

Frequently Asked Questions about the Actions of the 217th General Assembly (2006) on the Report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church

What did the 217th General Assembly (2006) do?

The General Assembly retained the ordination standards and lifted up the historic responsibility of governing bodies to examine rigorously each and every candidate for minister, elder, or deacon, considering whether they are qualified and called, and whether they adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and practice.

So what's different now?

The standards of the church didn't change; it is the spirit that has changed. The action encourages a more pastoral approach to ordination and encourages governing bodies to do thorough work in examining individuals for office.

What was the Theological Task Force created to do, and how did their report do that?

The task force was appointed in 2001 to address deep divisions in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The unanimous report of the twenty Presbyterians on the task force from all over the country, representing the full breadth of the theological spectrum, models hope for the church moving forward together in unity.

Obviously, the fifth recommendation (concerning ordination standards) has received a lot of attention. But many may not realize that the first four recommendations of the report, adopted almost unanimously by the assembly, carry enormous significance for the future of the church. Those four recommendations are:

- that the Theological Reflection section of the task force report—a very strong faith statement about God's love and salvation made known to us in Jesus Christ, and about our call to proclaim the gospel—be commended for study;
- that every Presbyterian would witness to the church's visible oneness, avoiding division;
- that every governing body, congregation, and group of Presbyterians engage in processes of intensive discernment through worship, community building, and study;
- that the General Assembly consider exploring the use of alternative forms of discernment preliminary to decision-making, especially when dealing with divisive issues.

Will gays and lesbians now be ordained?

Presbyteries and sessions have been reminded of their historical responsibility to examine candidates for ordination and decide, on a case-by-case basis, about a person's qualifications for ministry. The constitutional standard in the *Book of Order* (G-6.0106b) requiring "fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman" or "chastity in singleness" remains in place.

Each governing body will be required to decide if a departure from a standard of faith or practice represents a violation of an "essential" of the faith. Governing bodies have been encouraged to strive to honor one another's ordination decisions. Still, these decisions continue to be subject to review by higher governing bodies.

What are the “essentials”?

The General Assembly has never had a list of “essentials,” and, except for a few years in the early twentieth century, has always explicitly maintained there can be no list. We have a confessional foundation, and it has always been the responsibility of ordaining bodies to determine what tenets of faith are “essential” and to make decisions about ordination and installation accordingly.

Are congregations going to leave the PC(USA) because of the assembly’s actions?

Hopefully not. A few have said they are considering departure, but most have indicated they will stay and work to reshape and renew the denomination. The report the assembly approved was intended to bring a new spirit to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in which individuals who disagree deeply about important issues can still participate faithfully together as disciples of Jesus Christ. The assembly’s actions will make it possible for all Presbyterians to not merely stay together, but to strengthen one another’s faith and ministry, honoring God, who alone is Lord of the conscience.

What will this mean to congregations?

The intent of the General Assembly was that all governing groups—sessions that govern congregations, as well as presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly, which are made up of ministers and elders—will be empowered to bear with one another in Christian love, to exercise discernment, and to proclaim Good News in a new day of unity and faithfulness. In particular, nominating committees and examining bodies are called to a rigorous and thorough examination of every candidate for church office, discerning the totality of their faith, theology, and practice, and making wise decisions about those who will lead the people of God.

To read the full actions of the 217th General Assembly on these recommendations, go to <http://les-pcusa.org/Item.aspx?IID=129&> . To read the report of the Theological Task Force, go to www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity.