



The Normal Presbyterian Life

by the Revs. Mary Holder Naegeli, Mark Stryker, and Margaret Gelini

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Ministry in the Presbyterian setting is never predictable, though we might have thought so a few years back! Who knew that joining our presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry (COM) would redefine "normal" for three ordinary pastors. The latest:

News has just reached the principles in the *Naegeli et al v. San Francisco Presbytery* case that the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GA-PJC) has agreed to hear the appeal we filed in the spring. This means that the trial that took place before the Synod of the Pacific PJC on March 20, 2009, will be reviewed by the denomination's highest judicial commission, probably on November 6, 2009. We hope a binding decision by this commission will cut through the fog of ambiguity surrounding the ordination preparation process.

The basic question before the church is whether it is *ever* acceptable for a governing body to overlook a candidate's refusal to abide by a mandatory church-wide ordination standard. Our conviction—that it is *never* acceptable to grant such a waiver—motivated us to seek judicial remedy when San Francisco Presbytery decided on January 15, 2008, that candidate Lisa Larges' departure from G-6.0106b (the "fidelity and chastity" requirement) did not prevent her further examination for and progress toward ordination.

The Synod PJC ruled on the process but not on the outcome of the presbytery's decision, and thereby missed the opportunity to state clearly that mandatory church-wide standards are, in fact, requirements of all candidates, and that G-6.0106b is one of these mandatory church-wide standards. Some people believe circumstances have changed, and that presbyteries can decide whether an ordination standard is a requirement in a particular case. When a few claim local option, ambiguity creeps into established Presbyterian process. Cutting through the fog requires a compass, which we have, despite the unwillingness of some to employ it.

So where does that put us? We have learned from personal experience that the PCUSA judicial process is a marathon, not a sprint. While the wheels of ecclesiastical justice grind slowly, we have been reflecting on how we arrived to this point.

The three of us are members of San Francisco Presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry (CPM). The questions surrounding Lisa Larges' candidacy came before the committee in 2007 (again), and through a very careful deliberation, it was decided by a split vote to present her departure to the presbytery for its discussion and approval. The CPM presented its report to the presbytery, asserting that Ms. Larges was indeed ready to be examined, despite her refusal to abide by the constitutional requirement of "fidelity and chastity."

Nine of us CPM members submitted a Minority Report, asking the presbytery not to advance Ms. Larges but rather to remove her from the roll of candidates because her long-standing departure disqualified her. Despite our plea, the presbytery voted 168 to 151 to certify the candidate ready for examination; 75 presbyters signed a protest stating that this action was irregular. We gathered 115 signatures to file a "stay of enforcement" that put the candidate's progress on hold until judicial remedy could be sought. We submitted a formal complaint to the Synod PJC a few weeks later.

Heroic? Pharisaic? Obsessive-compulsive? No! This is what Presbyterians do when a governing body acts in an irregular or unconstitutional fashion: we raise the issue and submit it to those elected by us to adjudicate disagreements. This is the "normal Presbyterian life."

What is *not* normal (or shouldn't be) is the frustrating, patience-testing, confusing, and expensive process that is still going on eighteen months later. We understand why so few follow this path; it isn't fun, it is distracting in a slow-motion sort of way, fund-raising is hard, and being misunderstood by both allies and opponents is a bummer. So why have we pursued this case? Because it is our calling as Presbyterian ministers who simply answered yes to the constitutional questions of ordination.

We have discovered that honoring and living out our ordination vows has challenged our discipleship and spiritual discipline. We could not just sit back and let the presbytery's action go unchallenged. Raising the issue has required more strength, stamina, money, and courage than we could have imagined. We have learned a few things along the way:

1. "Doing the right thing" is not always conveniently timed, but doing the right thing at the right time and in the right way is commissioned and empowered by God.

2. This process *is* "real ministry," in the form of "preserving the truth," "promoting social righteousness," and "exhibiting the Kingdom of God to the world." In retrospect, we believe that God has placed a prophetic mantle upon us, challenging our previous assumption that "real ministry" is strictly pastoral and/or evangelistic. We can only point to the necessity of *all* these ministries working in concert with each other.

3. This process *is* "missional ministry," as it affords us, and ultimately the church itself, the opportunity to proclaim the gospel of grace and truth to this generation. As we have made our case, we have discovered how blinded, misguided, and compromised many within our denomination are, and for us, the PCUSA has become "the world" we have been sent to witness within. Until *this* world gets its message straight about the transforming power of Christ's gospel, we don't have much to proclaim or demonstrate to the World beyond it.

4. Three people cannot do this alone. We have maintained close fellowship with each other, yes, but we are dependent on the prayers and financial support of dozens of individuals and churches around the country. Our concerns are shared throughout the church, and tangible expressions of that concern have brought us much encouragement for the journey.

5. The adage, "Out of sight, out of mind," is true. The length of this process, the number of months that pass between any visible milestones is discouraging to us and to our supporters. Some way has to be discovered to expedite this process. A two-year sequence helps no one, and we are mindful of and sympathetic to the candidate whose future is at stake. But we endure the process, because we also have compassion on a doubting and double-minded denomination.

By opening our hearts and the process to you, we hope that you will renew your prayers and your financial support for this effort. Any one of *you* could be in our shoes next year, but the chance of that is lessened if we do our process well now and acquire a definitive answer from the GAPJC. We have genuine hope that our efforts will bear fruit for the future of the denomination.

There are two things you can do in response to what we have shared.

1. **Become an involved presbyter** by serving on key committees like CPM and Committee on Ministry, participating in strategic decisions or task forces, showing up for every presbytery meeting prepared and equipped to propose or take action, and growing in your knowledge and understanding of biblical and Reformed doctrine. Do not rely on your pastor to do the heavy lifting theologically, when *you* may be the only one to carry a doctrinal or polity point in a small group or meeting.

One concrete idea is to form an evangelical caucus in your presbytery. Meet before presbytery meetings, equip yourselves for theological and procedural discussions, learn floor process, and pray. Plan a "Presbyter 101" workshop. Resources are available from all the PCUSA renewal organizations, or email Mary at Mary.Naegeli@gmail.com, and we'll share materials we have used.

2. **Share our vision and hope for this judicial effort**, which is being exerted on your behalf. This case is very important for confirming the PCUSA's beliefs about ordination, sexuality, and even marriage. Join us in believing that denominational change is not accomplished by defying orthodoxy and flooding the judicial process with redundant cases, but by reforming ourselves according to God's Word and by the power of his Spirit.

As One Body, let us not grow weary in well-doing. Let us keep our eyes on the finish line, where our Lord awaits an account of our marathon. Let us encourage one another, and pray that this real ministry will bear real fruit for the Kingdom of God.

Tomorrow: The Expensive Presbyterian Life.

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