

More Light on ... Holy Unions and Marriage

More Light Presbyterians – as individuals, chapters and member congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) – believe that God continues to reveal liberating truth in scripture for the modern day as the Holy Spirit works in our hearts and minds. We are convinced that God has “yet more light” to break forth on our church’s understanding of committed relationships between two people brought together in God’s gracious mystery of love.

Why holy unions? Why marriage?

Sexuality is one of God’s amazing, life-enhancing gifts. Our sexuality expresses our capacity and longing for intimate connection. It is an indispensable component of our humanity, vital to our spiritual integrity and well-being. Each person – regardless of gender, sexual orientation or bodily condition – has a moral right to love and be loved, as well as the responsibility to express his or her sexuality in ways genuinely respectful of self and others.

Covenantal services (holy unions) between partners of any gender constitute one type of the church’s witness that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith can and do choose to live out their lives of love with integrity. These services express the fact that loving, intimate, covenantal relationships between persons of any gender are spiritually authentic expressions of God’s love.

The church has a moral interest in supporting people who desire to make life-long commitments to each other and to children they raise. To support those commitments, the same social and legal benefits ought to be conferred as in heterosexual marriage.

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Legal Landscape in Church and State

Our General Assembly’s Permanent Judicial Commission upheld the right of pastors to participate in holy unions and the right of worshipping communities to celebrate them: “...the Directory for Worship affirms the value of worship services in the practice of pastoral care and gives great latitude to ministers and sessions in addressing the pastoral care of members. A same-sex ceremony celebrates a loving, caring, and committed relationship” (Remedial Case 212-11, *Benton v. The Presbytery of Hudson River*). At the same time, the ruling warns that these services “do not constitute a marriage ceremony and should not be held out as such.”

Since that decision, new legal realities are being created by states (such as Massachusetts, with New Jersey and New York poised to follow) and countries (such as Canada) that recognize same-sex civil marriage. The Book of Order says that “marriage is a civil contract between a woman and a man” (W-4.9001) – a statement that is quickly becoming anachronistic. It remains to be seen whether church courts would sustain the marriage prohibition if the couple is legally married under civil law.

It is also unclear how our *Book of Order*, which offers no definition of “man” or “woman,” might be applied to relationships involving transgender partners. States vary in their recognition of marriages with one or more transgender spouse. Even where couples have been able to get married (or stay married through a partner’s gender transition), these marriages are at risk of being dismantled by courts and legislatures.

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Our Faithful Response

In a culture where prejudice, fear and hatred of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people abound, More Light Presbyterians affirm that the church is called to be an agent of love, wisdom and justice.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor denominations have affirmed “the need for the Church to stand for just treatment of homosexual persons in our society in regard to civil liberties, equal rights, and protection under the law from social and economic discrimination, which is due to all citizens” (Minutes, PCUS, 1977, Part 1, page 265). These rights and responsibilities include those taken for granted by many married couples, but routinely denied to same-sex couples.

We are also reminded that “the church is called to witness to society. To affirm standards of humane treatment and justice within the agencies and institutions of the church which [sic] are less compassionate than those of the civil order is a contradiction to the gospel” (Minutes, PCUSA, 1985, page 53).

The time is ripe to do what is right. More Light Presbyterians affirm the necessity to act on behalf of the gospel and our church’s social teachings and thus advocate working within the structures of the church and society to the end that marriage be an option to *all* who seek it. At the same time, we are mindful that many faithful Christians joyously choose *not* to marry; the church must avoid implicitly or explicitly treating marriage as a moral requirement for full participation in the life of the church. In this way we work to build a just and faithful society wherein all God’s children enjoy the same basic legal and spiritual rights and freedoms.

Our Call to Witness: Options for Action

Speaking out – As states and communities discuss civil marriage rights, it is of utmost importance that religious voices are heard supporting marriage rights for LGBT persons.

Developing a Congregational Policy – see examples of wedding/holy union policies at <http://www.mlp.org/holyunion.htm>.

Separating church and state functions – Some Presbyterian pastors no longer serve a civil role in any marriages. Eligible couples are legally married through a separate civil ceremony, and the pastor performs the same religious (holy union) ceremony for any couple, regardless of eligibility for marriage.

Ecclesial Disobedience – Some pastors perform ceremonies they boldly call marriages, despite the fact that the legal rights of marriage are not conferred upon the couple by the state. These intentional acts of ecclesial disobedience typically result in disciplinary action.

Taking risks – Some pastors have performed or are planning to perform legal marriage ceremonies in Canada or Massachusetts. It remains unclear whether this is acceptable within the PC(U.S.A.).

Resources for Further Study

Same-Sex Marriage? A Christian Ethical Analysis. Marvin Ellison, 2004.

Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe. John Boswell, 1994.

Equal Rites: Lesbian and Gay Worship, Ceremonies, and Celebrations. Cherry & Sherwood, editors, 1995.

Making Love Visible: In Celebration of Gay and Lesbian Families. Jean Swallow, 1995.

For more information, Contact MLP Field Organizer Michael Adee, (505) 820-7082, Michael@mlp.org

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