

Dear friends,

We have just received the "Final Decision and Order" of the Synod of the Pacific Permanent Judicial Commission, in the matter of Parnell et al. v. San Francisco Presbytery.

Summary: While the Synod PJC ruled against the Complainants, the good news is that there is a well-reasoned dissent in favor of Complainants arguments that provides stark contrast to the reasoning of the majority. The decision and dissent clearly state the two positions for appellate review.

The 5 to 4 decision in favor of the presbytery does not sustain any of the specifications of error the Complainants put forth. In every case, the basis for their decision was that the so-called Knox Authoritative Interpretation (Knox AI) allowed presbyteries to grant departures from any provision of the Book of Order. So, even though the Book of Order says that among our standards [for ordination] is the requirement to live either in fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness, a presbytery can grant a departure to someone who cannot or will not abide by it. So much for a "requirement."

On the plus side, from our perspective, the decision is unambiguous and very focused, based on one blanket authority (the Knox AI) without any moderating influences or reliance on other legal precedent. It also called for an appeal to the GAPJC simply to secure some clarity about the relationships between Constitutional provision, legal precedents, and the General Assembly's actions (we presume these to be "authoritative interpretations"). It also called for a Stay of Enforcement reaching all the way through the legal process, including an anticipated appeal to the GAPJC. So the Candidate in question will not be ordained until the entire process is completed, which could take another six to eight months.

But most importantly, a strong dissent was included from four of the commissioners, to say that four of our five allegations of error should have been sustained. They appealed to the plain definition of words, to the Reformed understanding of Scripture and its authority in the Church, the nature of the ordination standard of fidelity and chastity, and the nature of constitutions. We are pleased that such a well-reasoned dissent was included in the document. This, too, goes forward to be considered in the appeal.

So, clearly, the Complainants will be appealing this ruling and give the church through its GAPJC an opportunity to come to a definitive ruling on fidelity and chastity and the PCUSA Constitution itself. Your prayers are appreciated as we embark on the next phase. We have forty-five days to file.