

FROM: Richard P. Howard, historian emeritus, Community of Christ
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TO: Members of the First Presidency
Community of Christ International Headquarters
Independence, Missouri 64051

DATE: May 24, 2009

RE: Your policy statement of May 9, 2009, governing priesthood officiants at same-sex marriage ceremonies

Dear friends,

I have studied and have some concerns about your policy statement of May 9, 2009 meant to give direction to administrative officers and other priesthood who might be concerned about same-sex marriages in the Community of Christ.

It is my considered view, after much focused study of your statement, that the sources on which it is based have at best only marginal relevance to this current issue; reliance on them tends to attenuate the aims of your stated policy.

What follows is an accurate copy of your statement, interspersed with my commentary placing your sources in their historical context—settings which are quite remote from, and with little or no real bearing on, your current concern. My comments are not rhetorical in the least. They are earnest observations and questions, posed with intent to help you formulate a more comprehensive strategy to deal with the situation.

Respectfully submitted,

Richard P. Howard
historian emeritus

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Now follows your directive, with my annotations:

Dear Colleagues,

A growing number of nations, states, and provinces have begun to allow same-sex marriage. Others are considering it. Consequently, the First Presidency has received several inquiries about whether Community of Christ ministers may officiate in same-sex marriages in places where it is legal.

Obviously, this is a complex issue, with leaders and members of the church holding a great diversity of opinion. It is our hope that this communication will clarify the church's position for the present time.

The First Presidency, in consultation with other World Church leaders and the Standing High Council, is considering what the most-helpful process may be for engaging the church in a consideration of issues about church policy and homosexuality. We believe the only way to move through such a process with integrity is to continue to abide by the church's policies and procedures as long as they are in place. Three of the most significant documents informing the church's policy on marriage are World Conference Resolution 1182, Doctrine and Covenants 111, and the section in the "Administrator's Handbook, 2005 Edition" on "Legal Elements of Marriage and Termination of Marriage," point #4, page 59. **[COMMENT, RP HOWARD: *Please quote the relevant material here, since many persons would have no access to or be unaware of the specific material you have in mind.*]**

World Conference Resolution 1182 repeatedly uses language referring to marriage as being between a husband and wife. **[COMMENT, RP HOWARD: *There are only two references to "husband and wife" in #1182. These reflect this resolution's 1984 context: i.e., matters involving marriage and its termination. This merely incidental use of "husband and wife" in #1182 also reflects the culturally driven assumption—heterosexual marriage.*** The "Church Administrator's Handbook" states on page 59:

The language of WCR 1182 does not provide authorization for ministers of the Community of Christ to perform marriages between two persons of the same sex, even in jurisdictions where such marriages are legally valid. **[COMMENT, RP HOWARD: *Of course not! Same-sex marriage was not even on the radar screen during the 1983 framing of resolution #1182. Therefore there is no allusion to same-sex marriage, and that is wholly and***

exactly why #1182 neither prohibits nor authorizes our ministers to officiate in same-sex marriages, “even in jurisdictions where such marriages are (today—2005-2009) legally valid.” In truth, there were no jurisdictions in 1984 in which same-sex marriage was either authorized or banned; or, was even an issue. The language here is from documents of a previous generation, addressing concerns peculiar to those earlier times. Your policy statement, however, uses these words out of context, as if they were originally intended to address the current gay marriage situation in the culture of 2009. This is not so.

The resolution does, however, provide for the recognition of legally valid marriages. Thus, a same-sex marriage may be entered into the church records as a legal fact, just as in other instances where the church recognizes legally valid marriages that it may not choose to solemnize.

[COMMENT, RP HOWARD: What are some examples of these “other instances” of exclusion in prevailing church rulings and practice? On what moral and ethical and theological bases does the church prohibit its ministry from officiating in fully legal, same-sex marriage ceremonies?

To what extent is fear of losing financial support from members who oppose same-sex marriages a major driving force for this new policy?

What other reasonable objections to same-sex marriage can be summoned by church officials to prohibit ministers from solemnizing perfectly legal marriages between long-committed, loving, faithful same sex partners who desire to establish permanent and stable marriage covenants?]

Doctrine and Covenants 111 refers to marriage as being between a man and a woman. Though Doctrine and Covenants 111 is not a revelatory statement, its preface states that “the church knows no other law of marriage than that which is set forth here.” ***[COMMENT, RP HOWARD: This article (Section 111) had no preface when first published as Section CI (101) of the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835. Its title was simply “Marriage.” It begins with paragraph 1. The preface referred to in this present directive was written by M. L. Draper in the 1978 edition of the RLDS Doctrine and Covenants, six years before WCR 1182. The 1834-35 context of Section 111 was clearly to declare the church’s monogamous policy, in light of accusations that “the crime of fornication, and polygamy “ were then existing among church members.***

Section 111 is thus an irrelevant precedent for considering the gay marriage issue today, 175 years later. Using it for this purpose conveys the reality of an institution grasping for straws to buttress its anti-gay marriage policy.]

In summary, no language in these guiding documents provides for same-sex marriage. To allow Community of Christ priesthood to officiate in same-sex marriages, when our policy does not allow it, during a time in which the church still is sorting through this divisive issue, would only cause further division and reduce participation in the discussion process. ***[COMMENT, RP HOWARD: This paragraph and the one immediately preceding it come through to me as ineffective delaying tactics. As the father of a lesbian daughter married under Massachusetts law since July 2004 to Pamela Werntz, her Episcopal priest mate of some six years previously, I propose that the leaders of the Community of Christ accelerate the public consideration of these and other issues involving our discriminatory policies against GLBT members. If we choose not to show good faith and generous response to their presence and active involvement in the life of the church, we stand to lose the superb ministries of which they are so eminently capable and wanting to give.]***

As stated above, the First Presidency believes the only way to engage with integrity and fairness in church-wide discussions on this difficult issue is to abide by the policies of the church as long as they are officially in place, even if the policies themselves are under debate. Consequently, we want to be clear that Community of Christ priesthood members are not authorized by the church to officiate in same-sex marriages, even where it is legal to do so.

It is the responsibility of all church officers, staff, pastors, and priesthood to be aware of and adhere to church policies pertaining to this issue. Presiding officers and mission center leaders, please provide this information to all pastors and priesthood in your areas of responsibility. ***[COMMENT, RP HOWARD: This paragraph and the one immediately preceding it should be clearer. For example, what will be the penalties and/or sanctions to be levied against any priesthood member officiating in same-sex marriages in secular political settings in which such marriages are legal? Are they required to surrender their priesthood licenses, or will field administrators be required to take specific actions to compel the gay marriage officiant to surrender his/her license?]***

We understand that this communication will be greeted warmly by some and will be frustrating to others. Still, we believe it is vital for us to consistently honor the current policies as stated by the World Conference and interpreted by World Church leaders.

Please be assured of our heartfelt appreciation for your ministry and leadership, especially as we deal with difficult matters that touch us all.

In Christ's Peace,

The First Presidency

CC: Standing High Council