

## Ceremonies Blessing Same-Sex Relationships

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) defines Christian marriage in W-4.9001 as follows:

"Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith."

By definition, given this standard, only a union between a man and a woman is considered a marriage by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The church is concerned also about those for whom marriage is not an appropriate expression of their Christian discipleship. G-4.0403 affirms the commitment of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to the rich diversity within its membership and to participation in the life and ministry of the church. This explicitly includes members of different marital conditions among other aspects of diversity (G-4.0403). So for those for whom singleness is a matter of personal commitment or a reality to be accepted, the church is committed to their pastoral care and to guidance in their discipleship.

As the questions raised over the years have made clear, (such as the questions addressed by the General Assembly in 1991 (*Minutes*, 1991, Part I, p. 395), or those addressed by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission in 2000 in Remedial Case 212-11, *Benton, et al. v. Presbytery of Hudson River* (*Minutes*, 2000, Part I, p. 586) and in 2008 in Disciplinary Case 218-12, *Spahr v. Pby of Redwoods*) there are other members of the church who believe that they are called to live out their Christian discipleship in committed relationships in which the other person is of the same gender.

With the interpretation adopted in 1991, the General Assembly declared that it would not be proper for a minister to perform a same sex union ceremony that the minister determines to be the same as a marriage ceremony. Following that logic, the *Benton* case found that a session should not allow the use of church facilities for such a ceremony.<sup>1</sup> The recent *Spahr v. Pby of Redwoods* GAPJC case makes this mandatory: "...officers of the PCUSA authorized to perform marriages shall not state, imply, or represent that a same sex ceremony is a marriage."

The General Assembly PJC, in both *Benton* and *Spahr*, recognized the necessity for ministers to be sure not to permit confusion regarding the difference between same sex

---

<sup>1</sup>"Inasmuch as the session is responsible and accountable for determination of the appropriate use of the church building and facilities (G-10.0102n), it should not allow the use of the church facilities for a same sex union ceremony that the session determines to be the same as a marriage ceremony."

unions, performed in the course of pastoral care and marriage ceremonies, described in our Directory for Worship.<sup>2,3</sup>

- These authoritative interpretations offer ministers and sessions the following guidance:
- They should not utilize liturgies for Christian marriage or liturgies for the recognition of civil marriage in ceremonies for same sex couples.
- They may not perform a ceremony that they consider or represent to be the same as a marriage ceremony nor may they permit their facilities to be utilized for any such ceremony.
- They may provide pastoral care in the form of worship services that "celebrate a loving, caring, and committed relationship" such as civil unions for same sex couples, but they must also advise such couples that such a service does not constitute a marriage and may not be held out as such.
- This means that ministers and sessions continue to be responsible to make appropriate decisions concerning pastoral care for members, all the members of the church.

Issued December 2002

Last updated April 2008

---

<sup>2</sup>Remedial Case 212-11: *Benton, et al v. Presbytery of Hudson River* (Minutes, 2000, Part I, page 587, ¶ 12.185) "There is no mention in the *Book of Order* of same sex unions (ceremonies). If a same sex ceremony were considered to be the equivalent of a marriage ceremony between two persons of the same sex, it would not be sanctioned under the *Book of Order*."

<sup>3</sup>Disciplinary Case 218-12: *Spahr v. Presbytery of the Redwoods* "We do hold that the liturgy should be kept distinct for the two types of services. We further hold that officers of the PCUSA authorized to perform marriages shall not state, imply, or represent that a same sex ceremony is a marriage."