

Ovt 016

On Issuing an Authoritative Interpretation of W-4.9000—From the Presbytery of Boston.

The Presbytery of Boston respectfully overtures the 220th General Assembly (2012) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to issue the following authoritative interpretation of Section W-4.9000 in the PC(USA) Constitution:

The 220th General Assembly declares that in the states and other jurisdictions that authorize same-gender marriage, teaching elders (Ministers of the Word and Sacrament) and ruling elders commissioned to pastoral service (where jurisdictions allow) may officiate at such marriages in the context of Christian worship, and sessions may permit the use of church property for such services. This authorization does not oblige anyone to act contrary to their judgment or conscience.

Rationale

The 218th General Assembly voted overwhelmingly (516 to 151) to “request the Stated Clerk, the General Assembly Council, and other representatives of the PC(USA) to urge state legislatures and the federal government to apply the principle of equal protection to same gender couples and their children,”¹ In the same vote they determined to “support congregations, sessions, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament who are seeking to extend pastoral care as well as outreach and evangelism to same-gender couples and their nontraditional families who are more and more our neighbors on our streets and our fellow members in our pews.” In states where the equal protection principle includes marriage for same-gender couples, it would run counter to the direction mandated by the 218th General Assembly if the state were to provide more protection than the church is willing to extend to its own members and neighbors.

Where same-gender marriage is recognized under the law, it is neither fair nor pastoral to exclude members of a congregation by declining to perform their marriage on the grounds of gender alone. In practical terms, what this authoritative interpretation means is that clergy and commissioned lay pastors will be able to exercise their pastoral responsibilities without running the risk of prosecution by the church. Such prosecutions have placed a formidable financial and spiritual burden on councils of the church.

¹ Minutes 218th General Assembly, p.258: Item 04-13, Friday, June 27, 2008