

Church of England OK's (celibate) gay bishops

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CANTERBURY, England (RNS) The Church of England on Friday (Jan. 4) confirmed that it has dropped its prohibition on gay clergy in civil partnerships becoming bishops – but only if they agree to remain celibate.

Speaking on behalf of the Church's House of Bishops, Bishop of Norwich Graham Jones said in a statement: "The House of Bishops has confirmed that clergy in civil partnerships, and living in accordance with the teaching of the Church on human sexuality, can be considered as candidates for the episcopate. There had been a moratorium on such candidates for the past year and a half while the working party completed its task."

Jones added that the bishops agreed it would be "unjust" to exclude gay men from becoming bishops if they were otherwise "seeking to live fully in conformity with the Church's teaching on sexual ethics or other areas of personal life and discipline."

Although the bishops approved the change on Dec. 20, it wasn't noticed until Friday when the BBC's religious affairs correspondent, Robert Pigott, read it in a report published in the Church Times.

The move represents a major shift for the mother church of the worldwide Anglican Communion, which had already weathered a major schism when Anglicanism's American branch, the Episcopal Church, consecrated openly gay Bishop V. Gene Robinson in New Hampshire in 2003.

Evangelical Anglicans said that they would fight the move to let gay clergy become bishops.

Rod Thomas, chairman of the conservative group Reform, told the BBC that the idea of appointing people in civil partnerships as bishops had not been agreed on or debated by the wider church.

"That would be a major change in church doctrine and therefore not something that can be slipped out in the news," he said. "It is something that has got to be considered by the General Synod."

The governing General Synod has already proven itself reluctant to make major changes to who can become a bishop; delegates narrowly defeated a proposal last November to allow women bishops, a decision that sparked widespread anger from the public and British government.

The issue of gay bishops has split the Church of England since 2003 amid a row over gay cleric Jeffrey John becoming the Bishop of Reading, about 58 miles west of London.

Presently, John is dean of St. Albans Cathedral in Hertfordshire and is registered in a same-sex civil partnership with his longtime partner. Under the new rules, he would be eligible to become a bishop as long as he maintains his commitment to celibacy.