

# **SOUTH TEXAS**

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## **ASSEMBLIES OF GOD MINISTRIES**

Dear South Texas District Churches and Ministers

Response to today's Supreme Court decision on gay marriage

God does not change. We call this quality immutability. When God is our focal point, along with his Word as our final authority, we gain perspective on a world that is ever-changing, and often at warp speed. When the world speeds up, the people of God must slow down long enough to gain our bearings by looking unto Jesus, and studying His unchanging Word.

Today's (June 26, 2015) United States Supreme Court ruling is a landmark example of an ever-changing world and worldview that bypasses thousands of years of human history, law, culture, and societal norms. In a narrow 5-4 decision, gay marriage is now the law of the land.

Pastors and parishioners will have questions about what this means for the church. For those of us within the South Texas District and the Assemblies of God in the United States, nothing changes in terms of what we believe or what we practice. We continue to believe the Bible, and are governed by Scripture and our own governing documents which align with Scripture. Our practices and attitudes are motivated by love, and never by hate or divisiveness. Our actions are motivated and led by the Holy Spirit who draws people to Jesus and convinces people of truth, righteousness, and judgment, as Jesus reminded us in John 16:7-11. We do not have to prove anything, or win an argument. We do have to stand for the truth of Scripture and remember that the Holy Spirit is our defense. How can we articulate what we believe in a kind and loving way?

God ordained three human institutions: the home (marriage), human government, and the church. Of these three, the home is the oldest and perhaps most sacred, because it is the bedrock foundation for a peaceful and prosperous society. When human government rules against Scripture, or against the home or the church, then followers of Christ have always done the right thing by peacefully and lovingly practicing our faith. Our pastors have a conscientious objection to performing a homosexual wedding ceremony, and our churches have the same objection to using our building facilities to host such ceremonies. Thus far, the law of the land upholds our right to practice what we believe in this area. And since Idaho does not already have a gay marriage law, the residents there (as in all 50 states) will be covered by today's Supreme Court ruling, which mentioned that a minister may choose not to perform such a wedding ceremony based upon their own convictions, and for any number of reasons.

Here is what we know: There will be much rhetoric on this topic for days and years to come. There will be those who will call for panic and a harsh response from the church, and profit from seminars and legal counsel to keep churches from being padlocked and pastors out of jail. Please, do not heed those voices or add yours to the mix. The top legal expert in matters of church and state in the world is our own Assemblies of God legal counsel, Richard Hammar. He is the only attorney in America that personally reads every legal case in the country that has any bearing on the church.

The Assemblies of God stand upon marriage as a union between a man and a woman in a legal commitment for life is already well-documented in our General Council Constitution and Bylaws. You do not need to add anything to your own local church bylaws in reaction to this, because every Assemblies of God Church in America is governed ultimately by the General Council Constitution and Bylaws according to agreements signed when your church became General Council affiliated. Here is what General Council Bylaws, Article VIII. states:

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### Section 1. Christian Marriage

Marriage was established by God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:18, 21-25) and confirmed by Jesus Christ to be a permanent relationship between a man and a woman (Matthew 19:4-6). Because marriage is not only a commitment to a spouse, but also to God (Genesis 2:24; Mark 10:9; Ephesians 5:31), a believer should marry only another believer (2 Corinthians 6:14). Christian marriage is a reflection of the love, purity, and permanence between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:23-33).

Even though some marriages may fall short of the biblical ideal (see Article IX, B, Section 5), husbands and wives who devote themselves to God (Ephesians 5:21) and find nurture and instruction in the body of Christ (Hebrews 10:25) can realize the strength and blessing of God in their relationship.

### Article IX. Doctrines and Practices Disapproved states:

#### Section 5. Divorce and Remarriage

##### d. Performing marriage ceremonies

(3) Same-sex ceremonies. No minister shall perform any type of marriage, cohabitation, or covenant ceremony for persons who are of the same sex. Such a ceremony would endorse homosexuality which is a sin and strictly forbidden in God's Word (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26,27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:9-11). Any minister of our Fellowship who performs a ceremony for these types of disapproved relations, unless innocently deceived into doing so, shall be dismissed from the Fellowship.

Additionally, our South Texas District Constitution and Bylaws state:

### Article VI - Standards Of Marriage And Sexuality

#### Section 1.

We believe that the only scriptural marriage is the joining of one man and one woman. (Gen. 2:24; Rom. 7:2; I Cor. 7:10; Eph. 5:22-23)

#### Section 2.

We believe that Scripture commands that there be no intimate sexual activity outside of marriage. We, also, believe that any form of homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, incest, fornication, adultery, and pornography are sinful perversions of God's gift of sex. We believe God disapproves of and forbids any attempt to alter one's gender by surgery or appearance. (Gen. 26:8-10; Heb. 13:4; Lev. 18:1-30; Rom. 1:26-29; 1 Cor. 5:1, 6:9-10; 1 Thess. 4:1-8)

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### Section 3.

To qualify for credentials or hold a leadership position with the South Texas District Council, a person must be in agreement with Article VI and shall not engage in any of the disapproved behaviors outlined in Article VI, Section 2.

Even though these matters are clearly addressed here, some of you may still wish to update your church policies, or feel a conviction to make an amendment in your church bylaws about our position on marriage and specifically address the gay marriage law and your position on it, and use of your facilities. To do so, Don Detrick, Secretary Treasurer of the Northwest District has prepared a document which will help you with this. (See below.)

In the meantime, join us in prayer for our nation, our churches, and our local communities. Jesus is the hope of the world. And remember who the real enemy is, not our neighbors who may disagree with us, but the one who blinds eyes and hearts to the truth of the Gospel and love of Christ. The best defense for traditional marriage is to have a good one, and model it to the world. Continue to empower our people by building families and strengthening marriages in our churches and communities. God bless you.

Sincerely,

Timothy R. Barker, Superintendent  
Don K. Wiehe, Secretary Treasurer  
NW Ministry Network Response to Same-Sex/LGBT Marriage:

We often receive calls or e-mails from pastors and church leaders asking for counsel regarding the same-sex marriage laws, specifically regarding Washington State's gay marriage law. Richard Hammar has reviewed the WA State law and believes it provides broad protections for churches and religious organizations. Thus, he does not see a need for a church to take any reactionary or preventative action. However, the questions do persist, and there are many sounding an alarm. I would like to suggest that we trust the counsel of Rich Hammar. Not only is he the Assemblies of God legal counsel and a graduate of Harvard Law School, he is also widely respected as the top church/state/tax legal expert in the nation.

Nevertheless, the question persists: "Does our church need to change its bylaws to protect itself from a discrimination lawsuit?"

Again, the short answer is no, amending the bylaws is not necessary. However, the church may want to consider adopting policies and practices to avoid other complications.

The General Council Bylaws already strictly prohibit A/G ministers and churches from participating in and officiating same-sex weddings. The General Council Bylaws govern credentialed ministers and affiliated churches, and supersede local bylaws, clearly establishing our doctrine and practice in this matter. The first amendment to the Constitution of the United States forbids the government from making any law that restricts the free exercise of religion and therefore cannot force churches to act against their doctrines or practices. The bottom line is that General Council Bylaws already establish our doctrine and practice in this area, and additional amendments are not needed to protect the church from lawsuits.

General Council Bylaws, ARTICLE IX, Section 5. Divorce and Remarriage. (3) Same-sex ceremonies states:

No minister shall perform any type of marriage, cohabitation, or covenant ceremony for persons who are of the same sex. Such a ceremony would endorse homosexuality which is a sin and strictly forbidden in God's Word (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26,27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:9-11). Any minister of our Fellowship who performs a ceremony for these types of disapproved relations, unless innocently deceived into doing so, shall be dismissed from the Fellowship.

However, the General Council Bylaws alone may not protect a local Assemblies of God church from every possible scenario. For example, a potential problem could be a lawsuit for non-religious discrimination. Let's say a church routinely rents the facilities to heterosexual non-members or non-attenders who are residents in the area, but refuses to rent the facilities to

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similar couples who are lesbian, gay, or transgendered. A potential lawsuit might occur if a declined couple contends that the church is operating a "wedding business" which may not have the right to discriminate on the basis of religion. Furthermore, it might be argued that this church is not discriminating on religious grounds at all (since it did not exercise any religious restrictions in the other weddings) but is only discriminating against

homosexuals.

Courts have considering this issue, raising the question: to what extent does an individual's right to the free exercise of religion extend to corporations and businesses? The WA State case regarding the florist in the Tri Cities is an example of this, and will ultimately be decided in the courts of the land.

A possible solution is for the church to adopt policies and practices about weddings that are consistent with Assemblies of God General Council Bylaws, restricting weddings solely on the basis of biblical requirements for a marriage, and pre-screening all weddings on the basis of those requirements.

The simplest policy is one that restricts weddings in the facility to members and adherents of the Assemblies of God and/or requires that all weddings in the facility be officiated by a minister that is credentialed by the Assemblies of God. The benefit of this policy is that it is effective, brief, and it covers all biblical requirements without drawing attention to any specific exclusion. This policy is probably sufficient for churches that do not make their facilities available for outside weddings.

Some churches may want a more flexible policy. They may want to open their doors to the community as an outreach and find this policy too restrictive. These churches will need to draft a more comprehensive policy that references the appropriate religious qualifications (it should not point to one exclusion and ignore all of the others. The sample policies below are only examples, and may not be appropriate or applicable to every church. Churches that want to adopt this type of policy may use it as a template, but they should also seek their own legal counsel.

Another potential problem is that of public relations or public perceptions in reaction to a church's stated policy. For this matter, it is best that only qualified spokespersons or credentialed Assemblies of God ministers speak on behalf of the church in these matters, and do so with caution, especially if addressing or responding to media inquiries.

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#### Appendix A (Brief policy)

Marriage is an institution that is ordained by God and is to be celebrated within the community of faith. It is the policy of ABC Church that its facilities will only be made available for weddings for members and adherents of Assemblies of God churches, and that all weddings within its facility must be officiated by clergy who are credentialed with the Assemblies of God.

#### Appendix B (Expanded Policy)

As a General Council affiliated Assemblies of God Church, ABC Church is aligned with the Assemblies of God Constitution and Bylaws, including Bylaw Article VIII. "Christian Marriage and Family," which defines and clarifies our biblical position on marriage. As such, ABC Church recognizes the biblical basis for marriage as a legal and sacred union between one man and one woman for life (you may insert appropriate scripture passages here). Therefore, ABC Church does not permit use of its facilities or properties for wedding ceremonies, anniversaries, receptions, or other events for same-sex couples and our pastors are not permitted to officiate weddings or domestic partnerships for same-sex couples.

#### Appendix C (Comprehensive policy)

ABC Church is a General Council affiliated church of the Assemblies of God (AG) adopting its Tenets of Faith

and Official Statement of Fundamental Truths. As an AG church, its certified, licensed, and ordained ministers are subordinate to the General Council in matters of doctrine and conduct (Art. IV Sec 6 of Bylaws AG, General Council). ABC Church is aligned doctrinally and organizationally with the General Council of the Assemblies of God in Springfield, MO, and with the Northwest Ministry Network of the Assemblies of God in Snoqualmie, WA.

For the purposes of providing guidance to its ministers and members, ABC Church adopts the following policy for marriage:

Marriage is a sacrament of the Church. It is a union ordained by God and confirmed by Jesus Christ to be a permanent relationship between a man and a woman (Matthew 19:4-6). Marriage is not only a commitment to a spouse but also to God (Genesis 2:24; Mark 10:9; Ephesians 5:31). A believer should only marry another believer (2 Corinthians 6:14). The Church views marriage as a profound spiritual institution established by God.

Sacerdotal functions such as ordinances and ceremonies (weddings) of the Church are only to be performed by AG certified, licensed, or ordained (credentialed) ministers (officials). Only Officials employed or authorized by ABC Church are to perform marriage ceremonies.

A same gender ceremony seeking to join members of the same gender or transgendered persons in holy matrimony, or covenant ceremony, or cohabitation ceremony shall not be

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officiated by any Assemblies of God minister or official. Such a ceremony would endorse the sins of fornication or homosexuality that are strictly forbidden in the Bible (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26, 27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; Timothy 1:9-11). Any official who performs such a ceremony shall be dismissed from the fellowship and have his or her credentials revoked (Art. IX Sec 5(d) of Bylaws AG, General Council).

Any person submitting a wedding application form seeking to have a marriage ceremony performed by an official of ABC Church or held on ABC church property shall affirm in writing their agreement with the Church Tenets of Faith and the approved Doctrines and Practices of the Assemblies of God and shall conduct themselves in a manner in keeping therewith.

Any applicant seeking to be married shall attend pre-marital counseling sessions with the official who will be performing the wedding ceremony or other qualified person as chosen by the pastoral staff having sufficient training, experience and spiritual understanding to provide such counseling.

Any official performing a marriage ceremony whether or not employed by the church, shall affirm their agreement with the Church Tenets of Faith and the approved Doctrines and Practices of the Assemblies of God and shall conduct themselves in a manner which is in keeping therewith.

The official assigned by the church to implement the procedures contained in this Marriage Policy, in his or her sole discretion, may decline to make church facilities available for, and/or decline to officiate at, a ceremony when, in his or her judgment, there are significant concerns that one or both of the applicants may not be qualified to enter into the sacred bond of marriage for theological, doctrinal, moral, or legal reasons.

A civil government's sanction of a union will be recognized as a legitimate marriage by the church only to the extent that it is consistent with the definition of marriage as a union ordained by God and confirmed by Jesus Christ to be a permanent relationship between a man and a woman as referenced in this Marriage Policy.



## Appendix D: Sample Reply to Request to Perform a Same Gender Marriage Ceremony

I/the Church am/is unable to agree to your request to officiate at a ceremony to join members of the same gender in holy matrimony, or a covenant ceremony or a cohabitation ceremony whether or not on church property. Such action is inconsistent with the Tenets of Faith of this church to which I/we adhere as members of the Assemblies of God, is not an approved doctrinal policy or practice of our faith, and is strictly forbidden in the Bible. Performance of such a ceremony by an official of the church on or off church property would result in the revocation of ministerial credentials and dismissal from the Assemblies of God.

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## Appendix E: General, Brief Statement on Homosexuality

Our church's position on homosexuality:

We believe that God loves all people. It is because He loves us that He prescribes behaviors that He knows are beneficial to us and society and prohibits those that are not beneficial to us and society. We admit that we don't always know the "whys" behind these prohibitions, but we trust that they are true. The Bible clearly states that sexual intimacy is intended to be exercised between a husband and wife within the confines of a marriage relationship. Sexual activity outside of marriage is forbidden. The Bible further states that sexual activity between same gender individuals is forbidden. Our church affirms these commandments as doctrine.

Nevertheless, our church also believes that everyone is welcome to gather with the church and to worship God and hear the Word of God, regardless of the degree to which they affirm these doctrines or align their lives to them. Our worship service is a public meeting and anyone is welcome to come. We also believe that everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and love, and everyone who attends a meeting at our church will be treated as such and will not be singled out or ridiculed. For a more comprehensive theological statement on this subject, including scripture references, please see the Position Paper found on the website of the General Council of the Assemblies of God.

Dr. Don Detrick, NWMN Sec/Treas May 2015

With thanks for collaboration to Dr. Jay Herndon, NoCal/Nev Sec/Treas and Richard Hammar, Assemblies of God legal counsel.