

Episcopal Church adopts same-sex liturgy, causing 'distress' for some Anglicans

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This article appears in the [August 5, 2015](#) issue.

The 2-million-member Episcopal Church voted overwhelmingly on July 1 to let gay and lesbian couples marry in the church's religious ceremonies, reinforcing its support for same-sex nuptials days after the U.S. Supreme Court legalized gay marriage nationwide.

Meeting in Salt Lake City for its 78th General Convention, the House of Deputies concurred with the House of Bishops to approve a canonical change that eliminates a written definition of marriage as between a man and a woman and authorizes two new marriage rites for same-sex or different-sex couples. Among the changes to church laws on marriage, the words *husband* and *wife* will be replaced with *the couple*.

Clergy can decline to perform same-sex marriages without incurring a penalty or punishment, and bishops can refuse to allow same-sex marriages in their dioceses. So same-sex Episcopal couples seeking a church wedding could find themselves having to go somewhere other than their home church or even their home diocese.

The move by the Episcopal Church, part of the Anglican Communion, contrasts with the position of the Church of England, which secured an exemption from ever having to perform a gay marriage ceremony when Parliament passed a law in 2014 making same-sex marriage legal.

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, head of the 80-million-member worldwide Anglican Communion, said in a statement that he is deeply concerned about the Episcopal vote.

The Episcopal decision "will cause distress for some and have ramifications for the Anglican Communion as a whole," Welby's statement said. He called for "the strengthening of the interdependent relationships between provinces, so that in the face of adversity and disagreement, Anglicans may be a force for peace and seek to

respond to the Lord Jesus's prayer that 'they may be one so that the world may believe' (John 17:21)."

Susan Russell, the senior associate for communications at All Saints Church in Pasadena, California, served on the task force that studied the marriage changes in the Episcopal Church.

The church actions "are an exemplary illustration of the hard, faithful work of a church refusing to let the perfect be the enemy of the good," Russell wrote in a commentary.

She noted that the conversation around sexuality and marriage began during the 1976 General Convention with a resolution declaring gay and lesbian people to be "children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the church."

In 1994, the church allowed the ordination of LGBT priests. The church marked another first in 2003 with the election of openly gay Gene Robinson to the post of bishop.

In 2012 it approved a liturgy for clergy to use in blessing same-sex unions. Between that vote and this one, same-sex Episcopalians could get married by a judge or ordained minister in another church, but an Episcopal priest could only "bless" the union. And they could not use an Episcopal liturgy for the service. They borrowed from other denominations' liturgies or wrote their own because no Episcopal same-sex marriage liturgy existed.

Kevin Eckstrom, spokesman for Washington National Cathedral, an Episcopal church, said it is hard to overstate how important a move this is to church members.

"Liturgy is part of the Episcopal DNA, so that if something does not have its own liturgy, it does not exist," he said. "Liturgy defines Episcopal life together."  
—Religion News Service

*This article was edited on July 21, 2015.*