

## Gay church 'marriages' set to get the go-ahead

Ministers are expected to publish plans to enable same-sex couples to "marry" in church, the BBC has learned. Equalities Minister Lynne Featherstone is to propose lifting the ban on civil partnerships taking place in religious settings in England and Wales.



There are no plans to compel religious organisations to hold ceremonies and the Church of England has said it would not allow its churches to be used.

Gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell said the change was "long overdue".

Civil partnership ceremonies are currently entirely secular.

It is not clear whether the proposals will suggest that civil ceremonies in religious surroundings could incorporate elements such as hymns or Bible readings or be formally described as marriages.

It is thought this might be part of a consultation process.

### **Equality Act**

Marriage between people of the same gender is not legal in the UK but civil partnerships were introduced in 2005 to give couples the same legal protection as if they were wed.

The proposals were welcomed by gay rights campaigners but may raise the ire of many churchgoers.

Church of England spokesman Mr Tatchell said: "Permitting faith organisations to make their own decision on whether to conduct same-sex civil partnerships is the democratic and decent thing to do.

"The current law prevents them from doing so, even if they want to. No religious institution will be forced to perform civil partnerships if they do not wish to do so."

The Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, gave the news a guarded welcome.

He told the BBC's Andrew Marr Show that he "believes in a liberal democracy, and actually wants equality with everybody".

A Church of England spokesman said: "Given the Church's view on the nature of marriage, the House of Bishops has consistently been clear that the Church of England should not provide services of blessing for those who register civil partnerships."

He added the worry was that any changes could "lead to inconsistencies with civil marriage, have unexplored impacts, and lead to confusion, with a number of difficult and unintended consequences for churches and faiths".

"Any change could therefore only be brought after proper and careful consideration of all the issues involved, to ensure that the intended freedom for all denominations over these matters is genuinely secured," he said.

BBC