



Conversation Guide Regarding Same-Sex Weddings Arkansas Conference of the United Methodist Church

May 1, 2024

The 2020 Postponed General Conference approved the allowing of same-sex weddings, with the removal of prohibitive language becoming effective upon the close of General Conference on May 4, 2024. The actions of the General Conference this week have strengthened the ability of the local church to minister to the people and families in their contexts, across the world, and across Arkansas. The 2020 Postponed General Conference voted to lift the restriction on same-sex weddings, a decision that became effective upon the close of the conference session. This action has strengthened the ability of our churches to minister to people and families in their own particular contexts, both around the world and right here in Arkansas.

Voices from outside the UMC are trying to convince people and churches that they will be forced to act in ways that are not aligned with who they are as a result of these decisions. But the fact is that in your local church, your leadership and members will still chart the course of your ministry, just as they have always done.

We offer these guidelines as a resource, not to sway or hasten any decisions you feel are before you, but simply to equip you to hold meaningful conversations.

Congregations

Before a same-sex wedding occurs within an Arkansas United Methodist congregation, the following steps are recommended to help church leaders and the larger congregation navigate these potential changes with care and Christ-centered love:

1. The church council, staff/pastor-parish relations committee (S/PPRC), and pastor(s) should prayerfully discern how or whether this option to celebrate same-sex weddings in the church fits into the congregation's ministry and whether the pastor desires to perform same-sex weddings or wishes to abstain for reasons of conscience. *(Note: congregations and clergy should not be concerned about potential civil legal action or punitive church action should they decide not to conduct same-sex weddings. These decisions are the responsibility of the local church and pastor, protected by the First Amendment and by the Book of Discipline.)*
2. If the church council desires to move forward with a policy clarification or revision, the council should provide opportunities to receive congregational feedback and share how this decision is part of the congregation's ministry in its context. Open and transparent communication is essential!
3. As the governing board, the church council has always been and will remain responsible for setting the congregation's wedding policy. For instance, some congregations only



allow weddings for members and their immediate families, while other congregations utilize their sanctuary as a community venue for weddings. Similarly, some congregations require that only the appointed clergy may preside, while others allow guest clergy. This option to allow same-sex weddings is no different. Within the bounds of the Book of Discipline, the church council continues to be empowered to set policies for weddings in their church facilities.

4. During this season, in the same spirit of transparency, it would be helpful to let your district superintendent know of significant conversations or decisions at your church.

Pastors

Before a same-sex wedding is conducted by an Arkansas United Methodist clergy person, the following steps are recommended in order to ensure that the sacred relationship between the pastor and congregation is encouraged and supported:

1. As always, pastors will decide which couples are ready for marriage. Pastors have always had the right of conscience to decline to perform any wedding ceremony, and this fact has not changed.
2. The church council, staff/pastor-parish relations committee (S/PPRC), and pastor should prayerfully discern whether or how this option to celebrate same-sex weddings in the church fits into the congregation's ministry and whether the pastor desires to perform same-sex weddings or wishes to abstain for reasons of conscience. (*Note: congregations and clergy should not be concerned about potential civil legal action or punitive church action should it decide not to conduct same-sex weddings. These decisions are the responsibility of the local church and pastor, protected by the First Amendment and by the Book of Discipline.*)
3. The church council, S/PPRC, and senior pastor should similarly discuss not only if the wedding policy of the church should be revised to allow same-sex weddings but also how the pastor will respond to invitations to perform same-sex weddings at off-site venues. This time of discussion is necessary because the pastor is both an ordained or licensed member of the conference and the spiritual leader of the congregation. The overall ministry of the pastor, the context of the local community, and the spiritual needs of the congregation are all impacted by the pastor's ministry and actions. Open and transparent communication between the pastor, church leaders, and all church members is essential!
4. If the clergy person is not the senior pastor (i.e., an appointed associate pastor or deacon or a retired pastor whose charge conference is located at the church), then the clergy person should first seek counsel with the appointed senior pastor.
5. During this season, in the same spirit of transparency, it would be helpful to let your district superintendent know of significant conversations or decisions at your church.