

Ministers may only conduct marriage between a man and woman

General Assembly decided today that ministers may conduct marriage only between a man and woman.

A new rule, effective immediately, has been added to the Book of Order to further clarify the decision: “a minister may solemnize marriage only between a man and woman”.

The new rule will be sent to presbyteries and church councils and will be brought back to General Assembly 2016 for ratification under the special legislative procedure.

Assembly’s decisions on leadership and marriage today are consistent with the rulings of previous general assemblies that marriage is between a man and woman and that those involved in a sexual relationship outside marriage between a man and woman are inappropriate persons to be elders or ministers in our Church.

The Rev Hamish Galloway spoke during debate saying that there had to be a better way forward for the Church to discuss what is a complicated issue. He ended his speech by laying down his voting cards and leaving the Assembly floor. Approximately 100 commissioners subsequently also abstained from voting by leaving the floor. People returned to the voting floor once voting on all sexuality and marriage matters was complete.

The Rev Richard Dawson asked Assembly to vote against legislating for a different reason. Richard said that legislating what ministers can and can’t do represented the start of a slippery slope. Other speakers advocated for a spacious approach that would recognise the strongly held views within the Church on these matters.

Proposals that asked Assembly to acknowledge that God is calling to leadership people in same-sex, de-facto and civil union partnerships, and to fall from Section 9.1(1A) from the Book of Order were not supported by Assembly. Assembly was also asked to approve falling from this section locally if 2/3 of congregation members agree, and this proposal was also lost. (This section prohibits the Church from accepting for training, licensing, ordination, or induction anyone involved in a sexual relationship outside of faithful marriage between a man and a woman.)

Earlier in the week, Assembly decided against establishing a special commission on diversity to facilitate a programme of informed study on matters relating to sexuality in leadership and the conduct of marriage including liberty of conscience.

Those who were in agreement that marriage is only between a man and woman reiterated their desire for clarity and direction on this matter, and noted that for clarity and consistency the Church needed to make certain that our practice remains consistent with our beliefs.