

Presbyterian Polity on Marriage and Commitment Services *A Brief History*

- 1991** Authoritative Interpretation [AI], 2013rd GA: Not proper for minister to perform same sex union ceremony that the minister determines to be the same as a marriage ceremony, nor should a session allow use of church property for such a ceremony; but no prohibition on blessing a same-sex relationship not considered to be a marriage.
- 1994** BOO amendment to declare that it is "not permitted for ministers to participate in the blessing of any same-sex unions" defeated in the presbyteries.
- 2000** *Benton v. Hudson River*: Minister should instruct same-sex couples that a ceremony does not constitute a marriage ceremony and should not be held out as such. The theological distinction between marriage and same-sex unions requires liturgical distinctions. Specific liturgical forms from services of marriage or for recognition of civil marriage should not be appropriated for same-sex ceremonies. "A determinative distinction between a permissible same-sex ceremony and a marriage ceremony is that the latter confers a new status; the former blesses an existing relationship."
- 2000** Amendment 00-O proposed by the GA but defeated in the presbyteries, 73-99-1: Shall "*W-4.9007*" be added to the *Book of Order* to read as follows: "*Scripture and our Confessions teach that God's intention for all people is to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or in chastity in singleness. Church property shall not be used for, and church officers shall not take part in conducting, any ceremony or event that pronounces blessing or gives approval of the church or invokes the blessing of God upon any relationship that is inconsistent with God's intention as expressed in the preceding sentence.*"
- 2004** First legal same-gender marriages in US – Massachusetts.
- 2008** *Spahr v. Redwoods*: Janie Spahr was not guilty of an offense for claiming to marry same-gender couples because, by definition, she could not have done so; but "officers of the PC(USA) authorized to perform marriages shall not state, imply, or represent that a same sex ceremony is a marriage" – the AI by the GAPJC that created an offense of performing a same-gender marriage.
- 2008** Proposed amendment to "man and woman" language rejected by GA; but authorization of Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage.
- 2010** GA declined to propose amendment; received the report of the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage and commended it and the minority report to sessions and presbyteries, and urged them to engage in study of the issues presented in the report.

- 2012** *Newark v. McNeill*: Minister did not commit an offense by being married.
- 2012** *Spahr 2*: Janie Spahr found guilty of an offense for violating the GAPJC's AI in *Spahr 1*.
- 2012** *Southard v. Boston*: Jean Southard found not guilty of an offense for performing the legal marriage of 2 women – the first time anyone had been charged for a ceremony that solemnized a legal marriage – because she did the service prior to the GAPJC's AI in *Spahr 1*.
- 2012** GA rejected overtures seeking amendment or AI but encouraged the PCUSA to enter into a season of serious study and discernment concerning the meaning of Christian marriage.
- 2014** GA AI of W-4.9000: *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.*
- 2014** 221st GA proposed Amendment 14-F to 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.

2015

With the approval of the presbyteries, the proposed amendment [14-F] becomes part of the *Book of Order* on June 21.

Supreme Court legalizes marriage equality nationwide.