

The Witherspoon Society

A Time for Conflict Avoidance ... or for Courageous Action?

A response to the Theological Task Force report
by the Board of the Witherspoon Society
September 12, 2005

The report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church provides us with helpful insights and suggestions. We appreciate their patient efforts at mutual understanding and affirmation in a time of conflict in our church. We appreciate as well their efforts to demonstrate that the Gospel can make a difference in how we deal with one another when we disagree.

The Task Force's use of the ancient Christian discipline of discernment reminds us of the importance of humility, listening to one another, and getting beyond stereotypes to a genuine appreciation of one another. They acknowledge that many people have suffered alienation and pain during our battles over inclusion and ordination. They point out that legislative and judicial actions alone will not bring peace to a community divided by conflicting but deeply held convictions. For this and more, we are grateful.

We are concerned, however, because the emphasis on discernment seems to rest on an assumption that the process of discernment can be separated from action. True discernment cannot proceed in a vacuum of inaction.

We agree with the Task Force that discernment must take place in an atmosphere of safety and mutual respect. Safety and respect are impossible, however, when one group is allowed to take part only as second-class members of the community, entering the discussion as "the problem," whose very presence is subject to question. This is an example of how the call for discernment is weakened by lack of attention to the realities of power – one of the basic issues included in the Task Force's mandate.

Recommendation 5 proposes an Authoritative Interpretation stating that, among the scriptural and constitutional standards by which candidates are judged, some may be determined to be "essential" and others not essential. This reminds us that G-6.0108 has already established the legitimacy of "departures" ("scruples" in the language of the Adopting Act of 1729) from some provisions of the Constitution, as long as the person has not "departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity" (G 6.0108b).

The proposed AI would reiterate the Constitution's position that ordaining bodies – sessions and presbyteries – are responsible for determining what may or may not be considered "essential" matters in discerning each candidate's suitability for ordination. This is consistent with numerous past General Assembly actions, including the adoption of the report of the Swearingen Commission in 1927, and the reaffirmation by the 2004 General Assembly that defining "essential tenets" is not appropriate.

The AI, however, would also place increased emphasis on the examination of candidates for ordination. This may well put pressure on nominating committees, sessions, Committees on Preparation for Ministry and presbyteries, to subject candidates to inappropriate and uneven scrutiny on matters of both faith and "manner of life." This problem could be reduced if the AI is supplemented to reiterate that any definitive listing of "essentials" by a governing body is not in the spirit of G-6.0108, and therefore has no status in a judicial review of an action taken by a governing body.

In Recommendation 6, the Task Force "strongly encourages" the 217th General Assembly to take no further actions dealing with matters of ordination, other than adopting its proposed authoritative interpretation. We are deeply concerned that if the Assembly were to follow this recommendation, it would perpetuate the second-class status of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons in the church. The recommendation to postpone any further action should be rejected, because it once again extends years of delay in exercising fairness and respect toward our brothers and sisters in Christ. The Task Force's work would best be completed by the deletion of those AIs whose intent and effects are discriminatory, and by sending to the presbyteries an amendment deleting G-6.0106b.

The Task Force writes that our struggle on the ordination question is "integral to our vocation to proclaim the truth of the gospel." We agree. The Task Force, however, apparently believes that this integral part of our vocation can be deferred. We see no mandate in the Gospel for delay in doing right. Divisions and tensions are not resolved unless we are willing to wrestle with them with what the Task Force aptly calls "respectful attention and loving care." And with courage.

Approved by the Board of the Witherspoon Society
Meeting at Stony Point Center
September 12, 2005