

Frequently Asked Questions About Actions by the 221st General Assembly (2014) Concerning Marriage



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1. What actions addressing marriage were approved by the 221st GA (2014)?

The General Assembly issued an authoritative interpretation clarifying that pastors may use their discretion in choosing whether or not to officiate at a service of marriage for any couple who has obtained a license from the civil jurisdiction, by a vote of 371-238. It proposed an amendment to the *Book of Order* revising W-4.9000, the marriage section in the Directory for Worship, by a vote of 429-175.

And by a voice vote it “direct[ed] the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board and the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly to engage in the process of working together with churches in the task of reconciliation, starting with visiting each presbytery and serving as a resource for each presbytery’s discussion of these actions in congregations and the presbytery at-large and present voices of reconciliation for the unity of the church.”

2. What is an authoritative interpretation (AI)?

The Form of Government [G-6.02] describes two ways in which the *Book of Order* may be interpreted – through a decision of the GA Permanent Judicial Commission (not unlike a Supreme Court case), and by the General Assembly itself. Sometimes there is ambiguity in the meaning of a *Book of Order* provision in a particular circumstance, and it is very common for Assemblies to issue AIs. AIs are also helpful when there is a new context that was never anticipated when the provisions of the Constitution were written. In such circumstances an interpretation is needed to apply the principles of the Constitution to the new context. The *Book of Order* does not address the reality of states making provision for marriage of same-gender couples, so an AI was needed to make clear that pastors may appropriately choose to officiate at such services. The AI is not subject to a further vote by the presbyteries; it took effect at the adjournment of the GA on June 21, 2014.

3. What exactly does the AI of W-4.9000 say?

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.*

4. Was the authoritative interpretation clarifying that ministers are allowed to conduct same-gender marriages an "end run" around the presbyteries to change the definition of marriage?

No, the AI did not amend the *Book of Order*. It clarifies that pastors have freedom of conscience in their interpretation of Scripture to conduct marriage services for same-gender couples without violating their ordination vows or facing the threat of judicial proceedings. The Preface to the Directory for Worship states that, while some practices are mandated, the Directory "also uses language about worship which is simply descriptive." The AI reassures pastors and sessions that faithful decisions made about pastoral care and worship do not constitute an *offense* subjecting a minister to discipline.

5. How is the PCUSA *Book of Order* amended?

The General Assembly approves a proposed amendment, which is then submitted to the 171 presbyteries for their positive or negative votes within the coming year. If the amendment receives the approval of a majority of the presbyteries (at least 86), it becomes part of the *Book of Order* one year from the adjournment of the Assembly – June 21, 2015.

6. What exactly is the text of the proposed amendment of W-4.9000?

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.

7. What does an amendment accomplish that an AI alone does not?

While the AI provides immediate relief for pastors and sessions who might otherwise be subject to disciplinary process for honoring the marriages of same-gender couples, an amendment provides a long-term witness, making the Constitution's description of marriage both more accurate (as its definition as a civil contract has changed in many states) and more just (removing language that excludes some faithful couples on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender).

8. What is the effect of these changes for pastors? For gay couples? For churches? In states that still prohibit full marriage equality?

Pastors and sessions are assured of their freedom faithfully, prayerfully to discern the appropriateness of proceeding with a marriage, guided by their conscience, their conversations with the couple, and their understanding of the scriptures. Gay couples are able to live out their Christian discipleship within the covenant of marriage without their relationships being treated as second-class, and without putting their pastors at risk of discipline. Congregations are able to demonstrate true hospitality to all people without systematically excluding some from one of the important ministries of the church. However, pastors or sessions that do not support marrying same-gender couples are not expected or required to do so.



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These actions do not give teaching elders or sessions any additional powers or privileges in states where same-gender marriage is not yet legal, although pastors are able to respond to requests to travel to other states, if authorized by the laws of those states to solemnize a marriage. And they would be able to welcome all couples they choose once the law changes in their state.

9. Are pastors now required to officiate at gay marriages?

No. The emphasis on pastoral discretion – both in the AI and in the language of the amendment, as well as in longstanding Presbyterian practice – guarantees that no minister can be forced to conduct a service that he or she believes to be unwise. Both Presbyterian polity and civil freedom of religion protections ensure that freedom of conscience.

10. What will be the impact of these actions on our partner churches in world mission?

Some, but not all, of our global partner churches believe that same-gender marriage is contrary to God's will. A small number have already ceased their common ministries with the PCUSA because of the change in our ordination standards allowing openly gay teaching and ruling elders. However, most of our partners are continuing their mission partnerships with the PCUSA while engaging with us in dialogue over these and other matters on which we disagree and can learn from each other. Most of our mission partners understand that each of us is called to unique understandings of our ministry within our own particular context and respect that the PCUSA is seeking to reflect God's will for us in our context in the USA.

11. How does PCUSA support of those in same-gender marriages relate to our world mission efforts?

One of the three major priorities of Presbyterian world mission is to work for reconciliation in cultures of violence. While efforts to end violence and discrimination against same-gender persons in the USA are a crucial mission priority in our own country, they are even more urgent in other parts of the world. In countries such as Uganda, Malawi, Nigeria, Russia, Pakistan (and many others) which treat homosexuality as a crime, countless numbers of people are imprisoned, and some are facing death, because of their sexual orientation. As a church that has always seen human rights as a central component of our world mission, support for basic rights for gay and lesbian persons, including the right to marry, is an important mission priority for the PCUSA to pursue with partner churches all around the world.

The GA unanimously adopted a measure encouraging prayer, education, and action to address "the global crisis for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons and their families in eighty-one countries where homosexuality is illegal and the impact of persecution that threatens their lives, health, and safety."

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12. How many states currently grant marriage licenses to same-gender couples?

In 1991, when a General Assembly first issued an authoritative interpretation addressing services of worship celebrating committed same-gender relationships, no state in the USA granted marriage licenses to same-gender couples. When the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage wrote its report to the 2010 GA, five states and the District of Columbia allowed same-gender marriage. At this writing, same-gender marriage is legal in 19 states and the District of Columbia, and courts have issued decisions, now under appeal, striking down marriage bans in several others. As a result of a 2013 US Supreme Court decision, the federal government now recognizes same-gender marriage for the purpose of applying all the federal rights and responsibilities of marriage.

13. What does Scripture say about marriage?

The Bible describes a variety of forms of marriage. For example, many men in the Hebrew Scriptures had more than one wife, and/or fathered children with women not their wives. The command that a man marry his brother's widow made polygamy a requirement for some. Rapists were commanded to marry their victims. Many of these provisions reflect a view of women, and their sexual purity, as belonging to their fathers or their husbands. More foundational biblical principles challenge this hierarchical view – with women and men valued as equal, rigid gender roles no longer constrain women, men, or their committed relationships.

In the New Testament and in much Christian tradition, celibacy is considered more worthy than marriage, yet considered a spiritual gift not given to all. Jesus was asked about divorce and responded with reference to Genesis, challenging those who would casually break family bonds; he upheld marriage between a man and a woman, the predominant pattern. But an affirmation of one kind of relationship does not require the exclusion of every other kind of relationship.

The Bible does not contemplate the possibility of same-gender marriage; but many who stand under the authority of Scripture today, in the spirit of the ever-widening understanding of who is included in the love and grace of God, have concluded that biblical moral logic values committed, mutual, loving partnerships – regardless of the gender of the partners.

14. But doesn't the Bible prohibit same-gender sex?

An understanding of sexual orientation – the reality that some persons are naturally attracted to persons of the same gender, with little or no possibility of change – was unknown in biblical times. Taken in context, scriptural prohibitions of same-sex practice in Scripture refer not to committed same-gender partnerships, but rather to prostitution, abuse, and notions of clean and unclean that have been invalidated by the grace of Jesus Christ.



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