

Naming names: PCUSA eyes "third way" on homosexuality

by [John Dart](#) in the [May 16, 2006](#) issue

"I have become profoundly disenchanted with our General Assembly process . . . the unsatisfactory way we were dealing with difficult and complex theological issues . . . and the toxic by-products of perpetually creating winners and losers, friends who are with us and enemies who oppose us."

—Peace, Unity and Purity task force member Scott Anderson

"In place of national-level ideological conflict that shouts entrenched positions past the opposition in hopes of rallying superior numbers of the already-convinced, the task force counsels a careful, attentive engagement of differences among neighbors and co-workers at the local level."

—PUP task force member Mark Achtemeier

Last year the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) enjoyed its first summer in years without a General Assembly fight over homosexuality. But that's because it was the first year that the church implemented its decision to hold assemblies every other year rather than annually. Meanwhile, the possibility of a more substantive resolution to the debate in the 2.3-million-member denomination emerged in the form of a proposal, offered by a theologically diverse task force, for a "third way" solution to the question of ordaining gays. Many Presbyterian leaders anticipate a breakthrough on the issue at the General Assembly June 15-22 in Birmingham, Alabama.

The 20-member Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church (PUP) concluded four years of study last August with a unanimous vote for a compromise position—one that critics denounce as contradictory.

The PUP task force is recommending that the General Assembly retain the national standards against ordaining noncelibate gay and lesbian persons. At the same time, the task force suggests that candidates for ordination who disagree in conscience with those standards in a way that does not depart "from the *essentials* of Reformed faith and polity" may be ordained by local churches and regional presbyteries,

subject to review by higher governing bodies.

The task force said its proposed “authoritative interpretation” offers ordination principles “that are, we believe, closer to Presbyterian tradition than some of our current practices.” If adopted by General Assembly delegates (called “commissioners”), the measure would “restore a greater degree of both rigor and flexibility in ordination decisions,” according to the PUP report.

Pointing to what they called “an important distinction between ‘standards’ and ‘essentials,’” task force members declared, “Standards are aspirational in character. No one lives up to them perfectly.”

The changes would be effective immediately if a simple majority of General Assembly delegates gives approval. That procedure contrasts sharply with the process on three separate occasions in the past decade when assembly-approved measures on homosexuality required approval by a majority of the PCUSA’s 173 presbyteries.

Prospects for the proposal are good, judging from the endorsements by a number of former PCUSA moderators and by the presidents of all 12 theological schools related to the denomination. The seminary presidents said the report is “a positive contribution toward a constructive and faithful future,” according to a statement in November.

“We seminary presidents are a diverse group ourselves and we know our denomination quite well,” said Cynthia M. Campbell, president of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, in an interview. While “extremely hopeful” that the proposal will pass, she said that the recommendations’ complexity ensures that the deliberations in Birmingham will not be easy.

Task force members acknowledged that they still differ on whether same-gender sexual intimacy is sinful. Campbell called the task force’s solution an attempt to apply “practical wisdom” to protracted battles. To hold two sets of principles in tension “is one of the geniuses of the Reformed tradition,” Campbell said. “It is an affirmation that more than one value and more than one theological idea can be true at the same time.”

But 35 ministers of large Presbyterian congregations—with an average membership of nearly 3,000—collectively stated their objection to the “local option” on

ordinations, calling the proposal a matter of “deep concern.” Members of the pastors group, associated with ten of the church’s 15 largest congregations, said that they “grieve the continuing decline of our denomination on multiple levels,” apparently alluding to yearly membership declines and smaller contributions to national budgets. “Something is deeply flawed at the core,” said the signers.

The local-option provision was faulted also by Richard A. Ray, president of the board of the independent *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, one of three writers assessing the PUP report in a pamphlet published by the church-owned Geneva Press. Ray said that “the leading Presbyterian renewal organizations” believe that the recommendations contain “a poison pill that could kill our entire church.” To allow local entities to make exceptions to nationwide standards “draws blood right out of the veins of biblical authority,” he said.

However, two other contributors to the booklet, seminary president Campbell and former pastor Thomas Sheridan, a self-described moderate, favored adoption.

In the March 20 *Presbyterian Outlook*, two pastors who disagree on homosexual issues endorsed the task force report, calling it “a hopeful way through the conflict,” though they said the document “does not offer everything that either of us hoped for.” The paid advertisement was signed by M. Craig Barnes, a professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and former pastor of the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., and John M. Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago and editor-publisher of the *Christian Century*.

Buchanan is a cofounder of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, which advocates the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in church life. The group’s executive committee last year said it remains committed to that goal, yet commended the report’s conclusions for careful study. In remarks posted on the network’s Web site, Buchanan, who served as moderator of the 1996 General Assembly, termed the unanimous accord by the theological task force “a minor miracle.”

Retired pastor Gary Demarest, who was the assembly’s evangelism director from 1988 to 1993, reluctantly agreed in 2001 to comoderate the PUP task force along with church elder Jean (Jenny) Stoner of Craftsbury, Vermont. He said this year that neither of them could have imagined the “greatest surprise of the journey—the unanimous vote.” Both said they felt the Holy Spirit enabled all members to listen to and hear each other and, as Stoner put it, “take the risks essential to fulfill our

mandate.”

Task force member Scott Anderson said he set aside his ordination years ago when “someone found out I was gay.” He later served as executive director of the California Council of Churches and now does the same for the Wisconsin Council of Churches. Asked in an interview if gay activists have accused him of betraying the cause with his support of the task force proposal, Anderson would say only that “it’s been a challenging time for me.”

Speaking from the other side of the issue, Demarest, a longtime southern California pastor who was president in 2000-2001 of the conservative Presbyterians for Renewal, said, “Some evangelicals are seriously questioning my standing right now.” In September the board of Presbyterians for Renewal urged that the task force recommendations not be adopted. However, Jack Haberer, the 2002-2003 president of the renewal group, is another task force member who supports the report.

Demarest said in an interview, “Increasingly what I see at this point is that we have a strong fundamentalist movement in the Presbyterian Church, [but] they want to be called evangelicals.” He asserted that movement members have redefined evangelical to include their positions on abortion, homosexuality and other social issues. “I argue that ‘evangelical’ has to do with your perception of the faith, the scriptures and salvation.”

Reflecting the weariness of Presbyterians with legislative challenges at General Assemblies, the task force also recommended a temporary moratorium on proposed amendments to the ordination standards.

However, two dozen such proposals were filed before the May 1 deadline. One target is a policy statement adopted in 1978 by the northern and southern Presbyterian churches that eventually merged as the PCUSA. That statement prohibited ordination of “self-affirming, practicing homosexual persons.” The other target is the constitutional requirement that all ministerial candidates be either faithful in heterosexual marriage or chaste in singleness.

The ability to differentiate between “standards” and “essentials” may be the key to whether the task force’s solution brings some peace and unity to mainline Presbyterians—or contributes to schismatic steps.

Standards are goals and “in some respects negotiable,” said Milton (Joe) Coalter, a task force member from Union Theological Seminary–Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia. “It simply means that the desired qualities present in a standard may be balanced by other gifts or graces,” Coalter told Presbyterian News Service. “Essentials simply cannot be departed from.”

Yet, Coalter said, no General Assembly has ever adopted a list of essential tenets “and some assemblies have said it’s not even appropriate to do so, even if we could agree.”

Task force member Mark Achtemeier, a professor at Dubuque Theological Seminary in Iowa, echoed that sentiment. “There is no perfect set of rules and regulations that will make all people good,” he said. “So we are trying to propose a more faithful spirit within the church, an ethos of trust and vulnerability.”

The real issue in the denomination is what amount of theological diversity will be acceptable, according to task force member William Stacy Johnson of Princeton Theological Seminary. The PCUSA’s method of letting local bodies determine a candidate’s fitness to be an elder or a minister is similar to that of the strongly conservative Presbyterian Church in America. “But the PCA has an ethos of uniformity that we don’t have,” Johnson said. “We say that in a diverse church, tolerance isn’t enough, that we’re called to embrace and embody a deeper koinonia [Christian fellowship or communion with God].”

Barbara Wheeler, president of Auburn Theological Seminary in New York, said she hopes that commissioners on the assembly floor will not “cherry-pick” the task force’s recommendations in seeking a clear-cut victory for one side or another. She joined the task force, she said, because of her admiration for people on both sides of the issue—for the gay Presbyterians “who sacrifice so much to stick with the rest of us” and for conservative evangelical Presbyterians, many of whom she disagrees with, she said, but who are among “my closest friends” and “whose faith, character and courage frequently exceed my own.”