

PCCMP Policy - Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ministers of the word and sacrament officiating at marriage ceremonies (to include same gender couples)

(The below is a synopsis on the provisions of the Constitution of the PC(USA) regarding ministers of the word and sacrament officiating at marriage ceremonies. This constitution continues to guide all ministers of the word and sacrament regardless of their specific calling – this includes all chaplains serving in federal positions to include military chaplains.)

Bottom Line Up Front - A minister of the word and sacrament (ministers) of the PC(USA) who serves as a chaplain in the uniformed services of our nation may not be compelled to perform any marriage they believe is contrary to their understanding of the Word of God as guided by the testimony of the Holy Spirit to their spirit. This applies to any discernment the chaplain may make regardless of the particulars of the individuals seeking the chaplain's participation. The chaplain may choose to decline participation for many reasons, one of which may be that the individuals constitute a same gender couple.

Please find below copies of articles from our Book of Order which are authoritative for chaplains as they consider officiating at marriage ceremonies. References to the role of the session do not apply to federal or other civil government settings.

Please note especially the Nothing Shall Compel section at the end.

W-4.06: The Covenant of Marriage

W-4.0601: Christian Marriage

In Baptism, each Christian is claimed in the covenant of God's faithful love. 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.

W-4.0602: Preparing for Marriage

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 minister of the Word and Sacrament[†] 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 minister of the Word and Sacrament[†], who may agree to the couple's request only if, in the judgment of the minister of the Word and Sacrament[†], 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 minister of the Word and Sacrament[†] may seek the

counsel of the session, which has authority to permit or deny the use of church property for a marriage service.

W-4.0601: 2 Helv. Conf. 5.245–5.251; West. Conf. 6.131–6.139.

W-4.06–W-4.07

Pastoral and Occasional Services W-4.0603–W-4.0703

W-4.0603: Order of Worship

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 minister of the Word and Sacrament[†] and the supervision of the session (W-2.03). In a service of marriage, the couple marry each other by exchanging mutual promises. The minister of the Word and Sacrament[†] 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.

W-4.0604: Recognizing Civil Marriage

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.

W-4.0605: Nothing Shall Compel

Nothing herein shall compel a minister of the Word and Sacrament[†] to perform nor compel a session to authorize the use of church property for a marriage service that the minister of the Word and Sacrament[†] or the session believes is contrary to the minister of the Word and Sacrament's[†] or the session's discernment of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of the Word of God.

As your Endorser, I am grateful for the acceptance of diversity within our church community. Our "Big Tent" church includes individuals who maintain differing beliefs regarding same gender marriage. Recognizing this, our policy regarding ministers officiating at marriage ceremonies was determined weighing interpretations of Holy Scripture and its application to current practice. This discernment process acknowledged some ministers do believe same gender marriage is in accord with our faith and some do not. Rather than address same gender marriage particularly we chose to emphasize the decision to officiate at any marriage ceremony rests with the minister. In our policy, each minister makes a unique decision whether to officiate at a marriage ceremony for each couple who seeks their service.

Please note that in the current policy regarding marriage, we do not single out same gender couples but preserve the prerogative of ministers to decline officiating at marriages based on any Biblical principle. I am most pleased with this approach. A key hallmark of our theology is the role of an individual's conscience in providing guidance in all matters of faith and practice.

As an endorsed chaplain, you are governed in your conduct with regards to marriage by the Book of Order. My role is to support your decisions based on provisions of our Constitution and your sincerely held beliefs based on Holy Scriptures.

As your Endorser, I require you to be able to make the case to me that you have made decisions to officiate or not officiate at a marriage ceremony based on your understanding of the Word of God.

I also require you to provide to any couple seeking your involvement in their marriage ceremony the same love and care as any other. You may determine you cannot officiate, but such a decision must be made and communicated with respect and appropriate support.

In our theology marriage is not a sacrament – and we should not treat it as such.

The PC(USA) is committed to providing ministry to all as all are created in the image of God. Despite the universal and complete nature of sin, each human may be the subject of God's saving grace and each one is the subject of God's common grace. We are ministers of the living Lord and extend to all the opportunity to enjoy God's love and grace.

As a chaplain, you are to be a Matthew 25 minister taking the love of Christ to all even as you also are faithful in helping individuals and communities understand the desires of God for personal conduct and fidelity.

Prepared by Lyman Smith September 14, 2020

Questions or comments – please send to info@pccmp.org