

Same-sex marriages were sanctioned by the State of California from June 20, 2008, through November 4, 2008. During that time period Spahr performed wedding ceremonies for approximately sixteen same-sex couples.

In 2010, a prosecuting committee of the Presbytery brought charges against Spahr for officiating at these ceremonies and a three day trial was held before the PPJC in August of 2010. At the conclusion of the trial the PPJC found her guilty of three of the four charges, issued a Rebuke, and enjoined her "to avoid such offenses in the future." The three charges read in salient part as follows:

1. Committing the offense of representing that a same-sex ceremony was a marriage by performing a ceremony in which two women were married under the laws of the State of California and thereafter signing their Certificate of Marriage as the person solemnizing the marriage;
2. Persisting in a pattern or practice of disobedience concerning an authoritative interpretation of the *Book of Order*, in that under the laws of the State of California, she represented that no fewer than fifteen such additional ceremonies she performed were marriages of persons of the same sex;
3. Acting in violation of the authoritative interpretation of the *Book of Order* by failing to be governed by the polity of the PC(USA) in violation of her ordination vows.

A fourth charge of intentionally and repeatedly acting in violation of the *Book of Order*, and therefore failing to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church, was not sustained, and that finding was not challenged. The PPJC also declared that the "rebuke and injunction shall not be imposed" until any appeals were complete. Spahr appealed to the SPJC.

On March 25, 2011, after a hearing, the SPJC affirmed the decision of the PPJC. Spahr filed this Appeal to the GAPJC on May 4, 2011.

Specifications of Error

Specification of Error No. 1: The SPJC erred in constitutional interpretation by:

- a. *Affirming that Spahr committed the "offense of representing that a same sex ceremony was a marriage" (Appellant's Specification of Error No. 1) and stating, implying, or representing that these "ceremonies were ecclesiastical marriages" in violation of W-4.9001 as interpreted in Spahr 2008 and Southard 2011 (Appellant's Specification of Error No. 3).*
- b. *Determining that an authoritative interpretation can serve as a basis for an offense against the Constitution of the PC(USA) (First Part of Appellant's Specification of Error No. 2).*
- c. *Determining that Spahr violated her ordination vow in W-4.4003e and acted in violation of Spahr 2008 (Appellant's Specification of Error No. 5).*
- d. *Affirming the PPJC's guilty verdict that was contradicted by the PPJC's own findings that Spahr was faithful to Scripture and the Book of Order in celebrating*

- marriages of same-sex couples and does not meet burden of proof requirements under D-11.0403a (Appellant's Specification of Error No. 6).*
- e. Requiring ministers to discriminate against lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgendered persons, contrary to constitutional requirements of pastoral care under G-6.0202(b), G-6.0203, W-6.3002, W-6.3010, W-6.4000, W-7.3000, and W-7.4000; Spahr 2008; as well as being contrary to Scripture and G-3.0401, G-4.0403, and G-5.0103 (Appellant's Specifications of Error No. 7 and 8).*
 - f. Failing to determine whether Spahr's ministry with same-sex couples and families was faithful to Scripture and essentials of reformed faith and polity under G-6.0108 (Appellant's Specification of Error No. 9).*

This specification of error is not sustained.

See Decision below.

Specification of Error No. 2: The PPJC, SPJC, and GAPJC (in the Spahr 2008 and Southard cases) have erred by usurping the legislative power of the General Assembly (Second Part of Appellant's Specification of Error No. 2).

This specification of error is not sustained.

See Decision below.

Specification of Error No. 3: The SPJC erred in rephrasing the charges to determine that Spahr was guilty (Appellant's Specification of Error No. 4).

This specification of error is not sustained.

Decision

In Spahr 2008, Spahr was directed to refrain from implying, stating, or representing that a same-sex ceremony is a marriage. Within months of that order, Spahr performed marriage ceremonies for approximately sixteen same-sex couples. Although counsel for both parties confirmed that state law recognizes the legality of these marriages, the change in state law did not and could not change what is permissible for marriages to be authorized by the PC(USA).

The *Book of Order* states that its provisions may be authoritatively interpreted by the General Assembly or by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission. No distinction is made between these forms of interpretation in authority or application, and the most recent interpretation is binding (G-13.0103r, now G-3.0501c and G-6.02). Since Spahr 2008 was decided, there have been attempts at the General Assembly level to expand the language in W-4.9000. Such attempts have failed.

Spahr 2008 did not arise in a vacuum. In 1991, the General Assembly issued an authoritative interpretation (1991 AI) clarifying the denomination's stance on same-sex union ceremonies. The 1991 AI stated:

If a same sex ceremony were considered to be the equivalent of a marriage ceremony between two persons of the same sex, it would not be sanctioned under the *Book of Order*.

The 1991 AI further stated that a session “should not allow the use of the church facilities for a same sex union ceremony that the session determines to be the same as a marriage ceremony,” and that:

since a Christian marriage performed in accordance with the Directory for Worship can only involve a covenant between a woman and a man, it would not be proper for a minister of the Word and Sacrament to perform a same sex union ceremony that the minister determines to be the same as a marriage ceremony (1991, 395, 21.124, Req. 91-23).

This Commission has addressed the issue of same-sex unions and marriages since that time in other cases. The issue is not simply the same-sex ceremony. It is the misrepresentation that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes the ceremony and the resulting relationship to be a marriage in the eyes of the church. By the definition of W-4.9001, such a result cannot be. So the critical question is not whether the definitional language creates proscribed conduct, it is whether it is permissible to represent that one is doing something which one cannot constitutionally do.

This Commission agrees with the SPJC regarding Specification of Error No. 1 d and e (Appellant's Specifications of Error Nos. 6, 7, and 8). The SPJC correctly found that "being faithful to Scripture and the Constitution on other matters does not provide a defense for the actions charged in this case," and "the constitutional interpretations of Spahr (2008) and Southard by the PPJC are not inconsistent with the *Book of Order* when read as a whole." Both the PPJC and SPJC found that Spahr's conduct violated the Constitution.

As to Specification of Error No. 3 (Appellant's Specification of Error No. 4), the SPJC did not rephrase the charges, contrary to Spahr's argument. The SPJC included descriptive language regarding the Southard decision but that did not amount to a modification of the charge. The SPJC upheld the PPJC on the specific charges before it. The SPJC discussed the Southard decision as a statement that Spahr 2008 continues to apply in a state which authorizes same-sex marriage by civil law. The SPJC correctly stated that the term "marriage" in the charge relates to "Christian marriage" (or "ecclesiastical marriage" as that term is used in Southard), since that is the only marriage ceremony over which the PC(USA) has authority.

Order

IT IS THEREFORE ORDERED that the decision of the Permanent Judicial Commission of the Synod of the Pacific is hereby affirmed.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the Stated Clerk of the Synod of the Pacific report this decision to the Synod of the Pacific at its first meeting after receipt, that the Synod of the Pacific

enter the full decision upon its minutes, and that an excerpt from those minutes showing entry of the decision be sent to the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly.

IT IS FURTHER ORDERED that the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of the Redwoods report this decision to the Presbytery of the Redwoods at its first meeting after receipt, that the Presbytery of the Redwoods enter the full decision upon its minutes, and that an excerpt from those minutes showing entry of the decision be sent to the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly.

Absences and Non-Appearances

Commissioner Margaret MacLeod was absent and did not take any part in the deliberations or decision.

Concurring Opinion

I concur with the majority that Spahr's action in conducting these ceremonies as marriages was not authorized.

According to the 1991 AI, Presbyterian teaching elders do not have authority to perform same-gender marriages. Thus, when a teaching elder performs a same-gender ceremony as a marriage, he or she is misrepresenting the authority granted by Presbyterian polity.

The issue of authority is not exclusively ecclesiastical. With marriage, church law and secular law intersect. All United States jurisdictions grant clergy the authority to act as agents of the secular government in conducting civil marriages. The basis for granting that authority varies from one jurisdiction to another. In some jurisdictions, clergy can only perform those marriages that are authorized by their denominations. Other jurisdictions are more generous in the grant of authority. Some jurisdictions will validate a marriage even if the pastor erred. Other jurisdictions will not. According to the counsel for both Spahr and the Presbytery, the marriages Spahr conducted in 2008 will remain valid marriages under California law even if this Commission holds that her actions exceeded the authorization granted by the PCUSA. The result could have been different had Spahr performed the same acts in a different jurisdiction. Overstepping one's authority thus risks putting a trusting couple in the position of discovering that the civil law does not recognize their marriage.

While I affirm the majority opinion, I have serious concerns that the majority, in affirming the SPJC's decision, is also affirming the SPJC's criticism of the content of the ceremonies and the counseling Spahr conducted. In drawing a distinction between same-sex blessings, which are permissible, and same-sex marriages, which are not, the authoritative interpretations have gone beyond the definition of marriage to dictate the nature of the liturgy that can be used in same-sex blessings. As was stated in Benton (cite), "Ministers should not appropriate specific liturgical forms from services of Christian marriage or services recognizing civil marriage in the conduct of such ceremonies." In Spahr 2008, this Commission stated "the liturgy should be kept distinct for the two types of services." This aspect of the precedent has created a difficult situation for those who minister to the GLBT community.

There is an inevitable and legitimate overlap between a same-sex blessing ceremony and a mixed-sex marriage ceremony. Both ceremonies involve a couple making promises to each other in the presence of God, their families and their community. As oft noted, "Form follows function." Moreover, many, if not most of the trappings surrounding such ceremonies reflect popular culture rather than Biblical command. Given the overlap and the input from popular culture, how the two liturgies can be "kept distinct" is a mystery.

Requiring different liturgies has led to judicial micromanagement of the liturgy. In this case, the SPJC ruled:

The cumulative effect of signing the marriage license as a Presbyterian minister, conducting ceremonies on church property, using the same pre-marital counseling, and using the same liturgy for services further supports the implication that these were ecclesiastical marriages.

Conducting same-sex ceremonies on church property has always been appropriate, providing one is clear about the nature of the ceremony. Requiring that relationship counseling offered to same-sex couples should somehow differ in kind from that offered to mixed-sex couples ignores the nature and purpose of counseling. In a world where neutral relationship counseling becomes grounds for censure, teaching elders who conduct same-sex blessings cannot realistically determine what they can appropriately do, even when they are clear that the blessing is not a marriage ceremony.

The best solution is for the General Assembly to amend the definition of marriage to authorize teaching elders and commissioned ruling elders to preside at the marriages of same-sex couples in civil jurisdictions that recognize such marriages as legal. The definition now found in W-4.9001 was never designed for these circumstances. It was adopted in a world where same-sex marriages were inconceivable. By retaining that definition despite the increasing number of jurisdictions recognizing same-sex marriage, the church creates a form of second class citizenship for faithful Christians despite all the other places in the *Book of Order* where the full equality of persons regardless of sexual orientation is affirmed. I encourage the General Assembly to so act.

Respectfully Submitted,
Barbara A. Bundick

Concurring Opinion

The Appellant argues that W-6.3002, W-6.3010, W-6.4000; W-7.3000 and W-7.4000 support a teaching elder's ability to officiate at same-sex marriage ceremonies as a form of pastoral care. This argument is an interpretation of these provisions. At the same time, the Appellant argues that the Authoritative Interpretation made by this Commission in Spahr 2008 is not sufficient grounds for considering this action an offense. The Appellant asks this Commission to substitute her own interpretation for that made by this Commission in Spahr

2008.

W-6.3010 states that pastoral care includes the recognition of “transitions which bring joy and sorrow in human life” and specifically mentions the establishment of households and the making of new commitments. This portion of the constitution would appear to provide ample support for the celebration of relationships, including the commitment of same-sex couples to one another.

Marriage, however, is discussed in W-4.9000 and is described as a “civil contract,” a “covenant,” and a “lifelong commitment” between a woman and a man. W-4.9004, concerning the “Form and Order of Service,” also refers to declarations of intention and marriage vows spoken by a man and a woman and the declaration by the teaching elder that the “woman and the man are now joined in marriage.”

There is clearly disagreement with the definition and description of marriage provided in W-4.9004. However, this Commission has authoritatively interpreted this portion of the Constitution in Spahr 2008. Descriptions of pastoral care found in the Directory of Worship do not reach to the question of marriage.

The appropriate way to redefine marriage and permissible practice within the PC(USA) is not through individual reinterpretation of the advice of the larger church, but by means of an amendment to the Constitution approved by the General Assembly and ratified by the presbyteries of the church.

Respectfully Submitted,
Meta Shoup Cramer
Yun Jin Kim
Tony Cook

Dissenting Opinion

Book of Order W-4.9001 has been interpreted to deny homosexuals their rights as full members of the PCUSA, despite the overwhelming language in our Constitution recognizing the equality and rights of all people. See F-1.0403, F-1.0404, G-1.0302. The majority's application of the Book of Order provision provided by the Spahr (2008) and Southard cases injures where it should not, and its presence interferes with our process of being in conversation about how celebrations of the joining of lives are to be conducted.

Both parties agree that before the 2008 Spahr decision there was no limitation on the conduct of teaching elders (clergy) regarding how they approached the matter of gay marriage, although most of the denomination hesitated to perform same gender marriages. The dissent in the first Spahr (2008) decision questioned the appropriateness of the interpretation of the majority. In that case five commissioners stated in part:

Neither the 1991 AI, nor this Commission's decision in Benton, prohibited ministers from performing ceremonies intended to bless or recognize the union between two men or two women. Because a same sex ceremony cannot be a "marriage" as marriage is defined by W-4.9001, it should not be necessary to say more. It is not the place of this Commission to go any farther and step into the legislative realm. The larger church has declined at least four times to amend W-4.9001 with regard to same sex ceremonies. The majority now takes this step to amend the definition to include prohibitions. See the Annotations to W-4.9001 describing repeated unsuccessful attempts to change W-4.9001. Any steps to define or distinguish same sex ceremonies or the nomenclature applied to them is best left to the General Assembly, not this Commission.

Benton attempts to draw a line between a marriage and a same sex ceremony based on the conclusion that a marriage confers a new status on the couple, while a same sex union blesses an existing relationship. The new status on which Benton differentiates marriages from same sex ceremonies is not defined. Then in circular fashion, Benton concludes the status results from the pronouncement of "marriage" which is a priori defined by W-4.9001 as a status only available to a man and a woman. Benton and the 1991 AI "admonished" ministers and sessions to take special care to avoid confusing same sex ceremonies with marriages. This advice is consistent with the current state of our Constitutional language, which makes it clear that there is no such thing as "marriage" between same sex couples. W-4.9001. The majority purports that Benton (on which the SPJC relied heavily for its decision to censure Spahr) is not applicable. However, the holding in this case extends the holding in Benton. The majority refused to address Benton squarely or acknowledge that Benton is built on a foundation of sand. We dissent because the majority fails to point out the fallacies of Benton, and then converts admonitions in Benton into prohibitions. We disagree with that portion of the majority decision and do not join in it.

We agree with the dissent in Spahr 2008. The larger church has repeatedly declined to amend W-4.9001 with regard to same-sex ceremonies. The church needs a sharper degree of clarification and guidance that precisely defines how it understands marriage, especially in light of the high financial and personal burden involved. Given the contention regarding the nature and practice of Christian marriage in our time, it would be important and valuable for the Church, through its General Assembly, to state its definition in clearer and more precise legislation.

Spahr was specifically called to a validated ministry by the Presbytery to provide pastoral care to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) community. It is ironic that the majority has now found her in violation of the Constitution by pursuing a natural consequence of such ministry.

We cannot perpetuate the idea that LGBT couples are children of a lesser God. They are ethically and spiritually the equals of heterosexual couples in the eyes of our Lord. None of us can honestly declare to a committed couple that somehow heterosexuals reflect a more perfect image of the God we worship than they who view their gender differently. Our denomination

has failed to do justice to the LGBT community while emphasizing the traditions of heterosexual marriage which are embodied in W-4.9001.

As Christians we claim the high goal of loving and including all, then seek to exclude the LGBT community. This second class (or worse) treatment proclaims the hypocrisy of our present interpretations. Since the Directory for Worship is part of our constitution and the majority has found that it may give rise to disciplinary cases, then it should be immediately amended to clearly state that we fully welcome the LGBT community into their rightful place in our church, including allowing them to marry. For the reasons explained above we must respectfully dissent from the majority opinion which perpetuates our reliance upon an incorrect construction of W- 4.9001 and continues the discrimination against our LGBT brothers and sisters.

Respectfully Submitted
Clifford Looney
A. Bates Butler III
Susan J. Cornman
Jeana Lungwitz
Michael Lukens
Rebecca New

Dissenting Opinion

We respectfully dissent from this Decision.

The majority judges this case primarily in relation to the decisions in Spahr (2008) and Southard (2011) in a conviction that, behind its judicial interpretation, there is in the Constitution an explicit basis against officiating in a same-sex marriage. In fact, this conviction rests upon an assumption rather than explicit constitutional rule. It is grounded principally upon one section, even one sentence, in the Directory of Worship, that is claimed to have clear and obvious legal status. The Commission assumes here and in earlier cases that W-4.9001 presents a legal basis for denying the permissibility and validity of same-sex marriage because it presents a “definition” of marriage as exclusively between a man and a woman. This assumption is flawed. This provision in the Directory of Worship cannot serve effectively as a judicial criterion.

There are several reasons why W-4.9001 is incapable of bearing the legal significance and weight that the Commission has placed upon it. First, this paragraph emerged decades ago, in a very different time and context. In its language and descriptions, it reflects conventions of a time when same-sex unions presented little, if any, cultural concern or attention. The exclusive conventional norm was heterosexual marriage, when same-sex marriage, either civil or ecclesiastical, was unimaginable.

Secondly, W-4.9001 is an introductory narrative for a distinctive, introductory section on marriage, outlining its biblical and theological characteristics as background to provisions of

pastoral practice and nurture. Its content serves to establish a progression of four theological claims (gift, civil contract, covenant, commitment) as a foundation for the church's general understanding of marriage. In W-4.9001, there is an overarching, schematic narrative that develops a biblical and theological progression. These elements are explicated as four simple but profound claims, each of which has theological bearing. Marriage is viewed within a progression of God's gift (general revelation in the created natural order), as an element of civil order (part of universal civil order), rooted in our covenant (a distinctive mark of biblical people), and with the characteristics of such covenant (promise, trust, and faithful commitment). To claim that this paragraph is primarily and intentionally legal in nature forces an artificial warp upon its evident narrative purpose. As a fourfold theological outline of Christian marriage in narrative form, in no way is it clear or obvious that it proposes regulatory imperative or legal intention. Certainly, it does not have the kind of language or format that the church has come to expect in definitive juridical statements, the kind of "shall" language that is common to our order in providing regulatory lines for boundaries of action or proscribed behavior.

Further, recent definitional arguments have devolved from ancillary elements in the text that seem to take priority over the primary focus of its sentences. The key sentence from W-4.9001: "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" has been treated as a consummate definition and legal regulation, based on one element in its secondary clause. For many, the secondary gendered example has become more central than the primary definitional clause that denotes the covenantal nature of marriage. This displaced emphasis the common role of such secondary material as descriptive and illustrative. The question may be raised whether a portion of a secondary clause, one part in a set that elaborates upon and describes the character of a covenantal relation, constitutes an absolute and exclusionary prescription. In fact, it can be argued that it is not immediately clear or textually obvious that any of the ancillary clauses in these four provisions rises to the level of legal intention or definitional weight.

Thus, W-4.9001 cannot bear the interpretive weight that judicial process and decision has put upon it. Referring to W-4.9001, the majority in this Decision claims: "...the critical question is not whether the definitional language creates proscribed conduct..."—and in that approach precisely avoids the truly foundational issues in this and all recent related cases. The church has long held a biblically-based, covenantal theology of marriage, as outlined above, well beyond views bound within natural theology or gendered orders of creation. So-called definitional descriptions do not suffice because they lack depth and weight, because definition is neither directive nor legislative.

This is all to say that, in cases such as this one, a determination of offense requires clear demonstration of a violation against Scripture or the Constitution, in which the terms of a mandate are unambiguous and expressly stated. In this case and in the other recent cases, it is strikingly significant to note the absence of arguments upon perceived biblical warrants or directly applicable mandates in our Constitution and the presence of mere definitional bases.

In this case and the other recent decisions, my principal concern is that this Commission has forged a standard upon an extremely fragile provision, employing a strained interpretation that does not provide the necessary legal foundation for resolution of our dilemma or foster

pastoral guidance in the life of the church. By relying so heavily on W-4.9001, the Commission has ruled upon convention rather than law. The definitive clarity that the church deserves and expects in this continuing and vexatious dispute awaits deeper foundational judgment as well as more precise legislation.

Respectfully submitted,
Michael Lukens
A Bates Butler III
Susan J. Cornman
Jeana Lungwitz
Rebecca New

Certificate

We certify that the foregoing is a true and correct copy of the decision of the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Disciplinary Case 220-08, Jane Adams Spahr Appellant (Accused), v. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) through the Presbytery of Redwoods, Appellee (Complainant) made and announced at San Antonio, TX, this 20th day of February, 2012.

Dated this 20th day of February, 2012.

Susan J. Cornman, Moderator
Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly

Gregory A. Goodwiller, Clerk
Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly

I certify that I did transmit a certified copy of the foregoing to the following persons by Federal Express Next Day Air, directing C. Laurie Griffith to deposit it in the mail at San Antonio, TX, this 20th day of February, 2012.

Sara Taylor, Counsel for Appellant
JoAn Blackstone, Counsel for Appellee
Stated Clerk, Synod of the Pacific
Stated Clerk, Presbytery of Redwoods
General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission

I further certify that I did transmit a certified copy of the foregoing to the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) by delivering it in person to C. Laurie Griffith, on February 20, 2012.

Gregory A. Goodwiller, Clerk
Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly

I certify that I received a certified copy of the foregoing, that it is a full and correct copy of the decision of the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), sitting during an interval between meetings of the General Assembly, in San Antonio, TX on February 20, 2012, in Disciplinary Case 220-08, Jane Adams Spahr Appellant (Accused), v. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) through the Presbytery of Redwoods, Appellee (Complainant, and that it is the final judgment of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the case.

Dated at San Antonio, TX, on February 20, 2012.

C. Laurie Griffith
Manager of Judicial Process and Social Witness