Marriage & the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): A People’s Guide for Study & Conversation
Introduction

As Presbyterians, we believe that no one person can know the will of God. This is a longstanding and foundational element of our Presbyterian church life: only together—with guidance by the Holy Spirit and through prayer, study and discussion—can we help each other see where we share a common understanding and where we need to focus to build one.

One area challenging the PCUSA right now is our understanding of marriage. While there are many aspects of modern marriage that need our prayerful attention, the one that prompted the 220th General Assembly to encourage the whole church to prayerful study together is marriage of same-sex couples.

The Office for Theology, Worship and Education of the Presbyterian Mission Agency has provided a review of Christian marriage in the PCUSA. That study uses the Statement on the Gift of Marriage in The Book of Common Worship to structure its look at how the PCUSA has understood marriage. The section on marriage in The Directory for Worship (4.9001) is the foundation for the aspects of marriage highlighted in that study. It also provides an overview of church policy, including a summary of PCUSA “Stances on Homosexuality and Marriage.”

What this four-part study adds to that review is consideration of the diverse perspectives among us on the inclusion of same-sex couples in our PCUSA understanding of marriage. Many in the church know same-sex couples whose lives together shine with all the attributes of marriage that are captured in our Directory for Worship. At the same time, the debate and vote on the marriage overtures at the 2012 GA showed clearly that there are also many in the church who believe that same-sex marriage is not appropriate for Christians.

This guide is meant to nurture the discussion that began with the Report on the Special Committee on Civil Unions and Marriage. It takes into account the fast-moving expansion of the modern understanding of marriage both in the church and the world. It seeks to outline the primary points of view on Scripture, theology, history and current affairs held among us so that we may together explore God’s will for us in this realm of marriage.

Reformed Christians are always on a journey toward greater understanding of God. This is certainly true with regard to our vision for marriage. More Light Presbyterians offers this study guide to the whole church with the hope that together, through prayerful, respectful study and conversation, we can come closer to discerning God’s plan for the institution of marriage and how the PCUSA will participate in what God has in store.

As you use this guide, you or your group are invited to join with others across the church in this prayer from our Presbyterian Book of Common Worship:

“Through the embrace of love and the bonds of godly affection, make us one in the Spirit by your peace which makes all things peaceful. We ask this through the grace, mercy and tenderness of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Book of Common Worship, p. 812.

Using This Guide

This guide has four sections: Biblical Considerations (pgs. 2-4), Theological Considerations (pgs. 5-7), Historical Considerations (pgs. 7-8) and Current Considerations (pgs. 9-10). Each section contains material that highlights different perspectives held in the PCUSA on the nature of marriage. These are followed by a set of study questions meant to guide a conversation about the material in that section.

Like the historical and policy study from the Office for Theology, Worship and Education, we are grateful for the groundbreaking work of the Report of the Special Committee on Civil Unions and Marriage presented to the 219th General Assembly in 2010. It is part of a list of resources for further study included at the end of this guide.

Since the 220th General Assembly Commissioners also asked that presbytery and congregational groups report their experience back to the Office for Theology, Worship, and Education, we encourage you to record the main points that come to light as a result of your discussions after completing a marriage study. The process to do this is found in the Conclusion.
Because all of us in the PCUSA look to the Bible to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ, our disagreements over many topics, including marriage, involve disagreements over our understanding of Scripture. For more than a century, the church has worked to agree upon parameters for interpretation of Scripture that hold together our freedom of conscience and our integrity as a Christian community.

What we suggest using here are the guidelines entitled, “Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture,” adopted by the 123rd General Assembly in 1983. These can be our common lodestars for our approach to Scripture in this church-wide study.

We encourage you to dwell upon these until everyone is familiar and comfortable with them and to return to them often in your discussion of the Bible:

1. **The Purpose of Holy Scripture**: Scripture’s purpose is to tell us about God and what God wants from humanity. It is not, for example, an astronomy or biology textbook.

2. **The Precedence of Holy Scripture**: Scripture comes first, before all other sources of knowledge; it does not replace other sources of knowledge.

3. **The Centrality of Jesus Christ**: Jesus is the central message of Scripture. Although this does not imply a “canon within a canon” any decision made on the basis of Scripture should be coherent with the way Jesus taught and embodied God’s person and will.

4. **The Interpretation of Scripture by Scripture**: When faced with one text, investigate all the other texts relevant to the same issue. This includes interpreting the Old Testament on the basis of the New, and the New on the basis of the Old.

5. **The Rule of Love**: The fundamental expression of God’s will is the two-fold commandment to love God and neighbor, and all interpretations are to be judged by the question whether they offer and support the love given and commanded by God.

6. **The Rule of Faith**: Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the past and present Christian community’s understanding of Scripture. For us, that means the confessions and catechisms. That does not mean new interpretations are automatically discounted, but anything new must be evaluated in the context of Christian tradition.

7. **The Fallibility of All Interpretation**: Every reading, confession, and theology that refers to Scripture is subject to testing by further and more faithful searching of the Scripture to see if it is genuinely in accord with the Bible’s witness.

8. **The Relation of Word and Spirit**: Our tradition has always believed that the role of the Spirit in illuminating the reader is an essential part of Scripture’s authority.

9. **The Use of All Relevant Guidelines**: Hold law and gospel in tension, use both Old and New Testament, and use all of these Reformed guidelines for interpreting Scripture.

**Two Biblical Passages for Consideration and Study**

There are many passages in Scripture that inform the church on our approaches to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people as well as to marriage. Here are two to begin the conversation.

**Genesis 2:18-25: Two Perspectives**

When reading this passage in the Creation story, many Presbyterians focus on God’s stated purpose, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” God's clear goal here is to create a partner or helper for the man. It is not specifically to create a woman to be a wife. To achieve this goal, God creates, first, the animals but the man fails to find a partner there. The human chooses as a helper: not the animals, but a human partner -- the woman. From this perspective, God allows the man to choose the creature that is, for him, the best partner.
Biblical Considerations (cont.)

Based upon this understanding of the passage, two conclusions may be drawn. First, in God’s eyes, it is not good for anyone to be alone. God desires a helper for everyone. Second, God gives us, as to the man in Genesis, the ability to choose the partner who is the best helper. For some, this may be a person of the opposite sex, but there is nothing requiring that choice. This allows the possibility that a same-sex partner may be the best helper and God’s gift to some of us as a partner in life. Based upon this interpretation, this passage becomes support for same-sex marriage.

Conversely, many other Presbyterians find in this passage the foundational Biblical establishment of marriage being between a man and a woman. The heart of the passage from this point of view is the conclusion, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” These Presbyterians see this as the first marriage and the paradigm for all the rest.

This perspective on marriage in Scripture is affirmed for these Presbyterians in the New Testament. Jesus quotes this verse, along with Genesis 1:27, when he is speaking with Pharisees who want to test Him about divorce in Matthew 19:1-12 and Mark 10:1-12. Some Presbyterians take this to be Jesus’ confirmation that marriage shall be between a man and a woman, the understanding they also have of Genesis.

At the same time, other Presbyterians find Mark 10:9 and Matthew 29:6a, “Therefore what God has joined together let no one separate,” to be an enjoiner to support all committed couples whom God has blessed, including those who are same-gender.

Revelation 21:1-8: Two Perspectives (see box page 4)

On the one hand, the speaker here envisions “the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” This echoes the prophetic images of God as the faithful husband and Israel as the adulterous, then forgiven, wife in the Old Testament, and the depiction in the New Testament letters of the husband as the head of the wife reflecting Christ as the head of the church. Many Presbyterians hold the view that these confirm marriage to be between a man and a woman, always and only a bridegroom and a bride.

On the other hand, many Presbyterians hold lightly the maleness of God in Scripture and the femaleness of Israel or the church. From this perspective, God is larger and more mysterious than human gender, and we know that communities like the church are neither male nor female as a whole. What is central in this image for them is the loving covenant between God and creature. They understand the reflection of that covenant among us to be equally as possible between two men or two women as it is between a man and a woman. Just as the idea of equality between male and female was new not too long ago, so also the loving covenant between two men or two women is a new idea of our time. This passage confirms, for some, that God often reveals new things that surprise, delight, and challenge us to grow and change.
Another verse of interest for our study of marriage is the vice list in verse 8: “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur.” It is helpful in any group of Presbyterians to clarify together what these categories mean and who exactly is included in them since differences on these definitions color our assessments of what constitutes a valid Christian marriage.

Study Questions

1. Which of the above interpretations fit best with your prayerful reading of the texts? Or do you hold yet another perspective on them?

2. When you put yourself in the shoes of those who hold other interpretations than your own, what do you see and learn?

3. When you look at the passage from Genesis, what discussions arise around the words “helper” and “partner” specifically in your understanding of gender? Does the passage provide any understanding of “woman” and “man” that can inform our understanding of marriage?

4. When you apply to these passages the guidelines for “Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture” listed earlier, with thoughts on marriage in mind, what fresh ideas arise?

5. What other Bible passages come to mind as valuable for your group’s study of marriage, particularly of same-sex couples? You may want to make plans to explore them, sharing different views and applying these same questions or others you may formulate together.
Theological Considerations

General themes in Reformed Theology

Our Reformed Christian faith emerged in Europe almost five hundred years ago as a faithful effort to reform the Roman Catholic Church. Out of the rich and complex theology developed by Reformed Christians through the years, three themes seem particularly relevant to our study of marriage: the sovereignty of God, human freedom within God’s covenant of love, and what it means to be both reforming and Reformed.

One of the distinguishing theological emphases of Reformed theology is God’s active sovereignty over every aspect of life. What this means at its simplest is that God’s will shall be done; God’s hand is in everything whether we see it or not. God inspired the creation of both church and state and works through both. God is sovereign over all.

Some of us who conclude that God condemns gay and lesbian relationships generally conclude that God’s sovereignty is being thwarted by same-sex marriage. Others in the PCUSA see God as sovereign over gay and lesbian people, creating them to love another of the same sex and blessing their life-long covenants of love in marriage.

The energizing tension in Reformed faith, which arises from holding together God’s sovereignty with the freedom given to human beings by God, is seen in a second distinctive emphasis among the Reformers, that is, the centrality of the covenant between God and humanity. God’s covenant of love with us requires this gift of freedom in order for us to freely choose to love and serve God in Christ. Our freedom also includes freedom of conscience with regard to reading of Scripture and acting in the world.

This generates constant discussion in the Reformed church as to the meaning of the Bible and God’s will for us as individuals and as a community of faith. When gay and lesbian Presbyterians express an intention to marry another of the same gender out of their faithful understanding of God’s call to them, and Presbyterian pastors feel called to preside at these weddings, then, for some, the Reformed emphasis on freedom of conscience permits them to do these things within the loving covenant with God. Other Presbyterians, whose consciences feel violated by the blessing of same gender couples--which they consider contrary to our covenant with God--object to this kind of pastoral care being offered by any Presbyterian teaching elder.

A third theme of Reformed theology that is especially relevant to our study of marriage is the acceptance of new things erupting into our faith and life captured in the foundational description of our church, “Reformed, always being reformed.” This is a perspective that rests upon the way in which the Reformers offered a new way to be the church as an alternative to the Catholic Church of their time.

Actually, for our ancestors, the church they created was both new and old, because the inspiration for their sense of church was the early church of the New Testament. At the same time, the experience for the people was something amazingly, refreshingly new. For some Presbyterians this emphasis on reform requires a “return” to limiting marriage to between a man and a woman. For others, being reformed opens the possibility of living into something new that the Holy Spirit has revealed to us now: the love and commitment between two men or two women that has all the qualities of marriage.

The Book of Confessions

All elders in the PCUSA promise to be instructed and led by the confessions authorized by the church as they lead the people of God. The eleven confessions in The Book of Confessions are both statements of who we are, as a church, now, and historic documents rooted in particular times and places. This tension between the “then” of each confessional document and the “now” of our time requires a constant conversation with our forbearers. Let’s have that conversation as a vital part of our study of marriage.

The index to The Book of Confessions confirms that marriage is not a central concern in the confessions of our church. The Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, written in an era when marriage was the prerogative of the state alone, do not mention it. When the Reformers became the prevailing church structure in large regions of Europe, they inherited the power over marriage established by the Catholic Church in the 1200’s. John Calvin led the Reformed Protestant church into a pattern of sharing the regulation of marriage with...
The Confession of 1967, 9.47

The relationship between man and woman exemplifies in a basic way God’s ordering of the interpersonal life for which he created mankind. Anarchy in sexual relationships is a symptom of man’s alienation from God, his neighbor, and himself. Man’s perennial confusion about the meaning of sex has been aggravated in our day by the availability of new means for birth control and the treatment of infection, by the pressures of urbanization, by the exploitation of sexual symbols in mass communication, and by world overpopulation. The church, as the household of God, is called to lead men out of this alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ. Reconciled to God, each person has joy in and respect for his own humanity and that of other persons; a man and a woman are enabled to marry, to commit themselves to a mutually shared life, and to respond to each other in sensitive and lifelong concern; parents receive the grace to care for children in love and to nurture their individuality. The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by man when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together, or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time.

Theological Considerations (cont.)

the state, prompting churches like the PCUSA to maintain harmony with state laws on marriage.

The brief treatment of marriage in the Second Helvetic Confession (5.245-5.248) and The Westminster Confession (6.131-139) reflect a presumption that marriage is between a man and a woman, one consistent with the social norms of the times. Amendments made by both the PCUS and the PCUSA to the chapter on marriage and divorce in The Westminster Confession (6.131-139) reflect the struggle of the Presbyterian tradition in the 20th century to reform our understanding of divorce. Some among us in the PCUSA find this a foundation for further reform in our expansion of marriage to two men or two women.

At the same time, there are other parts of the confessions that speak directly to concerns related to marriage. One important section to consider together is in The Confession of 1967, 9.47, where “anarchy in sexual relationships” is explored. Some Presbyterians find what is noted as “moral confusion” in a person’s claim to be lesbian or gay since, for them, God made only male and female to cleave to the other. However, others see “the moral confusion of our time” in anyone requiring gay and lesbian people to try to change their sexual orientation or to be celibate, particularly when our Reformed ancestors were so clear that celibacy is a gift, not a viable human choice for everyone. Additionally, while some might take the reference to marriage between “a man and woman” in this section to be definitive, others see it, along with the male references to God and humankind, to be a remnant from the era when our linguistic horizons had not yet expanded to be inclusive of women and of those who are lesbian and gay.

One final theological consideration regarding marriage is the dilemma our pastors face in the present situation where many churches have active gay and lesbian couples who come to their pastors asking them to preside at their weddings, especially when a growing number of state marriage laws now include same-sex couples. One of our oldest Reformed tenets becomes fresh and new for these Presbyterians: “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship (The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.109).” Some teaching elders have found here their freedom to offer the pastoral care of officiating at the legal weddings of their gay and lesbian church members. Other Presbyterians believe that Scripture precludes same-sex marriage and that pastors are bound by the traditional definition of marriage still found in the Directory for Worship, so that this section of our confessions does not apply.

It must be said, however, that ordained Presbyterians take a vow to be “governed by our church’s polity,” and therefore teaching elders and all others who are ordained do have their consciences bound by the laws of the church. Nevertheless, some see a conflict between the traditional definition of marriage as being between a man and a woman in W-4.9001 of our Directory for Worship and the provisions of W-7.4002, which states that the biblical vision of doing justice calls
Changes in marriage through time in Western culture

In ancient times the institution of marriage was a business arrangement, consented to by both fathers, and used for the purpose of consolidating power and increasing property holdings. Marriage contracts could be broken if another alliance offered better prospects. These arrangements changed very little in the early years of Christianity. Although Paul exhorted women to obey their husbands and men to love their wives, for the most part love, if it came into the marriage at all, was a result of marriage and not a consideration prior to the fact. Polygamy, still not uncommon at the time, was phased out under the influence of the early church.

Until the 16th century, celibacy was considered the ideal for Christians. Men who had taken vows not to marry, however, often had concubines and children with no legal rights. Although this was problematic for the church, the hierarchy continued to encourage celibacy, developing ever-stricter policies on who could marry whom, and prohibiting marriage between distant cousins, relatives not related by blood, and even those who had close societal ties, to the point where sometimes no suitable marriage partner could be found. For those with means, waivers to these rules could be purchased from the church.

The sixteenth century Reformers Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others instituted major changes in marriage law and practice. They held celibacy to be undesirable based on their experience and understanding of Scripture, and believed it should be reserved for only the very few who had the gift. They encouraged clergy to marry, and loosened the restrictions on the eligibility of marriage partners. They also permitted, under limited circumstances, divorce and remarriage, which had been totally banned by the church prior to that time. They recognized the authority of civil government to regulate marriage, making it mandatory that marriages be publicly registered with the state. According to their understanding, three things were needed for marriage: the consent of both partners, the consent of their parents, and the presence of witnesses. Marriages continued to be primarily financial and political transactions.

While a husband’s public status increased when he married, because he became the head of a household and spoke or voted on behalf of his family, the wife’s status decreased. The husband’s promise was to provide for and protect her and the children. Her promise was to obey and serve him. Women’s wages were considered the property of the man, whether she worked in the home or outside. She had no public voice or vote. He

### Theological Considerations (cont.)

for “supporting people who seek the dignity, freedom, and respect they have been denied.” Following one’s conscience within the parameters of obedience to Presbyterian polity thus sets up a conflicting situation which, for these individuals, may mean choosing the call to do justice as defined by the church and officiating at same-sex weddings even while the church defines marriage in a more restrictive way. (See the next section under “Current Considerations” for more information on this.)

### Study Questions

1. How do the doctrines of divine sovereignty, God’s covenant, and continuing reformation inform your faith in general and your stance on marriage in particular?
2. Are there other essential elements of your faith that impact your perspective on marriage? Could you share them for further discussion?
3. Is the tension clear to you between the historical particularity of our confessions and our declaration that these statements share with the world what we presently believe and resolve to do? How do you faithfully hold these together as you use the confessions in this study of marriage?
4. Read together Section 9.47 of The Confession of 1967. How do these insights inform your understanding of marriage? How does it relate to your approach to same-sex marriage?
5. How does the Reformed commitment to freedom of conscience impact this study and the road you see ahead for the church regarding marriage?

### Historical Considerations

Changes in marriage through time in Western culture

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Historical Considerations (cont.)

also owned her services and body, and could not be convicted of marital rape or, except in unusual cases, of spousal abuse. The courts considered it a husband’s right to beat a recalcitrant wife. This situation continued in the United States well into the twentieth century and created social norms that have influenced beliefs around the proper and expected roles that men and women should have in marriage and society – beliefs that remain today.

While marriage presided over by clergy was common in New England, in the early American South the majority of marriages were privately accomplished without presence of clergy, because clergy were scarce. Few records were kept, and the surrounding community set the norms and provided or withheld its approval. Bigamy was not unusual as husbands sometimes left their wives to move westward and then married again in the new territory, although abandoned wives could arrange for divorce. Polygamy, which had been practiced by some small Christian sects in Europe, was introduced in this country by the Mormons, but eventually outlawed. Same-sex marriage, which had been prohibited by the Christian church for centuries, was occasionally practiced among Native Americans.

Slaves were not permitted to marry because they had no standing to make legal contracts. With the master’s permission they could informally marry, but their families could be broken up and sold at any time. It was not unusual for white slaveholding men to claim sexual rights with the women they “owned,” and one of the primary objections to slavery by abolitionists was that it broke the sanctity of marriage. When the institution of slavery came to an end, many states enacted laws that prevented marriage between the races, and especially in Western states, this included Asians.

With the legal empowerment of women in the twentieth century to public voice and vote, marriage became a more egalitarian institution. Women gained rights over their own bodies. Contraceptives and abortion became legal. Women could now defend themselves against abusive husbands and take ownership of their own paychecks. While financial stability through marriage remained an issue, mutual attraction and love came to the fore. Men stopped asking the woman’s father for permission to marry her, fathers stopped giving their daughters away in marriage, and women no longer promised to obey their husbands. A growing shift in the understanding of marriage is the view that it is an equal partnership. As the mutual consent of the couple became paramount, divorce laws were also liberalized to allow divorce by the consent of both parties.

Being allowed to freely make a choice of whom to marry became a civil right when the Loving v. Virginia case was adjudicated by the Supreme Court in 1967, declaring that it is unconstitutional to prevent a couple from marrying on the basis of race. Gay and lesbian individuals and their allies continue to seek the right to same-sex marriage. At this writing, thirteen states and the District of Columbia have instituted marriage between two men or two women through legislation or state Supreme Court decisions. The Supreme Court of the United States has ruled on the grounds of equal protection under the law that the many benefits given by federal law to legally married couples cannot be withheld from legally married same-sex couples.

What strikes many Presbyterians in the sweep of history is the consistent understanding of marriage as being between one man and one woman.

What other Presbyterians see is steady change in the understanding of marriage, change that has brought us to this day when marriage is understood by many as being between equal partners who are committed to loving one another and building their lives together, including partners of the same gender.

Study Questions

1. What changes in marriage and gender roles for men and women over the past two thousand years outlined here stand out most to you and how do you, as a Christian, feel about them?

2. What troubles you about the current state of marriage in this country and what do you see as good about it? What parts of your Christian faith underlie your views?

3. What bearing do the changes in marriage through history have upon the present expansion of marriage to include same-sex couples? How does your faith inform your conclusions on this?
Current Considerations

United States Civil Law and the Current Understanding of Marriage

At this writing, thirteen states (Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, California, Washington, Maine, Maryland, Rhode Island, Delaware, Minnesota and Vermont), Washington D.C., and two Native American tribal jurisdictions (Coquille, Suquamish) legally permit same-sex marriages. Thirty-seven states have laws or constitutional amendments against same-sex marriage. Legislative and judicial action is ongoing in attempts to strengthen, replace or challenge these laws.

With the 2013 Supreme Court decision in Windsor v. The United States, about 1400 legal rights that had been reserved for heterosexual marriages are now granted by the federal government to legally married same-sex couples. Among these benefits are rights to joint parenting; joint adoption; status as next-of-kin for hospital visits and medical decisions; joint insurance policies for home, auto, and health; immigration and residency for partners from other countries; rights to annuities, pension plans, Social Security, and Medicare; wrongful death benefits for a surviving partner and children; veterans’ discounts on medical care, education, and home loans; and joint filing of tax returns. At the same time, same-sex couples residing in states that do not recognize their relationship as marriage may not be eligible for these federal benefits and no same-sex couple, legally married or not, will receive state benefits for married couples in those states.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Current Understanding of Marriage

At present the PCUSA defines marriage 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.” (Book of Order W-4.9001)

In states where same-sex marriage is permitted, some Presbyterian teaching elders are being asked to officiate at same-sex weddings. All pastors have traditionally had the right to determine whom they will marry within the parameters of what is allowed by the state. Since 2008 the exception for Presbyterian clergy, by a majority decision of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission, is that they are not permitted to “state, imply, or represent that a same-sex ceremony is a marriage.” (GAPJC Decision 218-12, Spahr v. Presbytery of Redwoods) Presbyterian teaching elders are permitted to bless same-sex civil unions.

For some, this ruling against same-sex marriage is consistent with their understanding of Scripture and centuries of church tradition, and therefore presents no difficulties. For others, it creates a pastoral crisis, because, as they see it, the ruling requires pastors to discriminate against same-sex couples in their congregations who come to them with the expectation that they will be able to wed like other couples in the sanctuary of their own church home. In some instances same-sex couples whose pastors have refused to marry them have left the Presbyterian Church. In others, pastors and clergy who have agreed to officiate at same-sex weddings have had to face judicial action in the PCUSA. The current situation in the church is that disciplinary accusations can be brought against any teaching elders who officiate at marriages of same-sex couples and against sessions who permit such marriages in their churches. Disciplinary action is costly both for the accused and for the church and adds to the tension between those who hold differing views.

Overtures regarding the definition of Christian marriage and the rights of clergy to choose whether they will officiate at same-sex weddings are being sent to the General Assembly. It will be up to the church to decide, by deliberation and by vote, how the PCUSA will resolve these matters.
Current Considerations (cont.)

Study Questions

1. Is civil marriage equality for same-sex couples a value that you hold? Why or why not?

2. Should there be a distinction between marriage equality in the civil realm and marriage equality in the church? Why or why not?

3. How do you see the church and the state cooperating in support of marriage as marriage continues to change?

4. As you understand the example and teachings of Jesus, what is the appropriate response of the church to requests of same-sex couples to have their marriages blessed within their congregations?

5. What impact do you foresee on the PCUSA given the direction marriage seems to be taking?

Conclusion

As you conclude this study, we invite you to share with one another any gratitude you may have for the willingness of your group to honestly voice convictions. Listen carefully to one another and seek understanding.

We also hope you will share any new insights that have come from this study of the tension over our understanding of marriage presently stirring in the PCUSA. Has the Holy Spirit brought you to a new place of understanding or sense of what you are to do in the church through this prayerful work together?

When the 2012 General Assembly asked the church to study marriage, they also asked us to report back to them about our experience. Your report can be sent to:

The Office for Theology, Worship and Education
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
100 Witherspoon St.
Louisville, KY 40202-1396

And we invite us all to pray together this prayer adapted from The Book of Common Worship, p. 823:

“Eternal God, you set us to live in families. We commend to your care our Presbyterian family. Keep us, we pray, free from bitterness, from the thirst of personal victory, and from pride itself. Fill us with faith, virtue, knowledge, moderation, patience and godliness. Light the fire of kindliness among us all, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”
Abbott, Elizabeth. *A HISTORY OF MARRIAGE from same sex unions to private vows and common law, the surprising diversity of a tradition*: Penguin Group (Canada), 2010.


PCUSA. Decisions of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Committee Regarding Teaching Elders who faced judicial charges for officiating at same-gender weddings:


