News



The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, left and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, gather at the General Synod of the Church of England, at Church House, to consider a motion which reviews the church's failure "to be welcoming to LGBTQI+ people" and the harm they have faced and still experience, in London, Thursday, Feb. 9, 2023. (James Manning/PA via AP)

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The Church of England's national assembly on Feb. 9 voted to let priests bless same-sex marriages and civil partnerships, while continuing to ban church weddings for the same couples.

Bishops proposed the compromise measure after five years of discussions about the church's position on sexuality. It was approved by the church's General Synod, which is made up of bishops, clergy and lay people from around the country, following eight hours of debate over two days at a meeting in London.

The measure included an apology for the church's failure welcome LGBTQ people. But it also endorsed the doctrine that marriage is between one man and one woman, meaning priests are still barred from marrying same-sex couples.

"I know that what we have proposed as a way forward does not go nearly far enough for many but too far for others," the Bishop of London, Sarah Mullally, said in a statement. "It is my prayer that what has been agreed today will represent a step forward for all of us within the Church — including LGBTQI+ people — as we remain committed to walking together."

Jayne Ozanne, a gay rights campaigner and member of the synod, said she was "deeply disappointed" that conservatives had stifled the church's debate on sexuality. The synod earlier this week rejected an amendment proposed by Ozanne that would have put the issue of marriage equality back on the agenda later this year.

"By continuing to tell [LGBT] people that they cannot hope to get married any time soon in their church or that their desire for sexual intimacy is sinful, we send a message to the nation that few will understand," Ozanne said on Twitter. "More importantly, it is a message that will continue to cause great harm to the LGBT community and put young LGBT+ lives at risk."

Same-sex marriage has been legal in England and Wales since 2013, but the church didn't alter its teaching on marriage when the law changed.

Public opinion surveys consistently show that a majority of people in England support same-sex marriage. But the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said the church continues to have "deep divisions" on the issue.

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The measure approved Feb. 9 endorses a proposal from the church's bishops to allow clergy to bless the unions of same-sex couples after they marry or have a partnership recognized by civil authorities. But clergy members won't be required to perform such blessings if they disagree with them.

The blessings are expected to begin later this year after the bishops refine their guidance and issue prayers for the clergy to use.

Welby said last month that he wouldn't personally bless any same-sex couples because it's his job to unify the 85 million members of the Anglican Communion around the world. Welby is the spiritual leader of both the Church of England and the global Anglican church of which it is a member.

Still, he celebrated the Feb. 9 decision.

"It has been a long road to get us to this point," Welby said in a statement issued jointly with the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell. "For the first time, the Church of England will publicly, unreservedly and joyfully welcome same-sex couples in church."