

**Executive Presbyter's Report to the Presbytery of Grand Canyon
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Fort Defiance Presbyterian Church, Fort Defiance, Arizona
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A major storm is bearing down on the Presbyterian Church (USA), and we need to get ready. High winds have been buffeting the church for years, and they are growing in intensity. Denomination watchers are predicting the greatest impact of the storm will occur next June in Birmingham, Alabama. That is the time and place of the 217th General Assembly. This report is offered as advance warning, calling on the Presbytery of Grand Canyon to prepare for the aftereffects of whatever happens at Birmingham next June.

Already the Office of the General Assembly has received four overtures to remove G-6.0106b from the *Book of Order* and another to make defunct the 1978 Definitive Guidance with regard to ordination of homosexual people. Santa Fe Presbytery is sending an overture to restrict the filing of disciplinary actions to those directly affected, rather than by people in distant presbyteries who have never met the accused.

Presbyterians for Renewal is floating a proposal for an overture that GA make no changes in the *Book of Order* until 2016. Overtures dealing with abortion will undoubtedly come before the commissioners next June. One presbytery has already sent an overture directing GA to cease membership in and financial support for any organization that supports abortion rights. A group rising out of the Presbyterian Coalition is looking for sympathetic presbyteries to send overtures to GA in support of something called the New Wineskins Initiative. I'll have more to say about that in a moment.

And the long awaited report of the denomination's Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church will be presented to the Assembly. Amid these turbulent waters, speculation is rife about a coming schism in our denomination. A good deal of that schismatic speculation is reported in the *Presbyterian Layman*.

The *Layman* recently published a booklet entitled "Can Two Faiths Embrace One Future?" The message of that booklet contrasts significantly with the recently released report of the Peace Unity and Purity task force.

Here's what the *Layman* has to say about the prospects for schism: "There are only two viable options for Presbyterians of integrity: We can affirm 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." [p. 15] The *Layman* goes on to assert: "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." [p. 18]

The Peace Unity and Purity task force has a clearly different message to the church. The PUP report says: "The task force believes that the Presbyterian Church (USA) is called to hold together in one body. We do not deny that differences in the church are deep and important. Even in our small task force, we are far apart on some issues despite intense engagement together in discernment over nearly four years. At the

same time, both in our own fellowship and in the church whose diversity we were chosen to represent, we have discovered more agreement than disagreement... Each of us on the task force still thinks that some positions others among us hold are incorrect, even damaging to the church and the clarity of its message. Yet we have come to respect the integrity with which theological views different from our own are held... Therefore, the task force has concluded that, despite disagreements, the Presbyterian Church (USA) should make every effort to prevent schism.” [p. 28]

Which of these different approaches seems more extreme? The *Layman's* call for strict doctrinal subscription to rein in what is paints as a “culture of unbelief” or the PUP task force’s call to respect the integrity of people with differing beliefs and appreciate the greater areas of mutual agreement? The *Layman* sees two scenarios: rigid doctrinal enforcement or schism. The PUP task force envisions a third way: take on the hard work of reconciling ourselves to God and one another.

Incidentally, the *Layman* has consistently demanded strict enforcement of G-6.0106b, the fidelity and chastity paragraph. But when it comes to G-8, the *Book of Order* chapter on church property, it provides encouragement to churches that are looking for ways to get around the clear language and intent of the constitution. In light of the *Layman's* strong calls for enforcement of the church’s constitution, the word hypocrisy comes to mind regarding this convenient inconsistency.

With all this talk about splitting the denomination, we need to do some reflecting on the consequences of schism. A large portion of this presbytery’s budget goes to direct financial support for our congregations. We have the greatest concentration of Native American congregations in the denomination, and this represents a historically vital mission. The presbytery, with help from synod and General Assembly, has bought land for most of the new churches developed in the last half century, and has invested millions of dollars and countless hours of human energy in developing new churches and helping older congregations to grow and renew. And with the population boom in Arizona, Christ’s yoke has been placed upon us to develop even more new congregations. Schism would have a severely negative economic effect on the mission commitments of this presbytery.

Any church in Grand Canyon Presbytery that would vote to leave the denomination and (with the encouragement of the *Layman*) seek to take the church land and buildings with them without compensation would be harming the mission of the presbytery and robbing our aid receiving churches.

As Executive Presbyter, I have a responsibility to protect the presbytery from the effects of schismatic movements. And it is fitting that I make this pledge at Fort Defiance, because it is our Native American churches that would be most hurt by division. I will do everything I know how to prevent congregations from leaving the Presbytery of Grand Canyon. But if any should decide by proper vote to depart from the PC(USA), let there be no secession without compensation! I pledge to work hard to protect the historic mission of this presbytery from the economic ravages of schism.

And now I want to speak about the New Wineskins Initiative. The New Wineskins Initiative is a movement that arose out of the Presbyterian Coalition. Its supporters are intent upon what they see as renewing the denomination, and surely they are full of youthful zeal for the gospel and abundant creative energy. They have reimaged the PC(USA) with an entirely new structure that essentially reverses the

historic pattern we have known for centuries. For most of our history, we have operated with strong covenants to do ministry and mission together in a mutually accountable way, but we have avoided specifying exactly what the essential tenets are. We have provided a good deal of room for individual conscience and presbytery discernment concerning acceptable doctrinal beliefs.

New Wineskins proposes just the opposite, a new PC(USA) structure with essentially congregationalist polity when it comes to mission and day-to-day ecclesiastical functioning. But with regard to doctrine, the New Wineskins PC(USA) is strictly subscriptionist. They have published a list of ten essential tenets and thirteen ethical imperatives to which all deacons, elders, and ministers of Word and Sacrament must subscribe. It would require an entire report to the presbytery to critique adequately these essentials, but for now I will say that although I could easily assent to much of what they have published, there are too many significant declarations I could not in good conscience subscribe to. And in that regard I know I'm not alone in this sanctuary. My guess is that if we were all honest about it, most of us could not subscribe to all the New Wineskins doctrinal requirements. Which means that if their reimagined denomination were to come to pass, most of us would either have to lie about it or be out on our duffs.

Now I respect the enthusiasm and strength of convictions of these New Wineskins folk. And it's only natural that they would want everybody else in the denomination to believe what they believe. But everyone does not; nor should they. The problem is not the content of the New Wineskins tenets and ethical imperatives. However clumsily expressed, these tenets and imperatives represent the authentic faith of the writers, and they certainly reflect historic elements within the Reformed Tradition. The problem is forced subscription. Not all of these particular tenets are believed to be essential by a large portion of ordained officers in the PC(USA). Many among us understand the world, the scriptures, and God with far more nuances and complexities than the authors of the New Wineskins documents. And I'm not referring only to progressives and moderates. Many evangelical Presbyterians hold to a faith that is broader and deeper than the essential New Wineskins tenets.

And in the context of the vibrant theological work being done in the Office of Theology and Worship at GA and by Presbyterian theologians around the country, these reforms proposed by the New Wineskins people feel like hardening of the theological arteries. This does not seem like a good way to bring new life to our denomination. Doing theology by checklist is clearly inadequate. And reform by heresy trial and purge implicit in this proposal is frightening.

Religious doctrines are not facts. Ideally, they are edifying guides to the faith. They are important but not impervious to reform. Indeed, Christians have been proclaiming, disputing, and changing doctrines for two millennia.

When it comes to theology and doctrine, the Presbyterian Church (USA) occupies a big tent. And everyone representing the broad spectrum of Reformed thinking deserves a safe place inside our tent. Evangelicals and progressives alike should be able to find comfort and nurture within. If we want to purge heretics, there are enough of them on both the theological left and the right. But we need to exercise great care and engage in lengthy, humble prayer before expelling anyone on doctrinal grounds. Heresy trials have a way of dampening enthusiasm for evangelism.

The New Wineskins supporters may not be aware of it, but their effort to enforce an awkward orthodoxy, as reflected in their lists of essentials, casts a chilling pall on the mission and ministry of our denomination. Some may be justifiably delighted at the prospect of my departure from the PC(USA) if the New Wineskins Initiative should succeed in taking control. An editorial in the *Layman* last month said: “Don’t prejudice the initiative because a presbytery executive, a member of the denomination’s national staff or even a renewal group harrumphs.” [8-8-05 web posting]

But this is not about me or my church employment. By the time their proposal for denominational control could work its way through our system, I’d be ready to retire with a full pension. This about the future of our beloved church. And it’s not just me harrumphing. If the PC(USA) should become a subscriptionist denomination, the exodus out the back door would be thunderous, and those remaining would be deeply wounded and saddled with huge institutional financial burdens. If the New Wineskins supporters succeed in winning control of the church, they will find themselves presiding over a pile of dry limbs, because the trunk will have been destroyed, and the life-giving Reformed roots will have been crushed by their efforts.

There has been a good deal of speculation that the likelihood of the New Wineskins Initiative gaining control of the PC(USA) is somewhere between low and non-existent. Therefore, the real goal of this group must be something else; perhaps the shadow denomination members of the Presbyterian Coalition have spoken of. The *Layman* reports: “Some New Wineskins Initiative leaders say they are hopeful that ‘stay, fight, and win’ forces might regain control of the current denominational structure and then, by a chain of constitutional amendments, configure it into conformity with the New Wineskins vision. But they have not ruled out the possibility that congregations that are committed to theological integrity will choose to leave the Presbyterian Church (USA) and could find in the New Wineskins vision a community of faith they could call home.” [*Can Two Faiths*, p. 17]

The *Layman* confirmed that New Wineskins leaders, “seek to put in place an entity that is committed to the New Wineskins vision, including its theological and ethical imperatives. Their intention is that this can become a community of faith, currently existing inside the Presbyterian Church (USA) denominational structure... Should a precipitating event and/or General Assembly decision commit the denomination to policies that faithful Presbyterians find intolerable, then the New Wineskins community could become a functional alternative.” [*Can Two Faiths*, p. 17] In other words, if they don’t get their own way, the New Wineskins folk will take their toys and go somewhere else.

Many New Wineskins supporters have made it clear that somewhere else does not include other splinter Presbyterian denominations. If they split, it would be to form a brand new denomination. My question is why? If biblical theology and Reformed doctrine were as certain, clear, and obvious as they maintain, why are there so many splinter Presbyterian denominations? Why isn’t there just one orthodox evangelical Presbyterian denomination instead of the Presbyterian Church in America, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Bible Presbyterian Church, Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, and so on?

Why can't these ostensibly orthodox denominations unite in one consistent witness? And why would unhappy evangelicals in the PC(USA) need to form yet another splinter denomination instead of joining one of the existing evangelical options? If ordination of women is the issue, the EPC allows that. The reality is there is no such thing as a pure church. The existence of all these schismatic denominations desperately searching for that illusive purity attests to this reality.

I want to address one more issue that various advocacy groups rightly call attention to. The PC(USA) continues to lose members. Letters to the *Layman* claim the losses are due to departure from orthodox doctrine and that people are leaving to join more conservative churches. Some are. But indications are that we are losing far more people to secular culture. When people perceive the church as irrelevant, they stop coming. We are losing people who see the denomination as an anachronistic vestige mired in 17th century doctrinal arguments. They wouldn't use those particular words to describe their unease, but that's what it boils down to. We are losing many of our children, too, who are fed up with what they see as the hypocrisy of the church. And we are losing people who are bored out of their skulls with shallow sermons and haphazard worship.

And yet we continue to receive a steady stream of new members. Many are coming to us as refugees from authoritarian denominations of both hierarchical and congregational persuasions. What will we say to those who have found spiritual refuge here if we become like the churches they left? April Fools! We were only pretending to be a broad-based, tolerant church. We don't really respect your doubts and scruples after all!

The ethos of our denomination is not one of comfort with absolute answers to questions of faith. Presbyterians are people of strong conviction tempered with humility. Theological learning is a life-long endeavor for us. We expect that the content of the faith of an octogenarian will be fuller, deeper, and changed from that of a newly confirmed teenager. Both will have doubts, but they will be about different things. Being a broadly inclusive church is not easy, of course. But when has being Presbyterian ever been about what's easy? If we want to survive and thrive, we have to keep our minds, hearts, essential tenets, and church doors open.

Thank you for listening.