



PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)

GENERAL ASSEMBLY COUNCIL

June 12, 2007

Dear Executive Presbyters and Stated Clerks:

We are grateful for the leadership you provide to your governing body and to the whole church. We are also grateful for the ways we in the General Assembly Council and the Office of the General Assembly are able to work with you in the ministry and mission of the church. One way we can be of service to you is by providing resources that may be helpful, especially as you deal with congregations in conflict.

The New Wineskins Association of Churches has circulated material that mis-characterizes central convictions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s faith and life. This material appears on the NWAC web site, as well as in direct communication with some congregations. A number of presbytery executives and stated clerks have asked us to outline the church's position on these matters.

We attach a document, "The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ Her Lord," prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, that sets forth the church's convictions. This document, which will also be posted on the PCUSA web site, beginning with [www.pcusa.org/mgbconnect](http://www.pcusa.org/mgbconnect), is in two parts: a one-page summary and an expanded commentary.

We recognize that most of our congregations are not focused on New Wineskins or the statements being made about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We are simply making this resource available for those who seek to interpret accurately the positions of our church. Please feel free to distribute it as you deem helpful.

We encourage your comments, feedback, and questions – especially your thoughts about how we can be helpful to you and the whole church as we seek to reach out to those who believe that the church is moving in troubling directions. Please send your comments to [taw@ctr.pcusa.org](mailto:taw@ctr.pcusa.org).

We are grateful for so many Presbyterian leaders who are working hard and faithfully in this time of confusion and conflict. You are in our prayers.

In Christ,

Linda Valentine  
Executive Director, General Assembly Council

Clifton Kirkpatrick  
Stated Clerk

## **“The Church’s One Foundation is Jesus Christ Her Lord”**

Prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, General Assembly Council

The New Wineskins Association of Churches has raised significant questions about the faith and mission of the church that every Presbyterian should take seriously. NWAC has presented its case in *A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven: Report of the Strategy Team of the New Wineskins Association of Churches*. Unfortunately, in advancing their case New Wineskins has presented the positions of the PCUSA inaccurately. As they consider the analysis of NWAC, all Presbyterians deserve to know the defined positions of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

### **Has the PCUSA abandoned a faithful confession of Jesus as Lord?**

No. In the *Confession of 1967* the Presbyterian Church proclaims that “Jesus Christ is God with man. He is the eternal Son of the Father, who became man and lived among us to fulfill the work of reconciliation. . . . The risen Christ is the savior for all men.” However, in 2000-2002 the consistent faith of the church faced a challenge: What does it mean to acknowledge that “every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord . . .” in our day? The 214<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2002) overwhelmingly affirmed the full theological statement, *Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ*. At the heart of that statement is the proclamation that, “Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him.”

### **Has the PCUSA exhibited a loss of biblical authority?**

No. The Book of Confessions is remarkably consistent in the way it speaks of the authority of Scripture. Recent confessions are no less clear than Reformation confessions: “The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel” [Confession of 1967]. The reuniting General Assembly declared in 1983 that, “Scripture has its source in none other than God. Reformed confessions stress that the source of biblical authority is God alone . . .”

### **Has the PCUSA adopted modernist, unscriptural definitions of the nature of the Trinity?**

No. There has been concern across the PCUSA that 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2006) substituted human ingenuity for scriptural revelation in expressing the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, *The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing*, states that “we know the great love of the God who is three-in-one and one-in-three truly, tangibly, and decisively only through God’s own self-gift in the person and work of Jesus Christ and in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.” Further it affirms that “the church declares in its doctrine of the Trinity that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are, together with God the Father, fully and eternally God,” and that, “The language of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, rooted in Scripture and creed, remains an indispensable anchor for our efforts to speak faithfully of God.”

### **What does the PCUSA believe about the ordination of women?**

The PCUSA has strongly affirmed the ordination of women to ministry of the Word and Sacrament for over fifty years. Twenty years ago the PCUSA raised the ordination of women to confessional status: “The same Spirit . . . calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.” [A Brief Statement of Faith]

### **Has the PCUSA effectively abandoned ordination standards?**

No. Each governing body is required to determine if a candidate for ordination has departed from a standard of faith or practice, and if that departure violates an “essential” of the faith. Such determinations may not contravene the constitution, however, and continue to be subject to review and correction by higher governing bodies. Despite reports to the contrary, 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.

### **What is the PCUSA’s position on abortion?**

The PCUSA has addressed issues of abortion repeatedly. The 204<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1992) stated that, “The strong Christian presumption is that since all life is precious to God, we are to preserve and protect it. Abortion ought to be an option of last resort. The large number of abortions in this society is a grave concern to the church.” [“Do Justice, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly”] The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has repeatedly affirmed the sanctity of life, adoption as a viable alternative to abortion, and the provision of pastoral care and support for women facing difficult decisions surrounding problematic pregnancies. The church has also affirmed that no law should impose criminal penalties on a woman who chooses or a physician who performs a medically safe abortion.

## **“The Church’s One Foundation is Jesus Christ Her Lord”**

### **Background and Commentary**

Prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, General Assembly Council

*A Time for Every Purpose Under Heaven: Report of the Strategy Team of the New Wineskins Association of Churches*, states that theological and missional considerations lead to the New Wineskins strategy: “A New Thing Fosters a Cohesive Theological Identity.”

The leadership of NWAC offers two broad theological rationales for the strategy:

- *A Missional Consideration:* NWAC believes that the media characterize continuing theological and ethical debates in the PCUSA as “liberal vs. fundamentalist.”

*Barrier to Mission:* This characterization is an encumbrance upon the mission of congregations striving to attract orthodox, biblically faithful Christians to their membership and witnessing to non-Christians who are seeking the truth of Christ.

- *A Doctrinal Consideration:* Because NWAC affirms the Reformed conviction that splits within Christian communities over non-essential matters is the sin of schism, they identify three “essentials” that justify their separation from the PCUSA. They believe that the denomination has experienced a confessional drift over the past 25 years on essentials of faith and practice:

*Trinity:* NWAC asserts that the PCUSA has adopted “modernist unscriptural definitions of the nature of the Trinity.”

*Christology:* NWAC asserts that the PCUSA has diluted its position on the divinity of Jesus, abandoning Christ’s own words and equivocating on whether he is the only way to the Father.

*Ordination Standards:* NWAC asserts that the church has departed from “a firm reliance on the authority of Scripture,” and thus is “effectively abandoning ordination standards.”

NWAC cites these doctrinal considerations – in addition to congregational, legal, and strategic considerations – as reasons to “recommend the Biblical solution of separation from our present denomination.” This recommendation is said to be in the Spirit of John Calvin: “It was necessary for us to withdraw from them in order to approach to Christ.”

In addressing the questions NWAC raises, we must acknowledge that there is always a gap between any denomination’s official positions and the views and practices of some ministers and members of that denomination. For example, to say that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) unequivocally proclaims the Lordship of Jesus Christ does not assure that all PCUSA members and ordained officers believe it in their hearts. Nevertheless, the General Assembly and all its entities are bound by official positions of the church, and all ministers, elders, and deacons make vows concerning Scripture, the confessions, and the church’s polity.

### **Theological disputes in the PCUSA and effectiveness in mission**

There is widespread agreement throughout the PCUSA that our church needs to be “a community of people known by its convictions as well as by its actions” [G-2.0100b]. There is also widespread agreement that the energy, time, and money that have been poured into intra-PCUSA theological and ethical battles over the past three decades could have been used for more faithful purposes. Media coverage of the PCUSA has focused on our internal struggles, and it can be embarrassing to encounter reports of PCUSA controversies. Simplified, sensational coverage results both from the nature of the media and the politicized PCUSA atmosphere that fosters

exaggerated characterizations of opponents' positions. When the media cover our debates, they hear talking points that emphasize polar opposition and so their reports focus on our remarkably fractured debates. The irony in NWAC's description of church disputes and the ways these disputes impair mission is that NWAC itself declares the PCUSA "apostate" (notably in the media), while decrying the fact that media reports of "apostate stances" of the PCUSA impede the church's mission.

### **The PCUSA has not adopted modernist, unscriptural definitions of the nature of the Trinity**

The controversy surrounding "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing" has obscured some critically important matters. Several observations must be made:

- The General Assembly did not "adopt" the Trinity report. It even declined to "approve" it. Instead, uneasiness with some of the report's discussion of language led the Assembly merely to "receive" it, the weakest action short of rejection. While any General Assembly Report has some standing in the church regardless of its official status, the Trinity report is not and never has been denominational policy.
- The "definition" of the Trinity in the report is scrupulously orthodox: "Against the views of modalism and subordinationism the church declares in its doctrine of the Trinity that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are, together with God the Father, fully and eternally God. Together with the Nicene Creed, the Trinity report affirms that Jesus Christ is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God," and that the Holy Spirit is to be worshiped and glorified as "the Lord, the giver of life."
- The controversy concerning the report is focused almost exclusively on two sections that explore Trinitarian imagery, drawing on language that is found in the theology and practice of the church during its first five centuries. The Trinitarian images suggested in the report are not to be used as substitutes for "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." The church's scriptural and confessional language is "anchor" and "root" of all language for God. Furthermore, the Trinity report explicitly reaffirms the necessity of the Scriptural and constitutional baptismal formula: "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In addition, however, the report also recognizes an ancient tradition, dating back to at least A.D. 110, of three-fold imagery that highlights particular aspects of the character and work of the Triune God. These triads can expand our appreciation of the work of God, yet they are limited in scope. The language of these triads is often simply functional – an appropriate way to speak of the Trinity as long as it does not substitute for personal language. Such use of language is as familiar as the last line of verse three of the beloved hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy."

Holy, holy, holy! though the darkness hide Thee,  
Though the eye of sinfulness Thy glory may not see,  
Only Thou art holy; there is none beside Thee  
Perfect in power, in love and purity.

Interestingly, such imagery is also used in the New Wineskins Association's own affirmation of the Triune God, "The LORD our God is One who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

- Members of the task force that prepared "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing" were confident that they had been clear about the intended modest use of the expanded Trinitarian language suggested in the report. However, it is now apparent that the report should have been far more precise in stating that the Trinitarian images suggested in the report are not to be used as substitutes for "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." The report should have provided a rationale for the Trinitarian imagery that was unambiguous about the appropriate use of such imagery.

- The Office of Theology and Worship has prepared materials for a churchwide study of the doctrine of the Trinity that may lead to clarifying revisions of the report for consideration by a future General Assembly.

### **The PCUSA has not abandoned a faithful confession of Jesus as Lord**

The New Wineskins leadership consistently emphasizes the events of 2000-2001 as the lynchpin of their argument that the PCUSA is in theological and missional decline. NWAC sees the failure of the 213<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2001) to affirm the “singular saving Lordship of Jesus Christ” as a refusal to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. Two points must be made concerning the 2001 and 2002 assemblies:

1. The phrase the 2001 Assembly chose not to affirm – the “singular saving Lordship” of Christ – is not language that draws from the deep wells of Scripture, the confessions, or the theological tradition of the church. It is, in fact, a recent, novel expression of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The fact that a PCUSA General Assembly did not adopt this new formulation, using instead the language of *The Book of Confessions* (“unique,” Second Helvetic Confession, 5.077) certainly does not indicate an unfaithful confession of Jesus as Lord.
2. That said, the action of the 213<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2001) failed to quell concerns that the PCUSA had not sufficiently affirmed the Lordship of Christ. In response, the 214<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2002) affirmed the document “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ” by the overwhelming margin of 497-11-5. “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ” affirms the Saving Lordship of Jesus Christ in unmistakable declarations:

Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him. No one is saved by virtue of inherent goodness or admirable living, for “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” [Ephesians 2:8]. No one is saved apart from God’s gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of “God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” [1 Timothy 2:4]. Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine. [lines 155-168]

This statement has received deep appreciation and approval throughout the PCUSA, clearly proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the Reformed understanding of salvation.

### **The PCUSA does not exhibit a loss of biblical authority**

In the New Wineskins *Strategy*, the loss of biblical authority in the PCUSA is linked to adoption of the Confession of 1967. While it is true that the preliminary statement on biblical authority in the proposed draft of the Confession of 1967 caused alarm, the revised, approved, constitutional text demonstrates full confidence in the authority of scripture:

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel. [9.27]

The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the

words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos that were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture. [9.29]

God's word is spoken to his church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit and with readiness to receive their truth and direction. [9.30]

If some Presbyterians engage in interpretations of the scripture that are "completely subject to individual whims," such interpretations are made in spite of the clear meaning of the Confession of 1967, not because of it.

### **The PCUSA has not abandoned its ordination standards**

The effects of the General Assembly's adoption of the report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church are not yet fully known. However, it is clear that the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2006) retained the ordination standards of G-6.0106 and lifted up the historic responsibility of governing bodies to examine rigorously every candidate for minister, elder, and deacon, considering whether each is qualified and called, and whether each adheres to the essentials of Reformed faith and practice.

Despite reports to the contrary, 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 is now required to determine if a candidate for ordination has departed from a constitutional standard of faith or practice, and if that departure violates an "essential" of the faith. These determinations continue to be subject to review and correction by higher governing bodies.

The most dramatic immediate affect of the adoption of this report is that presbyteries and sessions across the denomination are carrying out their examination responsibilities with renewed thoroughness.

### **The church's ministers and members**

The New Wineskins Association of Churches has raised questions about the faith and mission of the church that must be dealt with seriously. However, the confessional and constitutional theology and practice of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) cannot be fairly censured with the careless charge of "apostasy." Neither can the whole church be held responsible for every departure from its standards voiced by individual ministers, elders, deacons, and members. Let us all strive to recover the original purpose of governing bodies as settings of mutual responsibility and accountability in which faithful discourse deepens the church's beliefs and focuses the church's mission.

*If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*

- *Philippians 2:1-2*