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## Session Decisions and Definitions of Marriage

In 2021, the General Assembly adopted two parallel definitions of marriage:

### **Remit B, 2019 – Definition of Marriage (A&P 2021 p. 27)**

The Presbyterian Church in Canada holds two parallel definitions of marriage and recognizes that faithful, Holy Spirit filled, Christ centered, God honouring people can understand marriage as a covenant relationship between a man and a woman or as a covenant relationship between two adult persons. That congregations, sessions, ruling and teaching elders be granted liberty of conscience and action on marriage.

Since there are two approved definitions of marriage, the question is raised: Do ministers, Sessions or congregations need to decide which of the definitions of marriage they will adopt? Would Session have a vote? Would a congregation vote?

Since it is the Session that is responsible for all policy and procedures with respect to the use of church buildings and property, subject to the oversight of presbytery (Book of Forms 109.2), the question of whether the church will host same-sex weddings rests with the Session and not the congregation. While the Session will want to be pastorally sensitive to the expectations of the congregation, it would not be necessary (and possibly not appropriate) for the congregation to vote on the subject.

When a Session discusses how it will respond to a same-sex marriage request, there may be a difference of opinion among the ruling elders. The decision whether the Session will welcome same-sex weddings in the church, could be decided by a simple majority vote. That said, it would be beneficial to hold discussions leading up to this vote before a same-sex marriage request is received so that the Session can consider the question prayerfully, thoughtfully and in an unhurried manner. As always, it is expected that the whole Session will respect and uphold whatever decision is taken. Like all Session decisions, this is one that can be reconsidered if there is a will to do so at some time.

There may also be a difference of opinion between the minister and the ruling elders. The Presbyterian Church in Canada polity implies that the minister is required to abide by the will of the Session for all decisions within the purview of the session. While the minister moderates Session meetings, it is the ruling elders who make the decisions. Nevertheless, if a minister is prepared to conduct same-sex weddings but the Session is opposed to hosting them at the church, a compromise might be for the minister to conduct a same-sex wedding in another church or some other location\*. If the minister is not prepared to conduct same-sex weddings, but the Session is open to hosting them, arrangements could be made for another minister to conduct the ceremony in the church. Ministers are accountable to presbytery for their conduct of all marriages. In the context of ministry within a congregation the minister and Session should collaborate on an appropriate approach to a marriage policy.

If the Session (minister and ruling elders) accepts marriage as a covenant relationship between two adult persons, then it would make decisions about weddings held at the church based on that principle.

If the Session agrees that marriage is a covenant relationship between a man and a woman, then it would make decisions about weddings held at the church based on that principle. In this instance, it would be pastorally respectful for the minister to kindly refer a couple seeking a same-sex marriage to another minister who is prepared to consider conducting the wedding.

A sample wedding policy that gathers all the usual wedding information and can be modified to express the Session's understanding of marriage, can be found at the following websites:

Clerks' Corner web page: [presbyterian.ca/gao/clerks](http://presbyterian.ca/gao/clerks)

Sexuality web page: [presbyterian.ca/sexuality](http://presbyterian.ca/sexuality)

*\* If a minister conducts a wedding outside the church, which is not recorded in the congregation's marriage register, that minister must maintain a personal marriage register. The advice of the Clerks of Assembly is that the presbytery should be aware of this practice.*