to determine whether the officer-elect accepts the essentials of faith and polity. If the candidate cannot accept the essentials of Reformed faith and polity as determined by the examining body, the ordination cannot proceed.

- *G-6.0106b*: It is not the intention of this proposed authoritative interpretation of G-6.0108 to change existing ordination standards, including the standards of G-6.0106b, which was added to the *Constitution* in 1997, and authoritative interpretations addressing its concerns.¹ The task force was not asked to adjudicate the issues named in its mandate, including the questions about sexuality and ordination that are the focus of G-6.0106b. Rather, the task force was instructed to propose ways for the church to live faithfully while dealing with those issues. The task force recognizes that the debate over G- 6.0106b may continue for many years. The authoritative interpretation the task force proposes is designed to help the church maintain peace, unity, and faithfulness to scriptural and theological principles while that debate continues.

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

- *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 (*Book of Order*, 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 nonessentials is sufficiently serious that a candidate will not be ordained or installed.

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.

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 often finds itself under sustained pressure from opposing interest groups. And what about purity? Some will object that the approach we propose will lead to variations in the actual judgments made by ordaining bodies and will permit persons to be ordained who do not meet the church's standards. There is already considerable variation in the judgments of ordaining and installing bodies; and no candidate perfectly conforms to the church's standards. We predict that the authoritative interpretation, by bringing renewed emphasis to the process of examination and application of standards, will in fact lead to more careful and balanced decisions about fitness for ordination, thereby promoting the purity of the church and the quality of its leadership.

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

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

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

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

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

Rationale

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. The Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church recommends to the 217th General Assembly (2006) that this report answer the following: *Overture 01-33, Commissioners' 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.

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

APPENDIX III

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