

Frequently Asked Questions: Same-Gender Marriage

The 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 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 took effect at 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.”

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.

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.

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.

What is the timeline?

The same-gender marriage measure (the AI) took 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.

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.”

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.”