

## **Frequently Asked Questions: Civil Union and Marriage**

### **What is the overall issue?**

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has for some time been wrestling with the issue of same-gender marriage. Despite differing views and positions the over-arching question, as laid out by the [Final Report of the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage](#) [219th General Assembly (2010)], is: How do we extend the grace of God to all, calling all persons to repentance, transformation, and discipleship—regardless of sexual orientation—so that all will experience God’s gracious intention for humanity?

### **What is civil marriage?**

Civil marriage is a state-licensed contract between two consenting adults. Such a contract is granted to parties who meet particular criteria, which may include residency, identification, premarital counseling, evidence that neither party is currently in a civil marriage, medical testing, lack of consanguinity, and age. In most states, difference in gender is a state-required criterion; in some, people of the same sex may be licensed to marry. Civil marriage determines the delineation of the household and a person’s next-of-kin, primary parental rights and responsibilities, and other benefits granted by states to those in licensed civil marriages.

### **Where does the federal government stand?**

The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) defines marriage as between a man and a woman for the purpose of federal law. It was signed in 1996 by President Clinton. In 2013 the U.S. Supreme Court struck down “Section Three” of DOMA, essentially extending federal marriage benefits to gay couples legally married in their states, regardless of where they choose to reside.

### **How does the PC(USA) *Book of Order* define marriage?**

The PC(USA) *Book of Order* states that “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” (W-4.9001).

### **What business is before the 221st General Assembly related to civil unions and marriage?**

**10-01:** On Amending W-4.9000 Concerning the Church’s Role in Legal Marriage and Services of Christian Covenant—From the Presbytery of Lehigh.

**10-02:** On Amending W-4.9000, Marriage—From the Presbytery of the Cascades.

**10-03:** On Issuing an Authoritative Interpretation of W-4.9000 to Affirm Pastoral Discretion in Performing Marriage Ceremonies—From the Presbytery of Heartland.

**10-04:** On Issuing an Authoritative Interpretation of W-4.9000 to Affirm Pastoral Discretion in Performing Marriage Ceremonies—From the Presbytery of East Iowa.

**10-05:** On Amending W-4.9001, Christian Marriage—From the Presbytery of Midwest Hanmi.

**10-06:** On Rescinding the 1991 Authoritative Interpretation Concerning Teaching Elders Performing Marriages for Same-Gender Couples and Sessions Permitting Such Ceremonies in their Facilities—From the Presbytery of New Castle.

**10-07:** On Creating a Task Force to Identify Common Ground and Reconcilable Differences with Respect to Same-Gender Marriage—From Eastern Korean Presbytery. Details are available on [PC-Biz](#)

## **What GA committee will handle this business?**

Committee 10: Civil Union and Marriage Issues. It is being led by Moderator Jeffrey Bridgeman (Santa Barbara Presbytery) and Vice Moderator Rebecca Tollefson (Scioto Valley Presbytery).

## **What actions can the 221st General Assembly take?**

The assembly must “answer” each item of business using one of five options: approve, disapprove, refer, approve as amended, or answer with a different action than was originally proposed.

## **What have other denominations done on the issue?**

A snapshot of information from the [Pew Research Center](#) and other sources.

- **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**

In 2009 the governing body of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America adopted *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, a social statement that defines marriage “as a covenant of mutual promises, commitment, and hope authorized legally by the state and blessed by God.” That statement then goes on to acknowledge that the Church historically has understood marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman, reflecting Mark 10: 6–9...” However, on the question of whether or how to regard “publically accountable lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships,” the statement commits those in the denomination to honoring--on the basis of conscience—each of four differing "conviction sets" at this time because each is based on differing understandings of Scripture, science, and pastoral care. An additional policy decision in 2009 committed the ELCA to allow—did not require--congregations that *chose* to do so to recognize and hold publicly accountable same-gender relationships that intended to be lifelong and monogamous.

- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Social Statement: Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust (2009) ( [www.elca.org/socialstatements](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements) )
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Sexuality: Some Common Convictions” (1996) ([www.elca.org/socialmessages](http://www.elca.org/socialmessages) )

- **United Church of Christ**

In 2005, the United Church of Christ’s General Synod voted to legally recognize and advocate in favor of same-sex marriage. Given the autonomous nature of United Church of Christ churches, each congregation may adopt or reject the recommendations of the General Synod.

- **United Methodist Church**

In 2008, the United Methodist Church’s top policymaking body reaffirmed that marriage is between a man and a woman. Additionally, the UMC’s Judicial Council ruled in 2009 that church law prohibits clergy from performing same-sex marriages. Thus, the denomination does not sanction UMC ministers or UMC churches to conduct civil union ceremonies, despite appeals from some regional congregations and clergy that it do so. During the 2012 meeting of the General Conference, delegates voted down a resolution that would have struck from the UMC’s Book of Doctrine and Rules language stating that homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching.” Delegates also tabled a proposal to allow churches to bless same-sex unions.

- **Episcopal Church**

In 2006 the church stated its “support of gay and lesbian persons and [opposition to] any state or federal constitutional amendment” prohibiting same-sex marriages or civil unions (Resolution A095). In July 2012, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church approved a liturgy for blessing same-sex relationships. The new liturgy falls short of a marriage rite. However, the “blessing” ceremony resembles the marriage ceremony in most ways, including an exchange of vows and agreement by the couple to be in a lifelong committed relationship. The ritual for same-sex couples will not be mandatory. Each Episcopal bishop will decide whether to allow churches in his or her jurisdiction to use the new liturgy to bless same-sex unions. And in those dioceses where blessing same-sex relationships is permissible, no Episcopal priest will be required to perform the blessing ceremony.