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Same-sex couples can use British churches for ceremonies starting in December

Al Webb Religion News Service | Nov. 2, 2011

LONDON -- The British government said Wednesday that same-sex couples will be allowed for the first time to use churches to seal their civil partnership vows, starting in December.

But the directive added that no religious group will be forced to conduct or host such a ceremony, and the Church of England quickly announced it would permit no such rites on its premises.

In a statement, the church said it "has no intention of allowing civil partnerships to be registered" in its churches.

The government's equalities minister, Lynne Featherstone, used a written statement to Parliament to announce that same-sex couples will be allowed to seal their vows in churches and other places of worship in England and Wales starting Dec. 5.

Civil partnership registrations have been entirely secular in Britain.

"The government is advancing equality for LGB (lesbian, gay and bisexual) people and ensuring freedom of religion for people of all faiths," Featherstone said. But she added that "no religious group will be forced to host a civil partnership registration."

Same-sex marriages are banned in Britain, but same-sex civil partnerships have been allowed since 2005. The partnerships give gay and lesbian couples the same legal protections accorded to heterosexual married couples.

Partnership ceremonies will most certainly be banned in Catholic churches, as well as mosques and Orthodox synagogues. The BBC reported that "leaders of Liberal Judaism, the Quakers and the Unitarians have in the past expressed interest" in hosting same-sex ceremonies.

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