On November 19, 2013, a tribunal of 13 United Methodist Ministers from the East Pennsylvania Conference at Camp Innabah in Chester County found the Reverend Frank Schaefer guilty for 1) presiding at a same-sex wedding and 2) disobeying the order and discipline of the United Methodist Church. Schaefer had celebrated the Massachusetts wedding of his gay son in April of 2007. The guilty verdict immediately suspended Schaefer’s ministry for thirty days. And on December 19, 2013, the East Pennsylvania Board of Ordained Ministry voted to defrock Schaefer.

Schaefer’s fate attracted national media attention.¹ His story, however, was not new. United Methodist clergy Jimmy Creech and


http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/19/frank-schaefer-defrocked_n_4473290.html

http://www.eonline.com/news/492940/pastor-defrocked-for-
Elizabeth Stroud were both defrocked in 1999 and 2005. Creech married a same-sex couple. Stroud announced her partnership in a same-sex relationship. With history more or less repeating itself, some have tried a different tactic of resistance by questioning the usefulness and expense of United Methodist Church [UMC] trials.² Yet those nuanced conversations have not changed church polity either.

A different approach then seems worth pursuing, one outside juridical and economic maneuvers. This essay recommends a liturgical route: exposing how the symmetry with respect to gender roles in the UMC matrimonial liturgy easily accommodates same sex marriage. The liturgy of the UMC as it is works just as well for heterosexual marriages as it does for same sex marriages. The adaptability of the liturgy not only vexes decisions like the ones against Schaeffer, Creech and Stroud. It also subtly subverts the current social principles of *The United Methodist Book of Discipline, 2012* and opens the possibility of performing same-sex marriages within existing norms of the United Methodist Church.

Most importantly, seeing how the matrimonial liturgies cross the limits of the polity from the largest but steadily declining mainline Protestant tradition – United Methodism – perhaps leads toward a wider view of how pastors and congregations within and beyond the tradition of United Methodism might use liturgy instead of church ornamented rights language for widening Christian matrimonial ritual practices.

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Analyzing the UMC Marriage Rites

In Christian Marriage I, Christian Marriage II, The Recognition of the Blessing of a Civil Marriage, The Reaffirmation of the Marriage Covenant, and the Marriage Anniversary Prayers from *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, developing matrimonial liturgy conducive for same-sex marriage requires little more than inserting the correct names of participants and choosing identifiers like “husband” or “wife” appropriately.\(^3\) In the following pages, gendered sections from each of the rites are displayed and discussed to show how same sex marriage adaptation requires virtually no significant change to the existing liturgies.

**Christian Marriage I**

Consider the opening Greeting from Christian Marriage I:

Friends, we are gathered together in the sight of God to witness and bless the joining together of Name and Name in Christian marriage. The covenant of marriage was established by God, **who created us male and female for each other**.\(^4\)

With his presence and power Jesus graced a wedding at Cana of Galilee, and in his sacrificial love gave us the example for the love of husband and wife.

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\(^4\) **Boldface** here and throughout added for emphasis.
Name and Name come to give themselves to one another in this holy covenant.⁵

Even the lines that speak of God creating male and female for each other or about Jesus giving the example of husband and wife do not preclude the possibility of same sex marriage. The male and female binary simply ascribes gendered identities to the participants of a marriage ceremony. The liturgical wording of the Greeting, however, in no way clearly recommends how the pairing of participants should occur. Neither does the example of husband and wife articulate a standard. Rather the relationship between a husband and wife provides a point of reference that can, as desired, also serve as a reference for same sex relationship marriages, and at least in terms of ceremony, arguably already does. The insight of John Boswell also helps to frame the notion that Jesus exemplifies something about marriage another way. He reminds readers that Jesus of Nazareth was celibate, and that for Christians of biblical times and even many now, celibacy surpasses marriage as a calling.⁶

In any case, the important point to grasp for this particular essay is that the symmetry and ambiguity of participant roles within the

⁵ Ibid., 116-17.
⁶ Ibid., 116. Here, Boswell refers to the marriage metaphor found in Revelation and not John, but his thinking still sheds light. He also cleverly notes with respect to the Lamb imagery of Revelation that marriage to Christ also contains a “hint of bestiality.” For more about the celibacy of Jesus, and the crucial historical recognition that Jesus never married, see also Peter Brown. The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 41. For the exaltation of virginity within the early church, see Brown’s discussion of Ambrose describing virginity and celibacy as “sacralized perpetuity,” 356. For “hint of bestiality” see Rev. 21:9: “Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”
marriage rite exposes underlying opportunity for broader celebrations of marriage.

The Declaration of Intention in Christian Marriage I shows more pronounced symmetry between gender roles:

_Name_, will you have _Name_ to be your **husband**, to live together in holy marriage?  
Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health,  
and forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?

_Name_, will you have _Name_ to be your **wife**,  
to live together in holy marriage?  
Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her,

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7 Notably, the ritual language here and throughout fails to account for fluid associations with respect to gender and human sexuality. They still for the most part rely static notions of gender and sexuality that scholars like Judith Butler and folks within the church have long shown to be elusive, and perhaps entirely contrived. See Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge 1990), 128. See also the UMC Judicial Council decision with regard to the Reverend Drew Phoenix, “pastor of St. John’s United Methodist Church in Baltimore. Phoenix, 48, had been minister at St. John’s for five years as the Rev. Ann Gordon. After surgery and hormone therapy in the past year, the pastor changed his gender to male and adopted a new name.” The primary issue for the Judicial Council was that although The Discipline disallowed the ordination of homosexual clergy, there were currently no statements regarding those who are transgendered. Neil Caldwell. ‘Transgender Issue on Judicial Council’s Fall Dockett’ Aug. 6, 2007  
in sickness and in health,  
and forsaking all others, be faithful to her  
as long as you both shall live?8

The parity of gender roles within the liturgical outlay above is ready-made to produce a sex marriage liturgy. One needs only to choose to replace and to repeat “husband” and/or “wife” and their accompanying pronouns appropriately. For two males, one can simply replace the wife stanza with another husband declaration. For two females, one can simply replace the husband stanza with another wife declaration. Choosing appropriate gender identifiers and pronouns amounts to liturgical decision-making common to most, if not all, heterosexual weddings.

The vows likewise express parity and the same possibility for same sex marriage adaptation:

In the name of God,  
I, Name, take you, Name, to be my  
wife, [same throughout] to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

In the name of God,  
I, Name, take you, Name, to be my  
husband, [same throughout] to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

The male and female scripts above have been placed side-by-side to show more clearly how the gendered roles mirror each other and therefore provide further continuity for developing same sex marriage liturgy from the existing structure of the rite. As with the Declaration of Intent, the replace-and-repeat method works well again. The remaining vows include more symmetry and

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8 Ibid., 117. Granted, pastoral instructions accompany the excerpts above, such as indications regarding clergy attention - “Pastor to the woman:” and “Pastor to the man”. But those directions do not comprise the actual liturgy.
interchangeability of participant roles. They even go so far as to include the interchangeability in the presentation of the rite:

I, take you, Name, to be my wife (husband),
and I promise before God and all who are present here
to be your loving and faithful husband (wife)
as long as we both shall live.

Name, in the name of God,
I take you to be my husband (wife) from this time onward,

The Thanksgiving and Communion that conclude Christian Marriage I require no kind of emendation as their liturgical language already accommodates same sex marriage just as easily as opposite sex marriages.

**Christian Marriage II**

Christian Marriage II exhibits the same kind of liturgical parity and dexterity. Its Greeting states, “Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the presence of these witnesses, to join together this man and this woman (Name and Name)…” Because any pair of names may fit the salutation of Christian Marriage II, any presumption that the liturgy only works for couples of the opposite sex cannot possibly hold. The Declaration of Intention of Christian Marriage II can be easily adapted for same sex marriage by replacing and repeating the appropriate stanza, too. Moreover, the wording here more or less matches Christian Marriage I with “holy estate of matrimony” instead of “holy matrimony” and “keep only to” instead of “be faithful to”.

Name, will you have this woman to be your wedded wife,
to live together in the holy estate of matrimony?
Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her,
in sickness and in health;

and forsaking all others keep only to her
so long as you both shall live?
Name, will you have this man to be your wedded husband, to live together in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others keep only to him so long as you both shall live? 

As seen in Christian Marriage I, identicalness and interchangeability of participant roles also appears in the vows of Christian Marriage II:

In the name of God, I, Name, take you, Name, to be my wedded wife [same throughout],
from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and therefore I pledge you my faith. 

The phrasing more or less matches the wording of Christian Marriage I again. “Wedded” and “till” are used in Christian Marriage II rather than the “until” of Christian Marriage I. Christian Marriage II also closes with the additional couplet, “according to God’s holy ordinance; and therefore I pledge you my faith.” And by contrast, Christian Marriage II states in the Blessing and Exchange of Rings, “The wedding ring is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, signifying to all the uniting of this man and woman

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9 Ibid., 129-130.
10 Ibid., 130-131.
in holy matrimony, through the Church of Jesus Christ our Lord.”\textsuperscript{11} Yet the final blessing is optional. Furthermore, stating “this man and man” or “this woman and woman” instead does not shift the meaning of the pastoral blessing. Regardless of the pronoun choice, the explanation of the ring as a visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace symbolizing that the couple as indeed married remains unchanged.

The same holds true for the Declaration of Marriage, which states midway, “I pronounce that they are husband and wife together.” Changing the declaration to “husband and husband” or “wife and wife” renames those designated by the pronouncement but such a change does not alter the purpose of the declaration to announce a publicly acknowledged marriage.

In addition to symmetrical liturgical content found in both Christian Marriage I and Christian Marriage II that supports same sex application, parity between gender roles also shows in the liturgies for civil marriage, reaffirmation of the marriage covenant and marriage anniversary prayers to further expose openings for using existing matrimonial liturgies to celebrate same sex marriage.

A Service for the Recognition or the Blessing of a Civil Marriage

Consider the symmetry of Declaration by the Husband and Wife:

\textit{Name, you have taken Name to be your lawful husband.}

Now you wish to declare, before God and this congregation, your desire that your married life should be according to God’s will.

I ask you, therefore,

will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?

\textit{Name, you have taken Name to be your lawful wife.}

[same throughout]

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 131.
will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her,
[same]
and forsaking all others, be faithful to her
[same]

Again, the officiant needs only to choose the stanza that best fits for the couple involved, and repeat it, instead of using the opposite sex formulation above. The same pattern of parity in gender roles continues in the Declaration of Marriage:

_Name and Name, you are husband and wife_
according to the witness of Christ’s universal Church,
in the name of the Father,
and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.
Those whom God has joined together,
let no one put asunder. Amen.

And the same kind of opportunity for adapting the liturgy for same sex marriage presents itself. Making the emendations of “husband” and “husband” or “wife and wife” would alter how “the witness of Christ’s universal Church’ is understood.” But it would not require significant change to the existing liturgical wording.

An Order for the Reaffirmation of the Marriage Covenant

The Greeting here essentially repeats Christian Marriage I with the slight change of “Friends, we are gathered together in the sight of God to witness and bless the joining together of Name and Name in Christian marriage” to “Friends...to witness and bless the reaffirmation of the marriage covenant.” The Name and Name fields of Christian Marriage I do not appear in the Reaffirmation of the Marriage Covenant. Like Christian Marriage I, the appeals to God creating humans male and female for each other and Jesus giving the example for the love of husband and wife, however, do appear. Yet again, the male and female binary simply describes participants in a marriage, but does not suggest that opposite sexes must marry one another. The example of husband and wife provides a point of reference that same sex couples could just as easily choose to follow.
Therefore, another existing rite continues to easy adaptability for same sex marriage.

The Reaffirmation of the Marriage Covenant also resembles the vows of Christian Marriage I except for the minor addition of “and with a thankful heart, I once again declare that.” Once again, the larger point is to see that the parity of participant roles makes it easy to adapt the liturgy for same sex marriage.

In the name of God, and with a thankful heart,
I once again declare that
I, Name, take you, Name, to be my wife, [same throughout],

from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

In the Congregational Response and Blessing of the Marriage(s) that close the Reaffirmation of the Marriage Covenant, lines like, “Bless and sanctify with your Holy Spirit Wife’s Name and Husband’s Name, (those) who have reaffirmed their marriage covenant,” and “Send therefore your blessing upon Name and Name (these couples)” and “bless Name and Name on their wedding anniversary” also display liturgical symmetry that easily and already supports the celebration of same sex marriage.

Marriage Anniversary Prayers

The last matrimonial liturgy offered in the United Methodist Book of Worship, the Marriage Anniversary Prayers, punctuates the parity of gender-designated participant roles and presents a final
opportunity for same sex marriage within an existing United Methodist rite. The first prayer begins, “Lord our God, Bless Name and Name. We thank you for their marriage, [for the children they have nurtured].” Though some might see the optional blessing of children as a distinct feature of opposite sex marriages, same sex marriages also raise children. The liturgy also specifically says “nurture.” There is therefore no appeal to natural law or procreation. The scope of the Marriage Anniversary Prayers appropriately applies to same sex marriages that endure the test of time, with or without children. More significantly, that the Marriage Anniversary Prayers exhibit the same consistency of gender symmetry shows that all matrimonial liturgies sanctioned by the UMC are suitable for same sex marriage celebration.

**The United Methodist Discipline**

The ease by which clergy may use the existing matrimonial rites of the UMC for same sex marriage celebration, however, subverts United Methodist polity. While “not to be considered church law,” the social principles of *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012* [*The Discipline*], articulate “a call to faithfulness.” With respect to faithfulness within Marriage, *The Discipline* contains the following paragraph:

¶161.B, Marriage—We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman. We believe that God’s blessing rests upon such marriage, whether or not there are children of the union. We reject social norms that assume different standards for women than for men in marriage. We support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.13


13 Ibid., 109.
A dissonance, however, emerges between the language of The Discipline and the adaptability of existing matrimonial liturgies in the UMC for same sex marriage in the name of God.

Notably in ¶161.E, The Discipline makes a clear commitment to the equality of men and women. “Women and Men—We affirm with Scripture the common humanity of male and female, both having equal worth in the eyes of God.”14 And the insistence upon equality between genders is clearly evident in all of the matrimonial liturgies. Yet that parity is precisely what allows a clergy person to celebrate the liturgies in accordance with the current Social Principles of the United Methodist Church or adapt them so that same sex marriage celebration becomes possible. In either case, the face-value and deeper social, ecclesial, and theological meanings of the rites remain intact. But even without choosing gendered identifiers and pronouns that designate how the liturgy is being used, clear connection to Methodist polity seems tenuous given the symmetrical, gendered language of the rites as they are.

What also begins to unravel in the latent contradiction between the matrimonial liturgies and the stances of The Discipline is ecclesial ethics toward homosexual persons. The official stance toward homosexuality of the United Methodist Church is as follows:

¶161.F, Human Sexuality—Human Sexuality—We affirm that sexuality is God’s good gift to all persons. We call everyone to responsible stewardship of this sacred gift.

Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are only affirmed with the covenant of monogamous, heterosexual marriage.15

We affirm that all persons are individuals of sacred worth, created in the image of God. All persons need the ministry of the Church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 110.
spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God’s grace is available to all. We will seek to live together in Christian community, welcoming, forgiving, and loving one another, as Christ has loved and accepted us. We implore families and churches not to reject or condemn lesbian and gay members and friends. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.

A couple of paragraphs prior, ¶161.D of the United Methodist Book of Discipline, 2012 also states, “We affirm the integrity of single persons, and we reject all social practices that discriminate or social attitudes that are prejudicial against persons because they are single. This includes single parents and we recognize the extra responsibilities involved.” To what extent is a statement like this one contradictory, however, when the disallowing of same sex marriage necessitates that homosexual individuals desiring to marry remain single. Does the UMC discriminate against single homosexuals who desire to have same sex marriage by not allowing them to do so? With regards to same sex matrimony we can see that prejudice and discrimination become liturgical concerns as well as legislative ones.

The United Methodist Tradition of Liturgical Revision

Frank Schaefer may have disobeyed the order and discipline of the United Methodist Church when he solemnized the same sex marriage of his son. Yet if he used the existing matrimonial rites of the UMC, those officially sanctioned rites actually permit a clerical and fatherly decision like his. They provide language for celebrating same sex marriage. The permission within the existing liturgy holds true for Jimmy Creech too. His defrocking came seven years after the 1992 publication of The Book of Worship and certainly, the adaptability of the UMC matrimonial rites for same sex marriage has import for a former UMC minister like Elizabeth Stroud. The transformation of ecclesial practices that parishioners and clergy might fear or hope to prevent if the UMC were to sanction same sex marriage, have, in the
case of the church’s marriage liturgy, already taken place as a result of other historical factors.

In the genealogy of its official marriage liturgies, the UMC has historically made revisions in order to counter prejudiced and discriminatory wording that would oppress specifically gendered or sexed populations, namely women. Karen Westerfield Tucker notes that the “causes of marriage” – procreation, remedy for fornication, and mutual companionship – as found in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer marriage rite and its subsequent adaptation as a Marriage Service for Methodists by John Wesley in 1784, are removed as early as 1792 by the Methodist Episcopal Church.16

In 1864, the Methodist Episcopal Church also erased references to obedience as a primary promise of commitment from the wife to the husband.17 Thus 18th century vows imbalanced by “Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her...” and “Wilt thou obey him, serve him, love, hour, and keep him...” become symmetrical in their expressions of fidelity by the 19th century. Fast-forwarding for the sake of brevity, when the Evangelical United Brethren and the Methodist Church join to form the United Methodist Church in 1968, the liturgical emendations were maintained.18

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17 Westerfield Tucker, 184.

18 See *The Book of Worship for Church and Home: With orders of worship, services for the administration of Sacraments, and aids to worship according*
parallelism has remained permanent as seen in the Declarations of Intention from Christian Marriage I and II and the Blessing of a Civil Marriage above and seem linked to the social advances of first wave feminism.\textsuperscript{19} One may have suspected that the parity of the UMC wedding liturgy to have begun in the mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Yet as early as 1864, gender-driven revisions within Methodist wedding liturgies cleared a liturgical path for same sex marriage adaptation of the UMC matrimonial rites more than a century later.

**Ecumenical Counterpoint and Insight from the United Church of Christ**

On the morning of Independence Day, 2005, the Sixth Plenary Session of United Church of Christ (UCC) decided in favor of “...equal marriage rights for couples regardless of gender who choose to marry and share fully and equally in the rights, responsibilities and commitment of legally recognized marriage.”\textsuperscript{20} The decision


\textsuperscript{19} For obedience and service language, see 1784 *Service Book and The United Methodist Hymnal*. (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 864. For revisions, see Westerfield Tucker’s citation of *Ritual of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, MR 46 (October 1864), 687, found on page 319 of *American Methodist Worship*.

\textsuperscript{20} The United Church of Christ. Minutes of the Twenty Fifth General Synod: Come Listen, Go Serve, God is Still Speaking. Meeting held in Atlanta, GA: Georgia World Conference Center, July 1-5, 2005, pgs. 30-31. There seems to be no explicit significance as to why 2005 became the year the UCC made this decision, but the UCC decision followed the approval of openly Gay Anglican bishop Rev. V. Gene Robinson (2003) in New Hampshire, and Massachusetts declaring denial of marriage licenses to same sex marriages as unconstitutional (2003) with the subsequent action of the state granting such licenses to same sex couples (2004). 4 THEREFORE LET IT BE RESOLVED, that the Twenty-fifth General Synod of the United Church of Christ
represents a rare occasion when a mainline Protestant denomination officially opened not only one single sanctuary, but the collective ecclesial entity towards celebration of marriage beyond the heterosexual norm. Importantly, the UCC decision articulates itself using rights language and is therefore noticeably juridical. As such, it represents precisely the kind of rights language that I am suggesting churches can outmaneuver through other specifically ecclesial vernaculars like liturgy. Nevertheless, the UCC precedent provides a helpful counterpoint to the current discussion because the UCC church does not have an official liturgy for same sex marriage, despite granting individual member congregations discretion to perform same sex marriages or not.

The United Church of Christ Book of Worship provides three matrimonial liturgies: 1) Order for Marriage, 2) Order for the Blessing of a Civil Marriage, and 3) Order for Renewal of the Marriage Covenant. Much in the same way that the UMC rite becomes easily adaptable to same sex union due to gender symmetrical language already in place, the same holds true for the UCC rites. For the sake of brevity, let us simply take for example the shortest rite, the Order for Renewal of the Marriage Covenant, and apply the replace-and-repeat

method discussed with the UMC rites. Both wife and wife and husband and husband adaptation possibilities are shown below on the right:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original UCC Liturgy:</th>
<th>UCC Liturgy Modified for same sex marriage (using female couple as example):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>__________ and</td>
<td>__________ and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>Wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>__________,</td>
<td>__________,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>Wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On this __________</td>
<td>[remains the same]</td>
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<tr>
<td>anniversary of your</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>marriage,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I invite you to</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>renew your covenant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>promises.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original UCC Liturgy:</th>
<th>UCC Liturgy Modified for same sex marriage (using male couple as example):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wife [ says following]:</td>
<td>Husband [says the following]:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>__________,</td>
<td>__________,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am blessed to be</td>
<td>I am blessed to be your</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your wife,</td>
<td>husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And I promise anew</td>
<td>[vow remains the same]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To love and sustain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the covenants of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>marriage,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In sickness and in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>health,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In plenty and in want,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In joy and in sorrow,</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
As long as we both shall live.

Even though matrimonial liturgy in The United Church of Christ Book of Worship has not kept up with the overall reform in the UCC regarding same sex marriage, the existing liturgical rites still work for same sex marriage ceremonies. An examination of only one rite has been provided above – the Order for the Renewal of a Marriage Covenant. Yet as with the UMC rites, it adapts easily for same sex marriage application. The remaining two rites, the Order for Marriage and Order for Blessing of a Civil Marriage are also as easily adaptable for celebrating same sex marriage. The irony here is that even in a church body that officially permits same sex marriage, the phrasing of the matrimonial liturgy has not been revised to reflect that change. Perhaps because in part, the available liturgy endorsed by the UCC, traditional though it may be, easily adapts for same sex marriage celebration.

A few years ago, I had a phone conversation with a local UCC pastor in Nashville, Tennessee. She explained to me how she modified the UCC liturgy to a “Service of Holy Union” appropriate for a same sex marriage. Her modification is appended below. Speaking with her and seeing the rite she had created, I was also reminded of perhaps the most important opening for same sex marriage ceremonies available in most Protestant solemnizations of marriage is that so many couples rarely follow the available marriage liturgies word for word anyway.

Empirically, many protestant churches, including the UMC and UCC have wide-ranging flexibility and diversity regarding the way their churches celebrate marriages. It is true that The United Methodist Church Book of Worship upholds that “the decision to perform the ceremony is the right and responsibility of the pastor, in accordance with the laws of the state and The United Methodist

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21 Pastor Cindy (first name used for confidentiality). Email message to author with liturgy attached. It should be noted that the service is a “holy union” by title, but the liturgy includes a section entitled, “Blessing of the Marriage” March 4, 2008. Liturgy has been pasted at the end of this document.
But *The United Methodist Book of Worship* also states that “[e]thic and cultural traditions are encouraged and may be incorporated into the service at the discretion of the pastor” and for couples who do not identify themselves as members of the church or Christians, “adaptations may be made at the discretion of the pastor.” Taking those clauses sincerely, do same sex couples represent another culture to which the liturgy might adapt? Or, even if same sex couples are viewed as living in a way “incompatible with Christian teaching,” pastoral discretion may still adapt the marriage service for these “sinners.”

### The Eclipse of Popular Piety

Late on the evening of January 26, 2014, the popular music artist Macklemore and his producer Ryan Lewis along with special guests that included Mary Lambert, Madonna, Trombone Shorty and Queen Latifah performed a song entitled “Same Love” that derides homophobia in rap music and religious intolerance. The stage displayed towering LED images of stained glass windows forming a giant arc over the performance. But what stole the show and transformed it into a theologically curious spectacle was the participation of thirty-three couples (many of them same sex) whose marriages were solemnized by Queen Latifah in less than a minute:

We are gathered here to celebrate love and harmony in every key and every color. As I look out on this audience I’m delighted to see the faces of thirty-three couples who’ve chosen this moment to celebrate their vows with us here in Los Angeles and everyone watching around the world as witnesses. It is now my distinct honor to now ask our participants to exchange rings, to signal their commitment to one another.

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23 Ibid.
24 UMC *Discipline*, ¶304.3.
another, and to a life shared together with the music of love. Will you please exchange rings? [pause.] Do you each declare that you take each other as spouses? By the power invested in me, by the power of the state of California, I now pronounce you a married couple! [cheers.]

Needless to say, the occasion drew far more attention than the defrocking of Schaefer.

The UMC matrimonial liturgies provide sufficient grammar for celebrating same sex marriage. They even perhaps provide reliable starting points for preaching that supports same sex marriage. That homiletic possibility has exceeded the scope of the current discussions. Yet it is worth considering how historical liturgy in actuality provides fresh points of departure for making theological claims that are harder to warrant using only Scripture. In any case, as long as United Methodists refuse to resource and release those liturgies to Christianize marriages beyond opposite sex paradigms, and as long as pastors like Schaefer, Creech, and Stroud suffer the loss of their orders for performing Christian ministry at the edges of cultural significance, they will, in the meantime, fall further into the shadow of cultural irrelevancy. Of course the language of the matrimonial rites will probably persist long after the popularity of Macklemore, Ryan Lewis, Mary Lambert, Madonna, Trombone Shorty and Queen Latifah fade away. But that longevity does not guarantee that the language will continue to mean much, and for now, the evening light of popular piety shines much brighter and its witness extends far further.

No matter how much ecclesial practices evolve or adapt, churches do not ultimately define what marriage is. Congregations can, however, articulate what they believe marriage to be. They have done so for centuries. Philip Lyndon Reynolds, in tracking the Christianization of marriage from Roman antiquity states, “Marriage was henceforth one of those things (like baptism and eucharist) to which Christians could look when they needed to know what set them apart from infidels.” If we take the inviting couple of Revelation 22:17 seriously, however the church wants to negotiate sexuality and marriage, each time it marries, it bestows not simply a
blessing, but grants the couple opportunity to serve as symbolic representation of an eschatological hope for a coming Christ. Refusing to marry same sex couples in the UMC misunderstands the reach of that hope and fails to see the glimmer of a new day.

Addendum

Same Sex Marriage Liturgy from Reverend Cindy, Minister of Holy Trinity Community Church, United Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee

A SERVICE OF HOLY UNION

Gathering

Greetings

Friends, we are gathered together in the sight of God to witness and bless the mutual vows of ___________ and ______________, which will unite them in Holy Union.

We believe that God in His Wisdom brought this couple together, God initiated their love for each other, and today they come to join
themselves in Holy Union. We, your friends and family, witness and celebrate the vows you make this day.

Declaration of Intent

I ask you now, in the presence of God and these people, to declare your intention to enter into union with one another through the grace of Jesus Christ, who calls you into union with Himself as acknowledged in your baptism.

__________________, will you have _______________ to be your life partner, to live together in holy union? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?

Response: I will.

(repeat for other partner)

Scripture: I Corinthians 13:1-8

Homily

For two people to create a life together is both difficult and miraculous. It evokes the deepest fears as well as the most luminous devotion. To do this with the blessing of God requires that you honor the divine in each other and in yourself; that you recognize that spirit is made manifest in a multitude of ways, all equal in holiness; that you honor the many voices of the soul – the joys, the delights, the love as well as the anger, the fear, the illness and the unhealed wounds; that you allow each other and yourself complete dignity and wholeness; that you not ask your life partner to be any less or any more than she is, that you embrace her in her complexity - in her longings and in her delights, in the fullness of her dreams, in her relationship to God.

This is both God’s blessing and charge to you; to live together with honor, courage, and honesty.
Prayer

Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all life, Author of salvation, Giver of all grace: Bless and sanctify with Your Holy Spirit _________ and __________, who come to join in holy union. Grant that they may give their vows to each other in the strength of Your steadfast love. Enable them to grow in love and peace with you and with one another all their days, that they may reach out in concern and service to the world. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Exchange of Vows

In the name of God, I ________________, take you _______________, to be my life partner, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

(repeat for other partner)

Blessing and Exchange of Rings

These rings are the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, signifying to us the union between Jesus Christ and His church.

Bless, O Lord, the giving of these rings, that they who wear them may live in your peace and continue in Your favor all the days of their life; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

___________, I give you this ring as a sign of my vow, and with all that I am, and all that I have, I honor you; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

(repeat for other partner)

Unity Candle
As a symbol of their lives being joined together, ____________ and __________ will light their unity candle. Their individual candles will remain lit, symbolizing that though they are uniting in Holy Union, they will never lose their unique strengths and personal identities.

Declaration of Union

You have declared your consent and vows before God and these witnesses. May God confirm your covenant and fill you both with grace. Now that ____________ and __________ have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands, and the giving and receiving of rings, I announce to you that they are partners for life; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; Those whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder. Amen.

As a sign of your covenant, you may seal your vows with a kiss.

Blessing of a Marriage

O God, we ask that you will consecrate the covenant of this couple that it may represent the covenant between Christ and his church. Send therefore your blessings upon ____________ and __________, that they may surely keep their vows, and so grow in love and godliness together that their home may be a haven of blessing and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sending Forth

Dismissal with Blessing

God the Eternal keep you in love with each other, so that the peace of Christ may abide in your home. Go and serve God and your neighbor in all that you do. Bear witness to the love of God in this world, so that those whom love is a stranger will find in you generous friends.
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. **Amen.**