

Frequently Asked Questions About Marriage Issues at the 221st General Assembly



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1. What proposals are coming to the 221st GA (2014) to address marriage?

There are seven items from the presbyteries referred to the GA Committee on Civil Union and Marriage Issues. Three seek authoritative interpretation of the section on marriage in the *Book of Order*, and three seek its amendment. One seeks a task force to study and bring recommendations.

2. Has the PCUSA studied same-gender marriage before?

Yes. Two previous General Assemblies have called for denomination-wide consideration of same-gender marriage. The 2008 GA created the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage, which reported to the 2010 GA. The 2012 GA called for a study process, and the Office of Theology and Worship created a study, "Christian Marriage in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)." Both of these studies involved congregations and presbyteries throughout the church.

3. 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. Many feel that this is the situation we now face with states making provision for marriage of same-gender couples. An AI takes effect when issued and is not subject to a further vote by the presbyteries; when AIs conflict, the most recent is binding.

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

No, the AIs requested by over 20 presbyteries do not seek to amend the *Book of Order*. Their purpose is to clarify that pastors have freedom of conscience in their interpretation of Scripture to conduct marriage services for same-gender couples without violating their ordination vows. 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." An AI will reassure pastors and sessions that faithful decisions made about pastoral care and worship, particularly involving same-gender couples, do not necessarily 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 172 presbyteries for their positive or negative votes. An amendment receiving the approval of a majority of the presbyteries (at least 87) becomes part of the *Book of Order* one year from the adjournment of the Assembly that proposed it – for the 221st GA, June 21, 2015.

6. What would an amendment accomplish that an AI alone does not?

While an AI would provide immediate relief for pastors and sessions who might otherwise be subject to disciplinary process for honoring the marriages of same-gender couples, an amendment would provide 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).

7. What is the current policy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) regarding same-gender marriage?

The section on marriage in the Directory for Worship of the *Book of Order*, W-4.9000, has been interpreted by the General Assembly, and by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission, to allow worship services blessing same-gender relationships, so long as the minister does not state, imply or represent the ceremony to be an ecclesiastical marriage – despite their acknowledgment that the *Book of Order* does not directly address same-gender marriage. As an example of the complexity of the current policy, decisions by the GAPJC have determined that though a Presbyterian minister can be legally married to a same-gender spouse, an ecclesiastical marriage service may not be conducted in a Presbyterian church by another Presbyterian minister. The complex and uneven legal landscape in current practice is one reason that these overtures are so important now.

8. If the *Book of Order* is amended and/or an AI is adopted, what would be the effect of the change for pastors? For same-gender couples? For churches? In states that still prohibit full marriage equality?

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

The proposed actions would not give teaching elders or sessions any additional powers or privileges in states where same-gender marriage is not yet legal. But they would be able to welcome all couples they choose once the law changes in their state.



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9. Will the proposed AI and/or amendment result in fewer church trials?

Yes, an AI would mean that pastors can pastor, and costly and divisive church trials can be avoided. (An amendment would have the same effect, but would require an extra year and ratification by a majority of presbyteries.) A high profile church trial took place in the United Methodist Church, when the Rev. Frank Schaefer was tried for officiating at the wedding of his son. He was found guilty and defrocked. As Presbyterians, we are caught in a similar bind where it is a matter of debate how pastors are to provide care and counseling to same-gender couples in their congregations and families.

10. If an AI is adopted by the General Assembly, and/or the *Book of Order* amended, would this mean I have to officiate at a gay marriage?

No. The emphasis on pastoral discretion – both in the proposed AIs and in the language retained in 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.

11. What will be the impact of the AI or the amendment 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.

12. How do the proposals for the PCUSA to support those in same-gender marriage 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 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender 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 72 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.



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13. 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 17 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 U.S. Supreme Court decision, the federal government now recognizes same-gender marriage for the purpose of applying all the federal rights and responsibilities of marriage.

14. 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.

15. 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.



For more information, visit:
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