



Dear Members of First Presbyterian Church:

As you may have read in the Express News this week, Mission Presbytery formed an Administrative Commission which claims has jurisdiction to remove the session of First Presbyterian Church of San Antonio and dissolve the pastoral relationships of the church. Mission Presbytery claims that if the Administrative Commission were to actually exercise that authority (assume "original jurisdiction") over the church, it would be able to seize control of the management and operations of the church, which would represent a radical change in the status quo. Because of this, counsel for the church filed a motion with The Honorable John D. Gabriel on Wednesday, requesting that he reconsider his ruling denying the protections against such actions. We just learned that Judge Gabriel has granted the temporary injunction. We need to emphasize that the Court's ruling only pertains to actions by Mission Presbytery that affect the property of this church.

On Thursday October 29, 2015, all of the session members and all of our pastors, including Dr. Ron Scates, Rev. Scott Simpson and Dr. Louis H. Zbinden, Jr. received letters from Mission Presbytery claiming that, by calling the congregational meeting for Sunday, November 1, the officers and pastors are in "defiance of the Constitution of the Church" and may entail "the possibility of ecclesiastical charges and of being found to have renounced the jurisdiction of the Church." For the pastors, this would mean that if Mission Presbytery found they had renounced jurisdiction, they would be "defrocked" as PC(USA) ministers and could not serve as pastors anywhere in the denomination, including First Presbyterian Church of San Antonio. For the session, Mission Presbytery claims this would mean that its surrogates would be designated to serve on its Administrative Commission would assume the functions of FPC's elected session. Of course, if the congregation votes this Sunday to disaffiliate from the PC(USA), our pastors and church officers will be able to continue serving FPC simply by being re-ordained by the Presbyterian denomination with which the church would newly align itself.

The session and pastors of your church strongly disagree that their actions constitute a renunciation of jurisdiction of the Book of Order. Many churches around the country have held votes to disaffiliate from the denomination, including Highland Park Presbyterian Church of Dallas and First Presbyterian Church of Amarillo. To our knowledge, this is the first time a presbytery has taken the position that such a vote by the congregation may constitute renunciation of jurisdiction. We have expressed our strong disagreement with this conclusion and asked that, if the presbytery did declare they had renounced jurisdiction, the pastors and session members be given the procedural rights afforded in the Book of Order before reaching this conclusion. We have requested that Mission Presbytery seek an advisory opinion from the Office of Constitutional Services of the PC(USA) on these matters. We understand that Grady Parsons, the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) and Joyce Lieberman, Director of the Office of Constitutional Services of the PC(USA) have provided preliminary information to Mission Presbytery and will have further response after staff review.

The Supreme Court of the United States and the Supreme Court of Texas have each upheld the right of a congregation to determine with whom it will associate. By joining a Presbyterian denomination, member churches do not give up their right to vote. By voluntarily affiliating with the PC(USA) this congregation did not give up its right to vote, its right of association, or its right of free speech.

The Book of Order does not negate the exercise of legal and constitutional rights. The actions by Mission Presbytery to try to remove the elected elders and called pastors of FPC as members in good standing only heightens the concerns over the continued affiliation with the PC(USA). If the only way the PC(USA) can hold churches in the denomination is to (1) try to prevent a congregation from holding a democratic vote; (2) assert claims of interest in the property of the local church; and (3) threaten its faithful pastors and session with potential ecclesiastical actions, it has elevated its own self-preservation over the health of the local church. To our knowledge, no council of the PC(USA) has ever contributed funds to the property or mission of First Presbyterian Church of San Antonio. The legal right to manage and control the property of this church has always been vested in the corporate trustees and in the session elected by this congregation.

This Sunday, November 1, 2015, we urge our members to vote in favor of disaffiliation from the PC(USA); in favor of affiliation with ECO; and in favor of retaining all or our pastors and officers duly called by this congregation to serve this church.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Norton A. Stuart III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the beginning and a trailing flourish at the end.

Norton A. Stuart III, MD  
Clerk of Session  
On behalf of the Session of First Presbyterian Church of San Antonio