

Presbyterian high court clears pastor of censure for same-sex weddings: As long as they're not called marriages

News in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue

Because the blessings of two lesbian couples were called “unions” or “weddings,” not “marriages,” the highest court in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has reversed a lower court’s censure of lesbian clergywoman Jane Spahr, who performed the rites in California.

“It is not improper for ministers of the Word and Sacrament to perform same-sex ceremonies,” ruled the Presbyterians’ Permanent Judicial Commission in a decision released April 28. “At least four times, the larger church has rejected overtures that would prohibit blessing the unions of same-sex couples.”

The case hinged on language in the church’s Book of Order, which defines marriage as “between a woman and a man.”

“By the definition, a same-sex ceremony can never be a marriage,” the high court ruled. “One cannot characterize same-sex ceremonies as marriages for the purpose of disciplining a minister of the Word and Sacrament and at the same time declare that such ceremonies are not marriages for legal or ecclesiastical purposes.”

Same-sex ceremonies and marriages should remain different, the court declared. “We further hold that officers of the PCUSA authorized to perform marriages shall not state, imply or represent that a same-sex ceremony is a marriage.”

Spahr, 65, said she is “grateful” for the decision, which she considers an affirmation of her longtime ministry to gays and lesbians. “The church is a place of welcome and hospitality in which I will continue to honor relationships of love and commitment, regardless of sexual orientation,” she said in a statement.

The court noted that Spahr “reported regularly to her presbytery about the same-sex unions and ‘weddings’ she performed,” but “these services were not described as marriages in her reports as found in the record of the case.”

Clifton Kirkpatrick, stated clerk of the PCUSA General Assembly, said the PJC decision reaffirmed the distinction in wording as well as the pastoral purpose of such rites. “The decision recognizes the importance of pastoral care and the appropriateness of same-sex blessing services as long as they are not presented as marriage ceremonies,” he told Presbyterian News Service.