

Pastor wins same-sex rites case on appeal: Conflicting interpretations of the Book of Order

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A Cincinnati minister has won a reversal of a 2003 Presbyterian church-court conviction for performing same-sex marriage ceremonies at a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Permanent Judicial Commission of the Synod of the Covenant made the 6-4 ruling April 30 in the case of Stephen A. Van Kuiken, reported Presbyterian News Service. The commission found that the record in the minister's case "does not support a finding of guilt by proof beyond a reasonable doubt." It ruled that the lower, presbytery court was mistaken when it interpreted a provision of the denomination's Book of Order as an absolute prohibition of same-sex marriage ceremonies.

"At issue is the existing tension in the Book of Order between the spirit and the letter of the law," the majority wrote. "The spirit of a wide, gracious welcome of all people, encouraged by the Book of Order, is in tension with the specified limitations on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Presbyterians, preventing their full and complete participation in the life of the church. This tension reflects the church's current place in history and its ongoing struggle with the issues of human sexuality."

The dissenters in the decision called the majority opinion "an improper and unjustified attempt to rewrite the clear and unambiguous meaning" of the Book of Order provision.

Van Kuiken is now part of a nondenominational faith community in Cincinnati, known as the Gathering, that includes former members of Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church where he performed the ceremonies that were questioned. The minister, a married heterosexual, ended his pastoral relationship with the Presbyterian congregation last year.

“I am very grateful for the courage the commission has shown in reaching this landmark decision,” Van Kuiken said, according to the Associated Press. “A new era has dawned in the Presbyterian Church.” *-Religion News Service*