

Same-Gender Marriage Amendment

14-F

Sources: PC(USA; Presbytery of Cayuga-Syracuse; Layman OnLine

WHY THIS AMENDMENT?

The 221st General Assembly (2014) of the PC(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 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.

Study materials were developed and placed on the web:

<http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/confession/belharstudyguide.pdf>

HOW DOES THIS HAPPEN?

The General Assembly made an authoritative interpretation of the Constitution and proposed 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. Presbyteries have one year to vote on the proposed amendment. If a majority ratifies the amendment, it would take effect June 21, 2015.

WHAT IS THE LANGUAGE OF THE AUTHORITATIVE INTERPRETATION?

“Worship is a central element of the pastoral care of the people of God 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 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 and the freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture 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 and the subsequent authoritative interpretations of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission relying upon it, are withdrawn and replaced with this authoritative interpretation.”

WHAT IS THE ACTUAL LANGUAGE OF THE AMENDMENT?

“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.”

SOME ARGUMENTS FOR VOTING ‘YES’ TO SAME-GENDER MARRIAGE , *credit to The Presbytery of Cayuga-Syracuse*

At issue is the Presbyterian understanding of the nature of Christian marriage and a pastor’s and session’s responsibility and ability to extend appropriate pastoral care.

1. As more and more states authorize marriage between same-gender partners, pastors and sessions trying to be responsible in providing pastoral care to church members by officiating at marriages in the church building find themselves increasingly constrained by the provisions of section 4.9000 of the Directory for Worship as interpreted by the 1991

General Assembly and subsequent decisions of the General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission.

2. In light of the increased flexibility offered by the new Form of Government for conducting the mission of the church, it is time for the Presbyterian Church to amend the Directory for Worship to provide comparable flexibility in extending pastoral care to church members in same-gender partnerships.
3. The Bible and the Reformed tradition reflect many patterns and forms of legal, religiously approved marital relationships. The nostalgically remembered pattern of marriage of 1940's America cannot be taken as normative from a Biblical or theological point of view.
4. The understanding of marriage has changed through the years and was often geared more to property rights or political advantage than to a mutual, loving relationship.
5. Marriage is a contract regulated and licensed by the state. This was recognized in the ancient church and in Protestant churches since the Reformation.
6. There are legitimate differences of interpretation of the passages regarding homosexual relationship in the Bible. The present regulation forces Presbyterian elders to act based on one interpretation, with which many disagree as a matter of conscience.
7. Jesus in his public ministry broke down the barriers that separated people. He identified with those who were outcasts and marginalized by society. Gay and lesbian individuals are considered outsiders by many today. The church needs to witness to the inclusive love of Jesus for all people.
8. To prohibit clergy and congregations from fulfilling a legitimate request for pastoral services binds the conscience of clergy and prevents them from fulfilling their pastoral responsibilities.
9. In 2010, the presbyteries approved Amendment A allowing persons in same-sex relationships to be ordained. These church members should be allowed to be married if the state issues them a marriage license and their teaching elder determines that their marriage is advisable.
10. The statement restricting marriage to "one man and one woman" addresses polygamy in 17th century England. The statement that marriage is "between a man and a woman" reflects conventions of the mid-20th century and is descriptive, not prescriptive.

SOME ARGUMENTS FOR VOTING 'NO' TO SAME-GENDER MARRIAGE

Faithfully Confronting the Reality of Same-Sex Marriage, by Rick Plasterer...excerpts

To cite T.S. Eliot, who said that when confronted with something new, we should ask "what can I do with it, or what is it for?" The second question should be asked first, to avoid abusing the unknown. In the case of marriage, the purpose of marriage should be ascertained before claiming it should be extended to homosexual couples. "The legal status of something doesn't change our Biblical responsibility to it," The proper status of marriage can be determined by asking first how God defines it. After that we can draw support from general knowledge shared across cultures.

John Stonestreet, Assistant Professor of Apologetics at Biola University

The claimed right to same-sex marriage should be answered first by addressing Jesus' doctrine of marriage in the gospels, rather than to passages concerning the sinfulness of sodomy, according to Stonestreet. Jesus said that more fundamental than the Law of Moses was "God's created [i.e., creation] intent." Sexual complementarity is not merely what has traditionally been thought to be true, but it really is true. Thus he said that the natural order of marriage is based on the divine

order of creation. With respect to marriage, it consists of three things: 1) male/female complementarity, 2) oneness, and 3) permanence. All biological functions can be done alone except procreation. To argue for same-sex marriage, it is necessary to say that “procreative oneness,” physical reality, “just doesn’t even matter.” These things “are part of the very fabric of human nature, they are part of what God created.”

Layman: “The phrases about no compulsion of conscience may ensure that a pastor is not forced, strictly speaking, to stand up front at a wedding with which he or she disagrees. Pastors have always had the freedom to say “yes” or “no” to particular couples requesting marriage. The problem is the retribution that might be visited upon a pastor after he or she says “no.” This will be an especially delicate situation if the reason given for declining to officiate is that it was a same-sex couple and the pastor is opposed to all same-sex marriages.

Under the new authoritative interpretation or the proposed amendment, pastors would seem to be protected against one form of retribution: being charged with a disciplinary offense. But there are other more likely forms of retribution.

One scenario surfaced in a question and answer during the Assembly’s discussion of the amendment. This exchange went unremarked at the time, but holds ominous portent for the future. Teaching Elder Commissioner Kenneth Macari from Elizabeth Presbytery in New Jersey asked whether under the new amendment “when someone is either preparing for ordination or taking a call, will they be in full conscience able to express either position [for or against same-sex marriage] and there not be a prejudice against them from either being ordained or taking a call or switching from one presbytery to another?”