

# Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

## PC(USA) leaders issue pastoral letter to the church on Assembly's marriage actions

**June 19, 2014**

To congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Earlier today the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved a recommendation from its Civil Union and Marriage Issues Committee allowing for pastoral discretion to perform “any such marriage they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform,” where legal by state law.

They also approved a recommendation to change language in the Book of Order to indicate that “marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman.”

Both decisions came with much thought, discussion and prayer, and clearly the entire body that is the PC(USA) will be interpreting these actions for some time.

Please know that the same triune God in whom we place our hope, faith and trust in is still in control, and that the Assembly's action today is the result of deep discernment to hear God's voice and discern God's will.

We concur with the feelings expressed by Teaching Elder Commissioner Jeffrey Bridgeman, moderator of the Civil Union and Marriage Issues Committee, during his presentation to the Assembly.

“The apostle Paul tells us that ours is, in fact, ‘the ministry of reconciliation’ as ‘ambassadors of Christ,’ and he died for us so that we might be reconciled, that we might become reconcilers,” Bridgeman said.

In this season of both happiness and sadness over the Assembly's decisions, we call on you to remember the overflowing grace and love God gifts us with, and to take seriously our charge to bestow the same grace and love on one another.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,



Ruling Elder Heath K. Rada  
Moderator, 221st General Assembly



The Reverend Gradye Parsons  
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly



Ruling Elder Linda Bryant Valentine

# Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

## Assembly approves allowing pastors to perform same-gender marriage where legal Sends proposed constitutional amendment changing marriage definition

June 19, 2014



Commissioners and Advisory Delegates broke out into small groups to discuss Marriage and Middle East Issues to begin plenary VII at the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the PC(USA) in Detroit, MI on Thursday, June 19, 2014. —*Danny Bolin*

General Assembly News

JERRY L. VAN MARTER

After clearing a number of procedural hurdles, the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) agreed to grant pastors discretion in determining whether or not to conduct same-gender marriages in civil jurisdictions where such marriages are legal.

The action effectively removes the ban on Presbyterian pastors marrying same-gender couples in those jurisdictions.

The Assembly approved sending out for presbytery approval a constitutional amendment to W-4.9001 of the PC(USA)'s *Book of Order* that would change the constitutional definition of marriage from “between a man and a woman” to “between two people, traditionally between a man and a woman.”

The vote on the authoritative interpretation – which takes effect immediately – was 371-238 or 61 percent to 39 percent.

The vote on the proposed constitutional amendment – which goes to the denomination's 172 presbyteries for ratification – was 429-175 or 71 percent to 29 percent. A majority of the presbyteries must vote approval of the measure for it to take effect.

Commissioners apparently agreed with speakers who argued that ministers must have pastoral discretion around marriage decisions, particularly in the 19 states and the District of Columbia where same-gender marriage is legal.

The direction of the authoritative interpretation debate was set by Teaching Elder Brian Franzen of San Jose Presbytery, who said, “The church has to be a place that welcomes all people. The only way to do that is to allow pastors to use their conscience.”

The desire to grant pastors greater discretion on marriage decisions outweighed the concern of those backing Teaching Elder Jim Miller of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery who said “the fragile unity of the church is at stake.”

Other opponents argued against the measure on theological grounds. Teaching Elder Ben Beres of Miami Valley Presbytery said the church “needs a faithful theology of marriage, I can't find [biblical] support for same-sex marriage.”

The full text of the authoritative interpretation (of W-4.9000) of the *Book of Order*:

“Worship is a central element of the pastoral care of the people of God (W-6.3001, W-6.3010) in which a teaching

elder's discernment of the leading of the Holy Spirit is indispensable. The necessity of ensuring the exercise of freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (G-2.0105) in the planning and leadership of worship has deep roots in our Reformed tradition and theology. Because a service of marriage is one form of such worship, when a couple requests the involvement of the church in solemnizing their marriage as permitted by the laws of the civil jurisdiction in which the marriage is to take place, teaching elders have the pastoral responsibility to assess the capabilities, intentions, and readiness of the couple to be married (W-4.9002), and the freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (G-2.0105) to participate in any such marriage they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform.

“Exercising such discretion and freedom of conscience under the prayerful guidance of Scripture, teaching elders may conduct a marriage service for any such couple in the place where the community gathers for worship, so long as it is approved by the session; or in such other place as may be suitable for a service of Christian worship. In no case shall any teaching elder's conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word, and the leading of the Holy Spirit.”

The Assembly – like its Assembly Committee on Civil Union and Marriage Issues – was careful to protect the consciences of pastors on both sides of the same-gender marriage issue.

In addition to the protective language at the conclusion of the authoritative interpretation, the Assembly included a clause in the proposed amendment stating: “Nothing herein shall compel a teaching elder to perform nor compel a session to authorize the use of church property for a marriage service that the teaching elder or the session believes is contrary to the teaching elder's or the session's discernment of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of the Word of God.”

The Assembly also reached out to Presbyterians who will certainly struggle with the proposed new definition of marriage. The words “traditionally between a man and a woman” were added by an amendment offered by Teaching Elder John Wilkinson of Genesee Valley Presbytery.

“Anything we can do to support those who hold to the traditional understanding of marriage, we should do,” Wilkinson said.

Teaching Elder Paul Roberts of Pittsburgh Presbytery, founder of the conservative Confessing Church Movement, supported Wilkinson's suggestion, calling it “really inclusive language.”

A move to appoint a task force to study the issue of same-gender marriage for two years rather than take any action at this Assembly failed 372-237 or 61 percent to 39 percent.

At a press conference following the votes, General Assembly Moderator Heath Rada said he expects to spend much of his time during the coming year seeking to reconcile Presbyterians who disagree on same-gender marriage.

“When Presbyterians gather, they tend to talk more about what holds us together – the same faith in Jesus Christ.” An experienced mediator, Rada said he hopes to use those skills to hold the church together.

General Assembly Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons acknowledged the historic decisions made by the Assembly. “The conversations about sexuality began in 1978,” he said, referring to an authoritative interpretation that year that declared “homosexuality does not accord with God's plan for humanity.”

“There have been places along the way when our talk turned to action, and this is one of those days,” Parsons said, adding that “both the church and the society have changed – more people are getting to know gays and lesbians, laws are changing and pastoral situations are changing.”

# Marriage and Civil Unions

## Authoritative Interpretation (AI)

### **What is the actual language of the authoritative interpretation?**

“Worship is a central element of the pastoral care of the people of God (W-6.3001, W-6.3010) in which a teaching elder’s discernment of the leading of the Holy Spirit is indispensable. The necessity of ensuring the exercise of freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (G-2.0105) in the planning and leadership of worship has deep roots in our Reformed tradition and theology. Because a service of marriage is one form of such worship, when a couple requests the involvement of the church in solemnizing their marriage as permitted by the laws of the civil jurisdiction in which the marriage is to take place, teaching elders\* have the pastoral responsibility to assess the capabilities, intentions, and readiness of the couple to be married (W-4.9002), and the freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (G-2.0105) to participate in any such marriage they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform.

“Exercising such discretion and freedom of conscience under the prayerful guidance of Scripture, teaching elders may conduct a marriage service for any such couple in the place where the community gathers for worship, so long as it is approved by the session; or in such other place as may be suitable for a service of Christian worship. In no case shall any teaching elder’s conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The authoritative interpretation of this section by the 203rd General Assembly (1991) (*Minutes*, 1991, Part I, p. 395, paragraphs 21.124–.128), and the subsequent authoritative interpretations of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission relying upon it, are withdrawn and replaced with this authoritative interpretation.”

\*“As in other places in the Directory for Worship, the use of ‘teaching elders’ in this paragraph should be understood to include ruling elders commissioned to pastoral service.”

## Proposed Amendment to the Constitution

### **What is the actual language of the proposed amendment?**

Amend W-4.9000 by striking the current text and replacing it with the following:

“Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people (traditionally a man and a woman) to love and support each other for the rest of their lives. The sacrificial love that unites the couple sustains them as faithful and responsible members of the church and the wider community.

“In civil law, marriage is a contract that recognizes the rights and obligations of the married couple in society. In the Reformed tradition, marriage is also a covenant in which God has an active part, and which the community of faith publicly witnesses and acknowledges.

“If they meet the requirements of the civil jurisdiction in which they intend to marry, a couple may request that a service of Christian marriage be conducted by a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), who is authorized, though not required, to act as an agent of the civil jurisdiction in recording the marriage contract. A couple requesting a service of Christian marriage shall receive instruction from the teaching elder, who may agree to the couple’s request only if, in the judgment of the teaching elder, the couple demonstrate sufficient understanding of the nature of the marriage covenant and commitment to living their lives together according to its values. In making this decision, the teaching elder may seek the counsel of the session, which has authority to permit or deny the use of church property for a marriage service.

“The marriage service shall be conducted in a manner appropriate to this covenant and to the forms of Reformed worship, under the direction of the teaching elder and the supervision of the session (W- 1.4004–.4006). In a service of marriage, the couple marry each other by exchanging mutual promises. The teaching elder witnesses the couple’s promises and pronounces God’s blessing upon their union. The community of faith pledges to support the couple in upholding their promises; prayers may be offered for the couple, for the communities that support them, and for all who seek to live in faithfulness.

“A service of worship recognizing a civil marriage and confirming it in the community of faith may be appropriate when requested by the couple. The service will be similar to the marriage service except that the statements made shall reflect the fact that the couple is already married to one another according to the laws of the civil jurisdiction.

“Nothing herein shall compel a teaching elder to perform nor compel a session to authorize the use of church property for a marriage service that the teaching elder or the session believes is contrary to the teaching elder’s or the session’s discernment of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of the Word of God.”

## FAQs – Same-Gender Marriage

(Detroit—June 19, 2014)—The 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today approved a measure giving pastors the discretion to perform same-gender marriages in states where it is legal. It offers the same discretion for churches with regard to the use of church property. The measure takes effect upon the conclusion of the General Assembly on Saturday, June 21, 2014. A proposed amendment to change the Constitution to include same-gender marriages in the church's Constitution passed the General Assembly but must be ratified by a majority of the church's 172 regional presbyteries. Presbyteries have one year to vote on the proposed amendment. If a majority ratifies the amendment, it would take effect June 21, 2015.

1. Are congregations and/or pastors required to participate in/host such weddings?

“In no case shall any teaching elder's conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit.” No pastor is compelled to perform a service of marriage nor a session compelled to use church property for a service of marriage.

2. Can a pastor in a state where it is not permitted perform a wedding in a state where it is?

The teaching elder has freedom of conscience. Beyond that, it would depend on whether the teaching elder is authorized under civil law to perform a wedding in the state where the wedding is to take place

3. Will sessions have the authority to permit (or not) same-gender marriage services in the church?

Yes. Nothing has changed about the authority of sessions in the way church property is used.

4. If a pastor is willing to preside at the marriage of a same-gender couple, can the session prohibit the pastor from doing so?

No. The session cannot compel the pastor nor can the pastor compel the session.

The pastor has the freedom of his or her own conscience and the session has the responsibility for providing for worship and making decisions about the use of church property.

5. Can the session make a categorical prohibition of same-gender weddings in its building?

Yes. Nothing has changed about the authority of the session with regard to the use of the church building.

6. What process did the General Assembly use to make this happen?

The General Assembly made an authoritative interpretation of the Constitution and proposed an amendment to the Constitution.

7. What is an authoritative interpretation (AI)?

An AI is an interpretation of the Constitution by the General Assembly or the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission. It is binding on all councils.

8. What is permitted according to the AI at the adjournment of the assembly?

Pastors may conduct a marriage service for same-gender couples and may do so where the community gathers for worship with the permission of the session. “In no case shall any teaching elder's conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit.”

9. What is an amendment to the Constitution?

An amendment to the Constitution is determined by the General Assembly, but must be confirmed by a majority of the presbyteries. All councils are under the authority of the Constitution.

## FAQs – Same-Gender Marriage

10. What if the presbyteries refuse to vote on the amendment?

A majority of the presbyteries must vote for the amendment in order for it to become part of the Constitution. A non-vote has the effect of a “no” vote.

11. If the presbyteries do not approve changes to the Constitution, what is the effect on the authoritative interpretation (“AI”)?

The AI remains in place until it is superseded by another.

12. What is the timeline?

The same-gender marriage measure (the AI) takes effect upon the conclusion of the General Assembly on Saturday, June 21, 2014. The proposed amendment must be ratified by a majority of the church’s 172 presbyteries, which have one year to vote. If ratified, the amendment would take effect on June 21, 2015.

13. What shall we tell the media?

Please see the official press release, or refer calls to PC(USA) offices.