



THE PRESBYTERY OF ST. ANDREW PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

24 CR 231 Oxford, MS 38655
voice (662) 234-6069, fax (662) 234-4150

April 17, 2018

Members and Friends of the Presbytery of St. Andrew

Greetings:

I am writing to keep you informed of developments in the Presbytery's dealings with First Presbyterian Church, Starkville.

As you recall, in March of 2015, the session then in place voted to file a complaint against the Presbytery, and was granted a temporary restraining order that kept our Administrative Commission from being able to do its work of mediating the differences that were increasingly dividing church members.

Sadly, the session's attorneys were able to convince the local Chancery Court judge that the dispute was about "property ownership," rather than theological differences, and that the Presbyterian concept of our unity as the body of Christ – which results, among other things, in our conviction that church property while "owned" by the local congregation is ultimately held in trust for the good of the whole church – doesn't apply to them because of how they responded to the addition of the so-called "trust clause" to the *Book of Church Order* in the early 1980's (which was done not because of any change of thinking, but rather because the U.S. Supreme Court in a case over a similar dispute in a Presbyterian church in Georgia, suggested that adding such language to our constitution would clarify the matter and make it enforceable in the courts).

The Presbytery appealed the Chancellor's ruling, but this past week, the Supreme Court of the State of Mississippi sided with the Chancellor by a vote of 7–2. While a dissent signed by the two justices in the minority correctly states what our polity says and does, the majority opinion misstates facts and ignores important state precedents.

That said, the Chancellor's ruling which has now been affirmed by our highest state court clearly states that it only applies to that particular church due to its unique circumstances. Furthermore, the ruling is limited to the issue of "property ownership," and states clearly that the Presbytery "shall not be restrained in any way from carrying out its ecclesiastical mission in ministering to [the church's] congregants and conducting such other usual and customary duties as required by church law."

On the basis of the Chancellor's ruling, the Presbytery's Administrative Commission exercised its ecclesiastical authority by assuming original jurisdiction of the Session and naming the members of the "true church within the PC(USA)" *prior to* the church's congregational meeting to "disaffiliate" with the

Kim Nix
Financial Administrator

Gregory A. Goodwiller
*Executive Presbyter
and Stated Clerk*

Allison Wehrung
*Associate Executive
for Campus Ministry*

Ellen Kellum
Office Manager

Allyson Ashmore
Director, Camps and Conferences

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denomination. The *true* First Presbyterian Church PC(USA) is alive and well. The Rev. Ron McDougald is serving as its Interim Pastor. It has an active Session, meets weekly for worship, and is engaged in mission and service in the community, despite the loss of its buildings and other resources.

The Session of FPC, Starkville has filed its own lawsuit in the matter, and must now decide on how to move forward. The Administrative Commission and I ask you to lift them up in prayer as they discern the best path for their future. Of course, the Presbytery will continue to do everything in its power to support and encourage them.

If you have any questions or concerns about these matters, feel free to contact me any time. Both the Chancellor's and MS Supreme Court rulings are posted on the Presbytery's website, along with our brief in the appeal, and I would be happy to provide you with any other materials you wish to review.

Blessings in all your efforts to be Christ's faithful disciples.

Gregory A. Goodwiller
Executive Presbyter and Stated Clerk
Presbytery of St. Andrew, PC(USA)

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