

Freedom of conscience, freedom from fear

By [Janet Edwards](#)

July 30, 2014

In 2004, Brenda Cole—a colleague in a group dedicated to improving the spiritual lives of LGBT people—asked me to preside at her wedding, scheduled more than a year away. “Nancy is a lifelong Presbyterian and wants a Presbyterian minister to preside at our wedding,” Brenda said hopefully. “Would you meet with us and talk about officiating?”

I smiled when I met Nancy McConn. She was so like many Presbyterian women I know: truly the salt of the earth. I told them that I was interested, but that I needed time to pray about it. I knew that, by participating, I would be taking a visible action deemed by many to be at odds with church law.

In good Presbyterian fashion, my prayer included serious conversations with a variety of people: the stated clerk of my presbytery, friends in the church, my lawyer. It also included careful reading of the Bible and the PCUSA constitution.

By the time I said yes to Nancy and Brenda, I was convinced there was no prohibition to their marriage in either scripture or the Book of Order. We were also fully aware that disciplinary action was likely. A joyous newspaper notice of the wedding mentioned that I officiated. Two weeks later my stated clerk received an accusation, initiating a process that could lead to losing my ordination.

Over the next three years, there were two trials. The first ended in dismissal; charges were filed late. The second ended in acquittal. The judicial commission concluded that it was only a “purported” wedding: “In this case,” they said, “it cannot be an offense to the Constitution to attempt to do the impossible.”

The impossible is now possible. This May, a federal court overturned Pennsylvania law against same-gender marriage. Then in June, the 221st General Assembly of the PCUSA passed an authoritative interpretation regarding policy on marriage. We now allow ministers to preside at weddings between same-gender couples in those states where same-sex marriage is legal.

During GA, the proceedings included small groups for conversation about the overtures on marriage. “I just don’t get what the problem is,” exclaimed one commissioner in my group. “Every minister in our church has the freedom of conscience to decide about presiding at weddings. Enough said!” In rejecting same-sex marriage, he suggested, he was simply following his conscience.

I broke in: “Actually, there are a lot of pastors who aren’t free to preside where the love and commitment between the partners is clear to them. We don’t have the freedom of conscience you assume.”

I struggled to contain my desperation at his apparent difficulty in putting himself in my shoes. The exchange touched the depth of pain I have long felt at the tension between the call from God to serve same-sex couples—a call I cannot flee—and the interpretations of our church constitution that prompt disciplinary charges like those filed against me.

When the gavel fell to adjourn, the new authoritative interpretation freed me to follow my conscience. The next day, I truly celebrated—without fear—the marriage ceremony for two lovely men who have already lived together through sickness and health for 18 years.

I understand that many Presbyterian clergy fear being required to preside at same-sex weddings that violate their conscience. Perhaps the comment from the commissioner in my small group arose from such fear. Some do not trust the authoritative interpretation when it specifically assures the freedom of conscience regarding pastoral choice in the realm of marriage.

Probably time is the best antidote to this fear. Experience can confirm that freedom of conscience continues to exist for them, even as it extends also to me. What has happened is this: clergy who see God’s ways as I do now join those who see them as the commissioner in my GA group does in being free to do what we feel called by God to do. We are all free from fear.

We Presbyterians will experience anew the great gift we received from our ancestors: freedom of conscience is the pure, sweet spot where those who disagree find harmony. We will also offer this approach to others. Freedom from fear, arising from freedom of conscience, is amazing grace. All of us in the PCUSA have a bit more of it now.