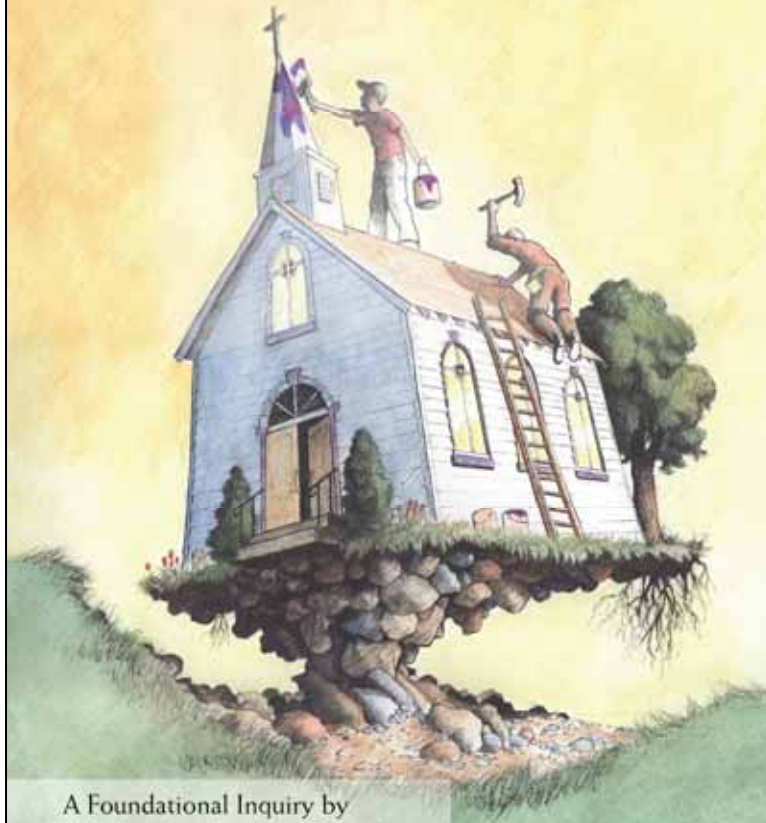


CAN  
TWO FAITHS  
EMBRACE  
ONE FUTURE?



A Foundational Inquiry by  
The Presbyterian Lay Committee

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By the Presbyterian Lay Committee

“How long will you go limping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him. But the people answered him not a word.”<sup>1</sup>

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is at a crossroads. That reality is no more welcome today than when Elijah voiced it to King Ahab. “Is that you, O troubler of Israel?” asked the king to God’s meddlesome prophet.<sup>2</sup>

Ahab’s answer to the presence of mutually exclusive faiths was accommodation, making room for both. That policy crippled Israel, proving once more what the ancients had always known: self-contradictions cannot survive.

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) underscores Elijah’s conviction: “... no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man’s opinions are.”<sup>3</sup>

Ignoring that Scriptural and constitutional counsel, policies and programs of the Presbyterian Church (USA) over several decades have touted a principle called “inclusiveness and diversity.” They have sought to accommodate within one institutional structure substantially different convictions regarding what Presbyterians are to believe and how they are to live. The result: a loss of theological and ethical discernment and a prevailing assumption that there can be parity between truth and falsehood.

The language of feeling now dominates Presbyterian parlance. “I’m not comfortable with this,” is employed in lieu of “this is wrong.” Dialogue, a process in which contradictory positions are “shared,” has replaced debate, a process in which contradictory positions engage one another in pursuit of the truth. No longer assessing truth claims *vis-à-vis* established standards, we have cast our people adrift on a sea of relativity, leaving them in a quandary as to who Presbyterians are and how we are to live. This forfeiture of our identity has eroded the very foundation of the Presbyterian Church (USA). We believe it is the primary cause of the loss of almost 50,000 members per year and multi-million dollar reductions in the denomination’s mission budget. In 1999, the Presbyterian Church (USA) research service calculated that at the then current rate of decline, we will run out of members in the year 2061. Accelerated losses since 1999 have revised that date to 2054.

While some may dispute the causes of the denomination’s malady, almost no one questions its trajectory. There is almost universal agreement that lacking a radical (some would say “miraculous”) intervention, the rapidly declining Presbyterian Church (USA) will die.

## **Presbyterian Pluralism**

In 2001, the General Assembly created a Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity (PUP) to examine the causes of denominational distress and to prescribe appropriate remedies. Its report was released in the fall of 2005 and was adopted by the General Assembly in 2006.

Most of the task force discussions were held behind closed doors. However, known opinions of its members, early corporate statements, e.g., PUP’s published statement on unity,<sup>4</sup> and the group’s lobbying

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<sup>1</sup> I Kings 18:21

<sup>2</sup> I Kings 18:17

<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Order*, G-1.0304

<sup>4</sup> Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church Preliminary Report to the 216th General Assembly (2004)

efforts to gain General Assembly approval of its final report clearly show its rationale and theological presupposition. PUP opted for institutional preservation by proffering itself as a model of the denomination's future. Declaring that it successfully assimilated persons of differing convictions, the task force suggested that Presbyterian governing bodies can do so as well.

In its approval of PUP's report and recommendations, the 2006 General Assembly adopted a political solution to its theological problem. It chose to leave in place denomination-wide sexual behavior standards that some members find vexing, but insisted that each presbytery be permitted to decide if it would enforce those standards (declare them "essential") in its own territory. This "both/and" policy became known popularly as "local option."

A variation of PUP's political solution was promoted by *Presbyterians for Renewal*, a moderate evangelical group. Although it has been given various labels, this plan is most often called the "two synod proposal,"<sup>5</sup> in which congregations are divided into synods based on theology rather than geography.

The theological term for this approach is pluralism. Pluralism may be initially appealing to those who place a premium on holding the institution together, but it poses serious problems of theology, polity and practicality that require careful consideration by thoughtful Presbyterians. As a contribution to that reflection, the Presbyterian Lay Committee offers the following analysis of foundational issues that we believe are not being addressed.

## **Issues of Theology**

The causes of discord in the Presbyterian Church (USA) are profoundly theological. They center around three essential questions:

- (1) Who is Jesus Christ?
- (2) In what sense is Scripture authoritative for our beliefs and practices?
- (3) How do we submit to God's call to a holy life, including His requirement that human sexuality be expressed exclusively through the heterosexual marriage relationship that was instituted by God and blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ?

The answers that Presbyterians give to these questions will reveal that our denomination encompasses two distinctly different faiths.

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<sup>5</sup>A two-synod proposal has been informally floating around the denomination for several years with tacit support from the Office of the General Assembly. Although it has taken a variety of forms, the essence of this proposal is that the denomination be divided into two synods, one for "Traditional Christians" who insist on upholding the authority of Holy Scripture and on maintaining and enforcing the denomination's now defunct standard that limits ordination to persons who confine their sexual activity to the covenant of marriage; and the other synod for "progressives" who do not accept the authority of Holy Scripture and have successfully brought about the deletion of the sexual behavior standard from the constitution. Congregations could select the synod to which they would belong. An early version of the two-synod proposal envisioned the denomination's unrestricted assets being divided between the synods according to membership, and its restricted assets being divided based upon negotiation and arbitration. Each synod would recognize the other as a legitimate governing body within the Presbyterian Church (USA), and there would be annual or semi-annual General Assembly meetings, primarily for worship and for handling institutions that the two synods jointly support. *Presbyterians for Renewal* proposed a version of this proposal (called "the 17<sup>th</sup> synod") to the 2008 General Assembly where it died during committee deliberations. Currently, a group largely composed of *Presbyterians for Renewal* leaders but operating under the name *Fellowship PC(USA)*, is promoting a similar denominational segmentation.

## **Different ‘Christ’s’**

Some persons who call themselves Christians affirm a Christ concept. When they affirm “Christ,” they are using the name as an ideological symbol. But they do not affirm the Jesus Christ who is revealed in Scripture, who is God Incarnate, who is the second person of the Trinity, who was born of a virgin, who lived a miraculous and holy life, who atoned for our sins through His death on the cross, who was raised bodily from the grave, and who ascended into heaven from whence He, with the Father and Holy Spirit, rules and empowers the kingdom of God on earth. This Jesus Christ to whom Scripture attests is a stumbling block for many who call themselves Christians, including some ordained leaders of the Presbyterian Church (USA). They find offensive Scripture’s claim that Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life,” and its affirmation that “no one comes to the Father” but by Him. Persons of such beliefs clearly are not talking about the Christ of Scripture, but are constructing a lower case “christ” of their own imagination.

## **Different Scriptures**

Some persons who call themselves Christians, including ordained leaders of the Presbyterian Church (USA), struggle with claims for the authority of Scripture. They affirm Scripture as a guide and source of wisdom, but regard it as culturally conditioned and of human origin. Thus they place it alongside, and even, at times, under the judgment of other human authorities. They prefer to say, “Listen for the Word of God,” rather than “Listen to the Word of God” when reading the Bible in the context of worship. Persons who hold such beliefs clearly are not talking about the Scriptures that Jesus upheld and fulfilled and that his church has affirmed for more than 2,000 years.

## **Different moral standards**

Some persons who call themselves Christians, including ordained leaders of the Presbyterian Church (USA), insist on individual autonomy when making moral judgments. Nowhere is that more obvious than in current discussions of sexual morality. There is a stark difference between an ethic of self-centeredness and the ethic of Scripture. Such persons clearly are not talking about the standards of moral behavior delivered once and for all to the saints, and upheld by the church for more than 2,000 years.

Pluralism is the institutionalist’s solution to these diametrically opposed views. It argues that all religions and philosophies contain elements of truth, and that no religion can claim final and definitive truth. Underlying the pluralist view is the assumption that religions and philosophies of life are of human origin. They are human attempts to conceive a divine reality that cannot be fully known.

Pluralism’s bottom line, therefore, insists that all religious ideas are equally valid and equally defective. Its adherents promote their view as a generous, gracious, respectful and humble way to embrace theological differences. Conversely, they regard those who profess exclusivist convictions as narrow-minded, intolerant, bigoted and inhospitable toward persons of other faiths, or, as some prefer to describe it, “other faith perspectives.”

Gavin D’Costa,<sup>6</sup> a Trinitarian Catholic and world-renowned philosophical theologian at Bristol

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<sup>6</sup> *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986 (BR127.D4)

University, once held the pluralist view. But in 1994, D’Costa astounded an audience at Kings College when, in the course of a lecture, he renounced his pluralist position. He told his London audience that after careful analysis of numerous religions, he was obliged to recognize that every religion’s truth claim necessarily excludes contrary positions.

Leslie Newbigin, who served for nearly 40 years as a missionary in India and was long active in international ecumenical organizations, clearly understood the exclusivist nature of every religion and ideology: “It is understandable that anyone faced with the clashing diversity of religious commitments should seek some basis for unity among them, or at least some agreed common framework. The difficulty is that we are dealing here with ultimate commitments, and the basis that I accept can only be my commitment. There have been many attempts to find a basis that all could accept, but none of them escapes this necessity.”

Disciples of Jesus Christ attest to the fact that He is God Incarnate. Islam says that He is not. Both positions cannot be true. To affirm, as the pluralists do, a position that encompasses these contradictory religious claims is to legitimize a self-contradiction. The same impasse is evident in Presbyterian clashes over the authority of Scripture and Christian ethics.

As the prophet Elijah saw centuries ago, pluralism’s attempt to encompass mutually exclusive faiths represents a self-inflicted injury, thus Elijah’s reference to “limping.” Based on a self-contradiction that defies the most elementary principles of rational thought, the pluralist position self-destructs. This observation led Friedhelm Hardy, a comparative religions scholar at Kings College, to declare, “religious pluralism is demonstrable nonsense.” This, of course, does not preclude some people from affirming it, for one can always find persons who embrace the absurd.

Contrary to their claim of graciousness, hospitality and humility, pluralists host an arrogance of their own, for, like other religions whose exclusiveness they criticize, their scheme rejects every truth claim except their own. Pluralism simply creates another, separate religion that is as exclusive as those it seeks to combine. D’Costa observes, “All pluralists are committed to holding some form of truth criteria and by virtue of this, anything that falls foul of such criteria is excluded from counting as truth.”

To suggest that the ailing Presbyterian Church (USA) legitimize a system that encompasses theological opposites (Jesus is **the** way, **the** truth, and **the** life vs. Jesus is **a** way, **a** truth, and **a** life) is to endorse pluralism. It would legitimize and institutionalize a competing religion that lacks both intellectual and theological integrity. It has been thoroughly discredited by scholars like Leslie Newbigin,<sup>10</sup> Gavin D’Costa, Thomas F. Torrance,<sup>11</sup> Friedhelm Hardy, Alvin Plantinga,<sup>12</sup> Nicolas Wolterstorff<sup>13</sup> and others who have devoted their lives to the engagement of the gospel with world religions. The false faith of pluralism finds followers within the Presbyterian Church (USA) who cling to the dogmas of postmodernism. That this pluralism, which has contributed so substantially to the denomination’s theological crisis, could now be proffered as a solution to that crisis strikes rational observers as a brutish irony.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Open Secret* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995, p. 162.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *The Religious Culture of India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994

<sup>9</sup> Cf. “The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions,” *Religious Studies* 32, 1996, pp.223-232

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Foolishness to the Greeks*, London: SPCK, 1986 (BR115.C8)

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1996, p. 22 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Professor of the Philosophy of Religion, Notre Dame University. Cf. Alvin Plantinga: *The Analytic Theist* ([www.homestead.com/philofreligion/plantingapage.html](http://www.homestead.com/philofreligion/plantingapage.html))

<sup>13</sup> Professor of Philosophical Theology, Yale University. Cf. *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976.

Any variation of local option, including various versions of the two-synod scheme that are now being vigorously promoted, is theologically oxymoronic. Allowing a denomination to balkanize itself into mutually exclusive faith groups may offer the political appearance of peace, but it cannot produce the power and peace that Christ alone promises. Institutionalizing mutually exclusive faith claims as two parts of one whole establishes a denomination that will accept a belief in everything. A denomination that believes everything in reality believes nothing, and a denomination that believes nothing has nothing to offer an unredeemed world. Thus, from the standpoint of theology, politically inclusivist schemes constitute a prescription for denominational self-annihilation. Jesus Christ warned church leaders of His day: “If a kingdom is divided against itself,<sup>14</sup> that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.”

## Issues of Polity

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is a constitutional church, whose *Book of Confessions* defines Presbyterian belief and whose *Book of Order* defines Presbyterian polity. *The Book of Order's* primary principle of denominational governance states: “The governing bodies are separate and independent, but have such mutual relations that the act of one of them is the act of the whole church performed by it through the appropriate governing body.”<sup>15</sup>

When the Presbytery of the Pacific ordains a person to service in the church, this is not simply an act of the Presbytery of the Pacific. It is an act of the whole church, performed by the whole church through the Presbytery of the Pacific. Thus, the credentials of a minister who is ordained in Los Angeles are honored by Presbyterians in New York.

Enshrining pluralism within church governance through any variation of local option will fracture Presbyterian polity. In the two-synod scheme, congregations would be allowed to select the synod to which they would belong, and each synod would ordain leaders to serve the churches in its territory.<sup>16</sup> But if both synods are mutually recognized as parts of the one Presbyterian Church (USA), ordination by one synod would necessarily be recognized as ordination by the other, even though the two synods would claim two radically different standards.

In Presbyterian polity, the interrelationship of governing bodies is delicately balanced among the principles of original jurisdiction, governing body oversight, and the appellate process. Ordinarily, the *Book of Order* grants the powers of governance to the most local elected body, the session. But the power of the session is not absolute, for session decisions are reviewed by the presbytery for their conformity to the constitution. Further, a decision by one governing body may be appealed to the courts of higher governing bodies.

Rather than solve the problem of encompassing two different faiths and morals by jurisdictionally separating them, a local option or two-synod solution would simply push the adjudication of these difficulties further up the line. At some point, namely, at the level of the General Assembly, these issues would have to be faced.

Just as a local option or two-synod solution creates unacceptable theological problems, i.e., the beliefs of

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<sup>14</sup> Mark 3:24-25

<sup>15</sup> *The Book Of Order*, G-9.0103

<sup>16</sup> “Territory” in this instance does not have geographical connotations, since the two synods are divided primarily along theological/ethical lines.

one synod (although not shared) must be recognized by the other, they also would create intractable polity problems. If the divergent practices of one synod or multiple presbyteries are still part of one denomination, such practices would have to be recognized by the non-concurring other synod or presbyteries for the same reasons.

Members of some presbyteries or one synod might wish to say that Reverend Smith is not a legitimate Presbyterian minister because he was ordained according to lesser standards. But from a polity perspective such convictions would be meaningless if ordination in one synod or presbytery means ordination in the whole denomination.

Similarly, the mission activities of one synod, e.g., a lobbying effort to legalize same-sex marriage, may be funded only by that one synod but it would nevertheless be regarded as an act of the whole church if the two synods are constituent parts of the one Presbyterian Church (USA).

From a polity perspective, as long as two distinctly different faiths and morals are institutionally yoked – whether or not they have been accorded some programmatic subdivision within the denomination – the two remain one. Such solutions institutionalize the self-contradiction that is currently tearing the denomination apart.

## **Practical Issues**

Practically speaking, no pluralist solution can bring peace to the Presbyterian Church (USA). Those who seek the church's blessing of homoerotic relationships could long ago have left the Presbyterian Church for denominations that welcome such relationships. The Metropolitan Community Church, for example, makes the endorsement of same-sex relations a central part of its ideology. But homoerotic activists in the Presbyterian Church (USA) have, in large measure, elected to stay in the denomination on grounds that their intention is not to go where their behavior is welcomed but to change the ethos of institutions where it is not.

Pluralist or inclusivist political arrangements presumably would be acceptable to such activists since they would imply by recognition, a legitimization of their position. This satisfaction would only be temporary, however, for proponents of homoerotic behavior seek the church's blessing on what they do. A partial blessing, endorsement by only one part of the denomination, will not satisfy that need. Thus, their present efforts will undoubtedly continue as long as the blessing is only partial.

Those who propose various versions of the two-synod model often suggest that it would avoid the congregational schism that might occur if the congregation were forced to choose between staying in or leaving the denomination. But there is no conflict avoidance in the two-synod proposal, for a choice between two faith groups must still be made, albeit within an encompassing denominational structure. Thus, in terms of its practical consequences, this plan contains the worst possible outcome. Congregations would experience the trauma of choosing which synod to join and, in its aftermath, continue to be institutionally yoked to an alien faith.

## **A Matter of Integrity**

The fact of the matter is that institutionalizing pluralism is not merely a *de jure* threat to our future. It

represents the *de facto* state of the Presbyterian Church (USA) today. We profess to be a constitutional church only in the sense that we still possess a *Book of Confessions* and a *Book of Order*, but our actions do not accord with our professed beliefs. Candidates for ordination continue to be asked to affirm “essential tenets of Reformed faith,” but since 1925, no General Assembly has been willing to state what those essentials are. Depending on the presbytery wherein one is examined, candidates for ordination may fill in the blanks and/or affirm their ordination vows with fingers crossed.

In 1986, the General Assembly adopted the following interpretation of its confessional statements that was later inserted into the preface of the *Book of Confessions*: “The ordination question that asks for commitment to the ‘essential tenets’ of the confessions brings freedom in the church at several levels. Ordained persons are free to be ‘instructed,’ ‘led,’ and ‘continually guided’ by the confessions without being forced to subscribe to any precisely worded articles of faith drawn up whether by the General Assembly or by a presbytery.”<sup>17</sup>

Because of this fluid approach to the content of the confessions, persons holding a broad spectrum of beliefs have been ordained in recent years. Some of those ordained have stated that they cannot affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, or the doctrine of the atonement, or a belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, yet their presbyteries have found their faith acceptable. Thus, while we say we are a constitutional church, and we cite the *Book of Confessions* as evidence that we subscribe to a particular corpus of belief, in practice we have eviscerated that corpus of any authoritative significance.

Similarly, the *Book of Order* contains standards for the governance of Presbyterian churches. But in recent years, there have been widespread and widely publicized violations of those standards with little or no disciplinary consequence. Clifton Kirkpatrick, former Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, the denomination’s chief constitutional officer, declared that it is not the stated clerk’s job to enforce the constitution. Baltimore Presbytery declared that it would not recognize the *Book of Order*’s ordination standards as authoritative, and it urged its permanent judicial commission not to accept for trial any alleged violation of that section of the constitution.<sup>18</sup>

So while the Presbyterian Church (USA) has *de jure* standards of faith and morals on its books, the refusal of its leaders to exercise discipline constitutes a *de facto* abandonment of those standards and an abandonment of its constitution.<sup>19</sup> Declaring oneself to be one thing while being something else is deceitful. That very practice has led the denomination into a massive integrity problem.

Making the denomination’s implicit pluralism explicit, by whatever inclusivist scheme, would admit but not solve our current disorder. Elijah’s counsel to Israel is precisely the word that the Presbyterian Church (USA) must hear. We must cease limping between two opinions. We must answer Christ’s compelling question: “Who do you say that I am?”<sup>20</sup> We must make a choice.

Continuing the pluralism in which we are currently engaged, either implicitly (the current practice) or explicitly (through various inclusivist approaches now being discussed), will produce predictable results. Unlike popular stock market disclaimers, past history does in fact guarantee future performance. The decay and death of the Presbyterian Church (USA) will surely come to pass.

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<sup>17</sup> The Confessional Nature of the Church Report, *The Book of Confessions*, p. XXVI.

<sup>18</sup> The 2010 General Assembly voted to delete the ordination standard, G-6.0106(b), an action that was ratified in 2011. But at the time that Baltimore Presbytery announced it would not abide by the standard, it was a part of the constitution.

<sup>19</sup> Some have defended the denomination against charges of apostasy by pointing to the fact that its constitutional standards have not been removed, failing to see that an unenforced constitution is no constitution at all.

<sup>20</sup> Matthew 16:15

## Discipline or Separation

There are only two viable options for Presbyterians of integrity: We can reaffirm our Scriptural and constitutional standards, explicitly requiring subscription to essential tenets of Reformed faith and morals and initiating an orderly process of discipline to defend them, or we can honestly recognize that the Presbyterian Church (USA) encompasses irreconcilable faiths, and that integrity requires us to divide them into separate denominations.

The first option, sometimes referred to as “stay, fight and win,” is losing traction. Faithful Presbyterians have fought the battle for Biblical integrity numerous times over many years. There have been victories, but they continue to be undermined by a recalcitrant denominational infrastructure. Many Presbyterians who are committed to Reformed faith and polity have grown weary of fighting. Many have left the denomination, and many more are seeking an acceptable alternative. Some have simply left “in place.” Their names remain officially on the rolls, but they have cut off all support for the denomination and, for all practical purposes, they are no longer members of the denomination.<sup>21</sup> The result is a state of lethargy among once renewal-minded Presbyterians.

The second option has been considered in various forms, one of which surfaced as a “gracious separation” proposal to the *Presbyterian Coalition* on March 12, 2002. This option was then described as an orderly process for “demerging the Presbyterian Church (USA).” It was argued that the denomination is not the church, but merely a non-profit corporation, a legally recognized institution that was created by the mergers of earlier corporations; that separating corporations (“demerging”) when they no longer function as originally intended is a common practice in the business world; and that if Presbyterians of good will conclude that their different faiths will not allow them to live together with integrity, similar procedures could enable them to take leave of one another decently and in order.

The “gracious separation” proposal was a broad-brush stroke plan by which the creation of two new denominations could be peaceably accomplished. A reorganization task force could meet over a period of four years with a commitment by the General Assembly that no constitutional changes would be considered during that period. Two new corporate entities could be formed, neither claiming the name Presbyterian Church (USA). By congregational vote, each church would choose which one of the two new denominations it would join. The trustees of colleges, seminaries and other denominational institutions would choose the denomination with which they wished to affiliate. Pension funds would be divided in proportion to minister selections as to denominational affiliation. Assets held by the Presbyterian Church (USA) Foundation would be divided by two criteria: (1) donor instruction, and (2) if donor intent is not discernable, then in proportion to the membership of the two entities.

The board of the *Presbyterian Coalition* declined formally to adopt the “gracious separation” proposal in 2002. Since then, however, the conviction that the Presbyterian Church (USA) cannot continue in its current composition is growing rapidly among church members, including many who have historically identified with various renewal groups. Many faithful Presbyterians are convinced that separation – gracious or otherwise – is virtually inevitable. The only remaining questions are: when, how, and who will lead?

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<sup>21</sup> A version of this approach, heard among some evangelicals, holds the view that the “progressive” leadership of the denomination will one day disappear (some predict this will happen in 10 years) and that Presbyterians of orthodox faith should keep the faith locally and avoid precipitating a crisis that could result in denominational division while waiting for the inevitable “progressive” demise.

## The New Wineskins Initiative

In 2005, “a new way of being the Church” surfaced among Presbyterians who hoped to bridge the gap between “stay, fight and win” and “gracious separation” proponents. It was called the New Wineskins Initiative.

“The New Wineskins Initiative is an effort to articulate a vision for the future to which we believe God is calling the Presbyterian Church (USA),” declared its sponsors.<sup>22</sup> That vision included a decentralized denomination whose ordained leaders subscribe to specified “essential tenets of Reformed faith” and a “declaration of ethical imperatives.” The resulting configuration appeared more like a network than a denomination. Its members found unity, not by fiat from a hierarchical, denominational infrastructure, but by their commitment to common faith and ethics.

New Wineskins’ stated intention was to become a community of faith existing inside the Presbyterian Church (USA). But implicit in this arrangement was the understanding that two faiths cannot coexist indefinitely within one structure. Thus, New Wineskins leaders warned that should denominational governing bodies move more deeply and explicitly into pluralism, or should a precipitating event and/or General Assembly decision commit the denomination to policies that faithful Presbyterians find intolerable, the New Wineskins community would be forced to seek a home in another denomination.

In short, the New Wineskins Initiative was declaring that it would either be a force that resulted in denominational reform or it would become a launching pad for denominational departure.

The New Wineskins initiative met opposition from two entities, the Office of the General Assembly, whose stated clerk, Clifton Kirkpatrick refused to meet with New Wineskins leaders to discuss their proposed reforms, and *Presbyterians for Renewal*, whose then executive, Michael Walker, described the initiative as “schismatic” during a seminar that he led on behalf of the *Presbyterian Global Fellowship*.<sup>23</sup>

Sensing that the resistance they encountered was intractable, New Wineskins leaders created an exit strategy through which their churches could leave the Presbyterian Church (USA) and enter a newly organized New Wineskins Transitional Presbytery within the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Many of the initiative’s leading congregations have exercised that option.

## Can two faiths embrace one future?

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has institutionalized a culture of unbelief over a period of many decades, commencing in the 1920s, when its General Assembly ceased specifying “fundamentals of the faith” to which all ordained leaders were required to subscribe. The resulting adaptation to cultural mores has been gradual, and, for many persons in the pews, it has been virtually imperceptible. Evidence that it is occurring has periodically erupted in crises, each of which has numbed the membership’s theological and ethical discernment and set the stage for further erosion of what were once its distinctive beliefs and practices.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Following Christ into the 21st Century – Vision Statement – Wichita, Kansas: New Wineskins Initiative, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> *Presbyterians for Renewal*’s opposition to the New Wineskins Initiative in 2005 changed in 2008 when PFR unsuccessfully sought General Assembly approval of its own plan to create a separate evangelical enclave (17th synod) within the denomination. PFR is now endorsing an amended version of that proposal under the *Fellowship PC(USA)* banner which in many respects appears to be a copy of the 2005 New Wineskins plan.

<sup>24</sup> Some crisis examples are:

This erosion of faith and life has not come without cost. Since 1965, our denomination has lost more than two million members, more than half its membership. In recent years, the decline has accelerated, forcing the General Assembly Mission Council to make spending cuts, choosing drastically to slash its mission budget from approximately \$144 million in 2001 to \$87 million in 2011).

As the Presbyterian Church (USA) staggers under the impact of General Assembly policies, including the now ratified removal of sexual behavior standards from the constitution, the directors and staff of the Presbyterian Lay Committee believe God is calling us to remind Presbyterians of the price that we have already paid for pluralism. Continuing down that road by promoting further celebrations of inclusiveness and diversity, whether by “local option,” “two-synod,” “17th synod,” “evangelical enclave,” or other related proposals yet to surface will exacerbate division and accelerate the day of denominational demise.

Scripture is replete with challenges that call the faithful to make critical choices. Joshua said: “Choose you this day whom you will serve, whether the gods that your fathers served that were on the other side of the river or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”<sup>25</sup>

Jesus Christ said: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”<sup>26</sup>

There is no way to avoid choosing, for choosing not to choose is itself a choice. Institutionalists who hail from both left and right sides of the denominational spectrum argue that pluralism can save the Presbyterian Church (USA). But we believe God is calling us to turn aside such thinking as nonsensical and unfaithful.

The issue before us is clear: Two faiths cannot embrace one future.

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a) The human sexuality report of 1991, expounding the principle that all sexual activity among adults – whether marital or extramarital, heterosexual or homosexual – is good if it expresses “justice love” by un-coerced, mutual consent and is motivated by a sincere desire to please the partner. This report was rejected by the General Assembly, but its agencies and staff have continued to promulgate policies, programs, and publications that reflect this view of human sexuality as if it had been adopted by the General Assembly.

(b) The denominationally-supported Re-Imagining god conference of 1993, whose themes were rejected by the 1994 General Assembly, but repeatedly resurfaced in materials published by the denominational infrastructure as if they had been adopted by the General Assembly.

(c) Persistent attacks upon and failure to enforce the denomination’s ordination standards, often with the complicity of staff of the General Assembly and of intermediate governing bodies.

(d) “Building Community Among Strangers,” a paper by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy suggesting that all faiths are equal, was rejected by the 1998 General Assembly, but its themes have repeatedly resurfaced in materials published by the denominational infrastructure as if they had been adopted by the General Assembly.

(e) In a keynote speech at the denominationally sponsored peacemaking conference in 2000, Rev. Dirk Ficca asked “What’s the big deal about Jesus?” promoting the theme that exclusive claims about Jesus undermine world peace. The General Assembly Council and subsequent General Assembly refused to denounce this theme and declined to adopt a statement declaring that salvation may only be found in Jesus Christ. Under intense political pressure, the subsequent General Assembly adopted an improved statement, but its implementation has been continuously undermined by the denominational infrastructure as if it had never been adopted by the General Assembly.

<sup>25</sup> Joshua 24:15

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 6:24

## The Presbyterian Lay Committee

The mission of the Presbyterian Lay Committee since 1965 is to inform and equip God's people by proclaiming Jesus Christ alone as:

- The Way of salvation.
- The Truth of God's Word.
- The Life of discipleship.

Its objectives are:

1. To provide reliable information and resources concerning significant issues confronting the PCUSA and the Church Universal, thereby equipping and empowering faithful congregations and leaders in the PCUSA and other denominations to fulfill the Great Commission in the 21st century.
2. To inform and equip congregations and leaders in the PCUSA and other denominations concerning the urgency for greater emphasis on the teaching of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God and regular Bible study and prayer.
3. To inform and equip congregations and leaders in the PCUSA and other denominations concerning the urgency of presenting Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior through preaching, teaching and witnessing, with evangelical zeal, as the primary mission of the Church.
4. To inform and equip individual Christians in the PCUSA and other denominations to engage the ethical and moral issues in cultural, economic and political affairs as Christ's active disciples.

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## THANK YOU!

We hope you have benefited from this resource published by the Presbyterian Lay Committee. As our gift to you, we have made it available in a variety of formats so that you can obtain additional copies.

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