

Archbishop of Canterbury to meet with gay rights activist

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CANTERBURY, England (RNS) The new archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, will hold talks with gay rights leader Peter Tatchell on Thursday (April 18), less than a month after the Australian-born activist called Welby "homophobic" for his opposition to same-sex marriage.

"I applaud the archbishop's willingness to engage in dialogue, all the more because he comes from the conservative wing of the Church of England," Tatchell said in an interview. "I hope our meeting is not mere window dressing and good PR for the church. I'm expecting more than tea and sympathy."

Tatchell, 61, said that his aim would be to persuade the new archbishop -- who is also head of the world's 77 million-member Anglican Communion -- to embrace "a new historic compromise with the gay community."

"Discrimination is not a Christian value," he said. "The archbishop should therefore oppose all discrimination against gay people, including the ban on same-sex civil marriage."

British lawmakers have passed a law to allow same-sex marriages despite opposition from Welby's Church of England and Roman Catholic leaders. Under the law, Anglican and Catholic churches would be specifically prohibited from hosting same-sex weddings.

Thursday's meeting was offered by Welby in response to an open letter Tatchell wrote on March 20; Welby wrote back and said he'd like to explain his positions "without the mediation of the press."

Tatchell said beyond urging Welby to reconsider his position on same-sex marriage, he would also ask the archbishop to end what he called "Anglican collusion with the persecution of gay people" in different parts of Africa, including Cameroon, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia.

"While the archbishop is entitled to reject homosexuality as unacceptable, in a liberal democracy he is not entitled to insist that his religious beliefs are legislated into law by banning same-sex marriage ceremonies," he said.