

**Shenandoah Presbytery Task Force
Peace, Unity and Purity**

**Report to the Presbytery
January 29, 2008
(Recommendation in box on page 2)**

As stated in the General Assembly's Peace, Unity, and Purity Report, "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."

Shenandoah Presbytery accepts as essentials those standards expressed in the vows taken by all officers and ministers in our Presbytery.

- We trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- We accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to us.
- We sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will be instructed and led by those confessions as we lead the people of God.

To that end, we strongly encourage the Presbytery to continue fostering a Christ-like, nurturing environment so that the examination of candidates will be based on trust and will not be a forum for personal viewpoints.

In adopting the report of the Shenandoah Presbytery's Task Force on the General Assembly's Report on Peace, Unity, and Purity, we affirm the work of the Committee on Ministry, and their thorough, exhaustive and outstanding process for receiving ministers of the Word and Sacrament into the Presbytery. The Presbytery encourages the COM and its subcommittees to continue in the manner in which they do their work, guiding ministers coming into the Presbytery and determining the suitability of their calls.

As a church we are connectional in nature, joined together by our common faith in Jesus Christ, and our Constitution [*Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order*], which guides all governing bodies of the Church: Session, Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly. The Constitution of the PC (USA) establishes the essential beliefs and polity guidelines for all levels within our church. In addition to Scripture, the Constitution is the foundation for our shared Presbyterian practice.

Shenandoah Presbytery PUP Task Force Process

Rather than a chronological recording of the work of the Shenandoah Presbytery (SP) Peace, Unity, and Purity (PUP) Task Force, the intent of this part of our report is to highlight those aspects of the process that were most conducive in getting our task accomplished. We share these ideas with the Presbytery so that others may know of our experience working together. Study, prayer, listening, and questioning were hallmarks of our process.

We read and discussed the General Assembly's (GA) PUP report in its entirety followed by in-depth study of Recommendation 5. We were enlightened in our study and discussion of the amendment (made on the floor of the 217th General Assembly, 2006) to the original report and the impact that amendment had on the report. Frankly, it took us some time to understand the language and the implications of that language.

Dr. Rufus Burton's lecture on the history of American Presbyterianism was extremely informative, giving us perspective on our task. We learned that throughout history, our denomination has often struggled to determine essential tenets and resolve disagreements. We reviewed the examination process for ministers of the Word and Sacrament wanting to gain membership into our Presbytery and were surprised at the organization and thoroughness of the process that occurs before a minister is examined at a Presbytery meeting.

In addition to study, we prayed, shared, listened, and questioned. Task force members often shared information from journal articles, books, etc. they were reading. Individuals as well as a group shared concerns and suggestions with us. In all matters, we deferred to hearing and listening to as many perspectives as we could.

One of our task force members aptly stated, "Our group was very harmonious and respectful to each other. I felt we each valued the opinions of others, though we may have held differing viewpoints of the PUP paper. This was great—it is the way Christians, and certainly Presbyterians, should work to the overall building up of the Church."

Recommendation of the Work of the Shenandoah Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity Report

We the Task Force commissioned by Shenandoah Presbytery to study and report to the Presbytery on the implications of the GA's Peace, Unity, and Purity Report move that, in order to clarify Recommendation 5 of the report approved by the 2006 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Shenandoah Presbytery adopt the following statement as definitive guidance for Presbytery and Sessional examinations:

Ordaining bodies are required to uphold all the standards of the Constitution and of essential reformed theology in determining their membership.

Rationale:

Even before the GA's Peace, Unity and Purity Report was released there were rumors about what it would say and what would be its implications for the functioning of the church. Many of these rumors colored how the Report was read once it was released. Our desire in studying the Report was to focus on the text itself and not the myriad of interpretations of the text that have circulated since the report was released.

There is much of value in the report as a whole for the health and well being of the church. We commend it to the study of all of our Sessions. The focal concern of the Report has been Recommendation 5, which offers an authoritative interpretation of our Constitution. We have found that Recommendation 5 stresses the seriousness of the task of examining candidates for Ordination and Installation to church office. It lifts up that examining bodies shoulder the responsibility of identifying deviation from church standards and judging whether those deviations violate essential articles of faith and governance. It identifies the responsibility of higher governing bodies to exercise fair and evenhanded oversight of the examination process to maintain both the integrity of the process and of the examining body that was responsible for making the Ordination and Installation decision. Recommendation 5 seeks to balance the integrity of the process and the integrity of those exercising the process. Standards are lifted up and maintained. The GA PUP Task Force wrote:

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. (GA Task Force Report Lines 1086-1088)

The importance of the examination process is lifted up. The GA PUP Task Force wrote:

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. (GA Task Force report lines 1089-1092)

The importance of a faithfulness and trust at every level of the church is lifted up:

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 respect of each other's decisions. (GA Task Force Report Lines 1093-1096)

Recommendation 5 calls us to fuller, richer, and more complete examinations. Some have feared that the language used in Recommendation 5 implies and gives permission for a "Local Option" allowing ordaining and installing bodies to ignore standards specially named in the constitution of the PC (USA). This is not the case. In fact the centrality and importance of constitutional standards were highlighted when Recommendation 5 was amended from the floor of the General Assembly to read:

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, prayerfully, and deliberately in deciding to ordain a candidate for church office is subject to review by higher governing bodies. (GA Task Force Report lines 1068-1072 Amended portion in italics)

If anything, Recommendation 5, as amended, underscores and highlights the importance of constitutional standards in making ordination and installation decisions. No one is given permission to ignore our named standards. Rather we are urged all the more to take their applications and importance seriously not only as we seek to make decisions about ordination and installation, but also, to live out our faith in a way that honors and glorifies the God who has called us into service as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.