



The Presbyterian Panel

Listening to Presbyterians



SUMMARY

ISSUES IN THE PC(USA) FINDINGS FROM THE MAY 2006 SURVEY

The Presbyterian Panel consists of three nationally representative samples of groups affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): members, elders serving on session (lay leaders), and ordained ministers. For most analyses, ministers are split into two groups based on current call: *pastors*, serving congregations, and *specialized clergy*, serving elsewhere. New samples are drawn every three years. These pages summarize major findings from the third survey completed by the 2006-2008 Panel, sampled in the fall of 2005.

IN THIS SUMMARY

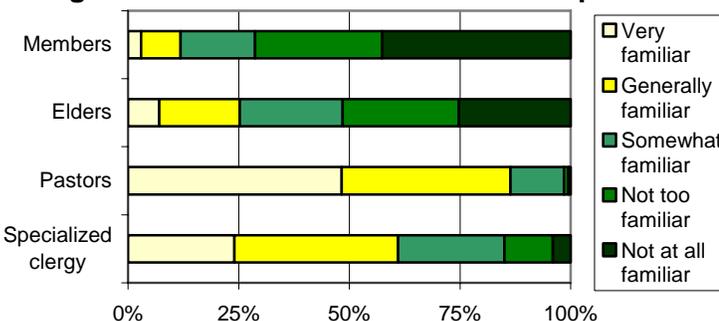
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THEOLOGICAL TASK FORCE ON PEACE, UNITY, AND PURITY

Awareness of the Task Force Report

- ✓ Few members (12%) and elders (25%) but most pastors (86%) and specialized clergy (61%) are “very familiar” or “generally familiar” with the report of the “Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church.” Overall, 43%, 25%, <0.5%, and 4%, respectively, are “not at all familiar” with the report.

Figure 1. Awareness of Task Force Report



- ✓ Few members (6%) or elders (15%) but most pastors (72%) and four in ten specialized clergy (41%) have read “most or all of the report” of the task force, issued in September 2005. Another 8%, 22%, 23%, and 33%, respectively, have read some of it.
- ✓ Other ways that panelists had learned about the report and the percentage who had done so include:
 - read press accounts (members, 22%; elders, 28%; pastors, 83%; specialized clergy, 64%)
 - met with or listened to a member of the task force talk about the report (7%; 11%; 68%; 40%)
 - read or heard accounts of the task force before they issued the report (11%; 18%; 77%; 50%)

Concern with Task Force Topics

- ✓ Besides church conflict in general, the task force was assigned by the General Assembly to deal with four topics. Those topics, and the percentage of panelists who are “very concerned” or “generally concerned” about each, are:
 - the role of Jesus Christ in salvation (members, 73%; elders, 79%; pastors, 80%; specialized clergy, 63%)
 - how to interpret the Bible (73%; 78%; 85%; 78%)
 - what standards the church should have on sexuality and ordination (79%; 84%; 86%; 77%)
 - how power is exercised in the church (75%; 80%; 88%; 85%)

Awareness of Affinity Group Positions

- ✓ Several PC(USA) affinity groups (informally associated but not official church bodies) took positions on the task force report. Few laity are aware of the positions of eight such groups—the most, 15% of members and 24% of elders, for that taken by the “Presbyterian Lay Committee/*Presbyterian Layman*.”
- ✓ More ministers, especially pastors, indicate awareness of group stands. However, besides the Lay Committee (aware of stand: pastors, 76%; specialized clergy, 51%), a majority of both pastors and specialized clergy are aware of the stand of only one other group: the Covenant Network (72%; 59%). A majority of pastors are also aware of the stands of Presbyterians for Renewal (68%), the Presbyterian Coalition (63%), and More Light Presbyterians (52%).

Conflict in the Church

- ✓ Large majorities “strongly agree” or “agree” that “conflict in the church is inevitable” (members, 83%; elders, 84%; pastors, 92%; specialized clergy, 94%).
- ✓ Small majorities of laity “strongly agree” or “agree” that “conflict in the church tears the body of Christ and should be ended” (members, 51%; elders, 52%), compared to 34% of pastors and 37% of specialized clergy. In fact, around half of both minister groups “strongly disagree” or “disagree” (49%; 53%).

Paths to Peace

- ✓ Majorities “strongly agree” or “agree” that “Presbyterians should step back from controversies that threaten the peace, unity, and purity of the church and take time to seek the truth together” (members, 62%; elders, 67%; pastors, 62%; specialized clergy, 70%).
- ✓ One possible response by governing bodies to ongoing conflicts in the church—forming groups “representing diverse views to engage in intensive discernment about those conflicts”—is supported by sizable majorities (“strongly agree” or “agree”): members, 67%; elders, 66%; pastors, 62%; specialized clergy, 68%).
- ✓ Large majorities “strongly agree” or “agree” that “all church members should conciliate, mediate, and adjust differences without strife, prayerfully and deliberately, and institute administrative or judicial proceedings only when other efforts fail” (members, 79%; elders, 79%; pastors, 81%; specialized clergy, 85%).

Splitting the Church

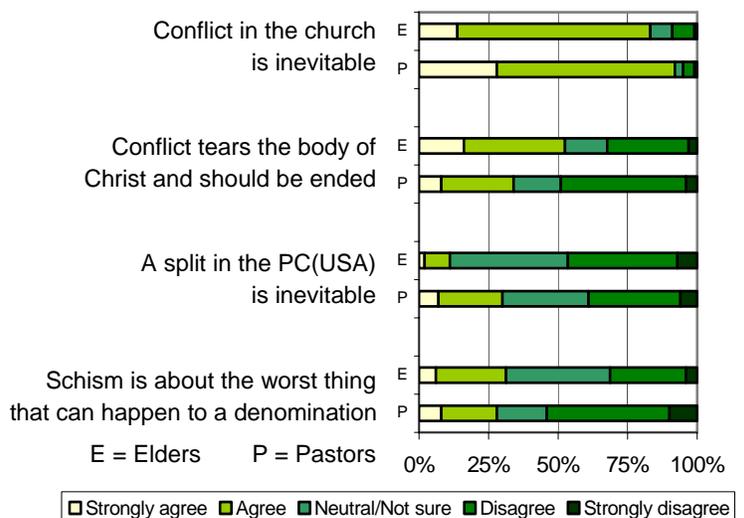
- ✓ Few laity (members, 11%; elders, 11%) and specialized clergy (16%) but three in ten pastors (30%) “strongly agree” or “agree” that “a split in the PC(USA) is inevitable.” And few desire such an outcome: only 19%, 19%, 22%, and 31%, respectively, “strongly agree” or “agree” that “the church would be better off if there were a gracious separation of opposing parties [on controversial issues].”
- ✓ A large segment of each Panel group responds “neutral or not sure” to the statement “If controversy in the PC(USA) continues, we will lose a few members, but there will not be a large split” (members, 45%; elders, 46%; pastors, 37%; specialized clergy, 46%). Of laity with an opinion, more “strongly agree” or “agree” (e.g., members, 37%) than “strongly disagree” or “disagree” (19%); the opposite is true of pastors (24%; 39%), and specialized clergy are evenly split (28%; 26%).

- ✓ To the statement “Schism is about the worst thing that can happen to a denomination,” laity are evenly split between “strongly agree” or “agree” (members, 33%; elders, 31%), “strongly disagree” or “disagree” (33%; 31%), and “neutral or not sure” (35%; 37%). Among ministers, however, many more “strongly disagree” or “disagree” (pastors, 54%; specialized clergy, 50%) than “strongly agree” or “agree” (28%; 33%).

Unity in Diversity

- ✓ To the statement “Despite our differences, people from the whole spectrum of positions on contested issues are called to be part of the PC(USA),” large majorities “strongly agree” or “agree”: members, 72%; elders, 76%; pastors, 85%; specialized clergy, 84%.
- ✓ However, many fewer are in agreement with a related statement: “In general, Presbyterians on all sides of the debate on sexuality, ordination, and same-sex relationships are sincere and trying to be guided by Scripture” (members, 47%; elders, 44%; pastors, 55%; specialized clergy 59%).
- ✓ Around two in three panelists “strongly agree” or “agree” that “every member of the PC(USA) should try to live in harmony with other members of the denomination and avoid actions that might divide the PC(USA)” (members, 68%; elders, 62%; pastors, 63%; specialized clergy, 67%).
- ✓ Nevertheless, fewer “strongly agree” or “agree” with the statement “The church should be united on a few essentials, and not worry about other differences” (members, 44%; elders, 42%; pastors, 53%; specialized clergy, 65%).

Figure 2. Opinions on Conflict and Schism



ORDINATION STANDARDS, ESSENTIALS OF FAITH, AND PURITY

Ordination Standards

- ✓ By majorities of 80% or more, panelists “strongly agree” or “agree” that “the standards for ordination of church officers set forth in the church’s constitution apply to the whole of the PC(USA)” (members, 81%; elders, 87%; pastors, 87%; specialized clergy, 80%).
- ✓ Similar-sized majorities “strongly agree” or “agree” that “ordaining and installing bodies have the responsibility to apply constitutional standards when examining candidates for ordination” (members, 84%; elders, 86%; pastors, 94%; specialized clergy, 88%).
- ✓ Many fewer, however, “strongly agree” or “agree” that “when an ordination candidate disagrees with one of the church’s constitutional standards, ordination should still be allowed to proceed if the disagreement is not over an essential tenet of Reformed faith or polity” (members, 39%; elders, 37%; pastors, 49%; specialized clergy, 56%).

Reviewing Ordination Decisions

- ✓ Large majorities “strongly agree” or “agree” that “higher governing bodies have a right to review whether lower governing bodies were reasonable, prayerful, and deliberate in examining candidates for ordination and installation” (members, 72%; elders, 69%; pastors, 87%; specialized clergy, 81%).

Defining Essentials of Faith

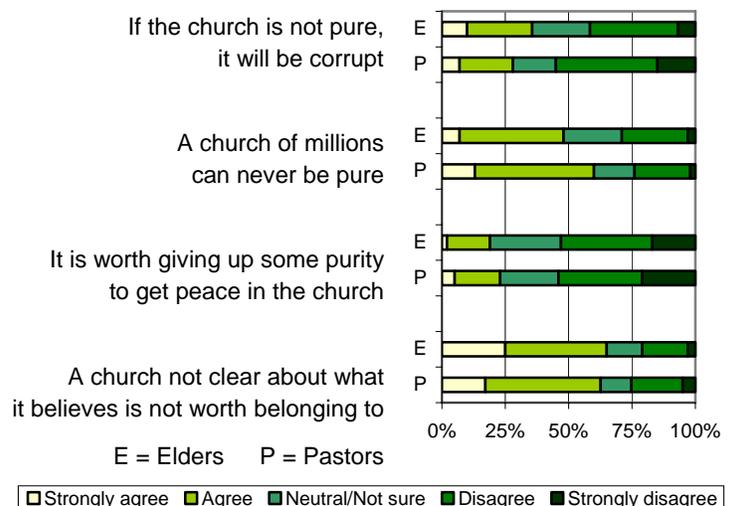
- ✓ Should “the church’s constitution specify the essential tenets of the Reformed faith, rather than leaving it up to ordaining bodies to discern them on a case-by-case basis”? Among laity, four in ten are “neutral or not sure” (members, 44%; elders, 41%), but overall, more “strongly favor” or “favor” this idea (37%; 38%) than “strongly oppose” or “oppose” it (19%; 21%).
- ✓ On the same proposal, more pastors “strongly favor” or “favor” the idea (44%) than “strongly oppose” or “oppose” it (36%), while the reverse is true among specialized clergy (31%; 48%). Around one in five in both groups are “neutral or not sure” (18%; 21%).
- ✓ Is “letting local ordaining bodies decide whether their members are in essential agreement with the Presbyterian and Reformed faith a good custom”? In all groups, more “strongly agree” or “agree” (members, 40%; elders, 44%; pastors, 50%; specialized clergy, 61%) than “strongly disagree” or “disagree” (28%; 30%; 37%; 24%) that it is.

- ✓ Nevertheless, more laity (members, 47%; elders, 49%) and pastors (49%) “strongly agree” or “agree” than “strongly disagree” or “disagree” (28%; 29%; 38%) that “if local ordaining bodies are allowed to decide what is essential and inessential, there will be chaos.” The reverse is found for specialized clergy (35%; 50%).

Purity

- ✓ To the statement “A church that is not clear about what it believes is not worth belonging to,” more than six in ten members (67%), elders (65%), and pastors (62%) respond “strongly agree” or “agree.” Only 47% of specialized clergy respond similarly.
- ✓ Presented the statement “A church of millions can never be pure,” more laity “strongly agree” or “agree” (members, 43%; elders, 48%) than “strongly disagree” or “disagree” (30%; 29%), and a fourth are “neutral or not sure” (27%; 23%). Among ministers, the gap between those in agreement (pastors, 60%; specialized clergy, 69%) and disagreement (24%; 17%) is greater.
- ✓ To the statement “If the church is not pure, it will be corrupt,” only a minority respond “strongly agree” or “agree” (members, 35%; elders, 36%; pastors, 28%; specialized clergy, 19%), while more respond “strongly disagree” or “disagree” (43%; 42%; 55%; 65%).
- ✓ Majorities in three groups “strongly disagree” or “disagree” that “it is worth giving up some purity to get peace in the church” (members, 53%; elders, 53%; pastors, 54%). Specialized clergy are more evenly split, with 40% responding in disagreement; 31%, in agreement; and 30%, “neutral or not sure.”

Figure 3. Opinions on Purity



OTHER ISSUES

Ranking and Rating Peace, Unity, and Purity

- ✓ In every group, more panelists believe that peace, unity, and purity “differ in importance” (members, 52%; elders, 50%; pastors, 49%; specialized clergy, 46%) than “are the same in importance” (30%; 32%; 42%; 38%) for the church.
- ✓ Among those who believe there are differences in importance, more laity and pastors choose purity as the most important for the church (e.g., overall, 26% of elders choose purity), followed by peace (16%) and unity (8%). Among specialized clergy, most choose peace as most important (overall, 22%), followed by unity (13%) and purity (12%).

Basic Beliefs

- ✓ Large majorities “strongly agree” or “agree” with each of three statements:
 - My faith is in the God of Israel who raised Jesus Christ bodily from the dead (members, 91%; elders, 93%; pastors, 95%; specialized clergy, 84%)
 - Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through him (83%; 85%; 81%; 64%)
 - Salvation rests not in any merit of our own but in the sovereign love of God that has been made known to us in Jesus Christ (92%; 94%; 99%; 97%)
- ✓ In a series of items, large majorities in all Panel groups (84% or more) “strongly agree” or “agree” that “the love of God extends to all people” regardless of their: religious perspective; social/economic class; race or ethnicity; sex/gender; and sexual orientation.

The Bible

- ✓ Large majorities in all groups “strongly agree” or “agree” that the Bible is:
 - the true Word of God (members, 83%; elders, 86%; pastors, 91%; specialized clergy, 81%)
 - a reliable guide in matters pertaining to salvation (91%; 96%; 96%; 91%)
 - a measure of what is theologically truthful and spiritually life-giving (90%; 92%; 92%; 94%)
- ✓ Many fewer “strongly agree” or “agree” that:
 - freedom of conscience in the interpretation of the Bible is an absolute right for church officers (members, 43%; elders, 52%; pastors, 55%; specialized clergy, 69%)
 - freedom of conscience in the interpretation of the Bible by church officers should be subject to church standards (52%; 52%; 72%; 59%)

Changing the Constitution

- ✓ Half of members (48%), elders (54%), and pastors (56%), and 38% of specialized clergy, “strongly agree” or “agree” that “the 2006 General Assembly should not change current denominational policy on any of the major issues being contested in the church today, including Christology, biblical interpretation, essential tenets, and sexuality and ordination.”
- ✓ 48% of members and most elders (57%), pastors (66%), and specialized clergy (78%) “strongly oppose” or “oppose” a proposal whereby “a congregation could switch presbyteries if two-thirds of those attending a congregational meeting wanted to switch, and if a majority of the new presbytery voted to accept the congregation.”

	Members	Elders	Ordained Ministers
Number of surveys mailed	1,079	1,163	1,463
Number returned.....	538	678	979‡
Response rate.....	49%	57%	66%

‡Of the 979 returned surveys, 660 came from pastors and 314 from specialized clergy; 5 were not classifiable.

The survey was mailed in late April 2006, with returns accepted through early July 2006. Results are subject to sampling and other errors. Small differences should be interpreted cautiously. As a general rule, differences of less than 8% between samples are not statistically meaningful.

For more numbers and interpretation of these results, a longer report with more charts is available for free on the Web (www.pcusa.org/research/panel) or for \$15 from PDS (1-800-524-2612; order PDS# 65100-06292). It includes tables showing percentage responses to each survey question separately for members, elders, pastors, and specialized clergy.

For more information on the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, go to <http://www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity/>.

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