

# How We Got Here

by Elder Bob Gillette in The Eastminster Observer [www.eastminsterobserver.blogspot.com](http://www.eastminsterobserver.blogspot.com)

There has been controversy within the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) and other protestant denominations regarding interpretation of the Bible and its application to certain personal behaviors. This has been reflected in ongoing debate over ordination standards – that is, whether some persons should be denied permission to be ordained as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament within our denomination. I do not address the specific controversies, of which ordination of gay or lesbian pastors is the most salient, in this report.

Five years ago the PCUSA created an ad hoc group to study these issues and make relevant recommendations for action. This “Peace, Unity and Purity Task Force” had 40 members, carefully chosen for balance in age, gender, lay vs. clergy, and especially liberal vs. conservative outlook. Their report, approved unanimously by all 40 members, was debated and adopted at the General Assembly this past June. The report has seven recommendations, the first and fifth being the most significant.

Recommendation 1 calls for –

- A) every member of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to witness to the church’s visible oneness, to avoid division into separate denominations that obscure our community in Christ, and to live in harmony with other members of this denomination, so that we may with one voice together glorify God in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and
- B) all sessions, congregations, presbyteries and synods to renew and strengthen their covenanted partnership with one another and with the General Assembly.

This call for unity and avoidance of schism was approved by 91% of the more than 500 commissioners voting.

Recommendation 5 drew more disagreement and debate, which isn’t surprising because it addresses the specific issue of interpreting ordination standards. Its wording can be found on the PCUSA Web site. My understanding of its impact is this:

- ◆ Local ordaining bodies (sessions and presbyteries) are reminded and reaffirmed in their historic responsibility of interpreting the ordination standards found in the Book of Order,<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ Higher bodies (synods and General Assembly) are given more authority to review and challenge local decisions, and
- ◆ The standards are unchanged.

This carefully balanced recommendation was adopted by a 57% affirmative vote, reflecting ongoing tension within the PCUSA.

It was widely predicted that some “conservative” congregations around the nation would disaffiliate from the denomination if their demands for more rigid ordination standards were not met. Some of them have found the General Assembly’s carefully crafted approach unacceptable, and schism is occurring in some places, within congregations and between congregations and presbyteries. This is driven in part by selective and sometimes inflammatory reporting by a nationally distributed publication.

An important issue in such cases is: who gets the church property? Long-standing PCUSA policy, based on more than a century of experience and reflected in the Book of Order, is that local church property is controlled by the presbytery. A dissenting group may negotiate with the presbytery but has no automatic right to the building. Those seeking to disaffiliate these days are increasingly turning to the civil courts and suing presbyteries for control of property, seeking to overturn long-established Presbyterian procedure.

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<sup>1</sup> Original was “Local ordaining bodies (chiefly presbyteries) are given a bit of “wiggle room” in interpreting the ordination standards found in the Book of Order,”