

Church of England Throws in Towel in Gay Marriage Fight

Bishops in the Church of England, who had strenuously opposed a bid to allow same-sex marriage, signaled that they won't try to derail the bill after an overwhelming vote of support in the House of Lords.

Church of England spokesman Steve Jenkins said that in the same way the church will eventually allow women bishops, England will eventually allow same-sex marriage.

"It doesn't mean the Church of England is happy, but that's where our government is going," Jenkins said. "Now it's about safeguarding people's right to hold religious beliefs."

The Right Rev. Tim Stevens, the Bishop of Leicester who leads the bishops in the House of Lords, issued a statement on Wednesday (June 5), one day after the parliament's upper house voted 390-148 against an amendment to kill the gay marriage bill.

"Both houses of Parliament have now expressed a clear view by large majorities on the principle that there should be legislation to enable same-sex marriages to take place in England and Wales," Stevens said.

The bill will now go into committee where bishops—who hold 26 seats in the upper chamber—will attempt to insert amendments to add protections for teachers or other workers who object on religious grounds. The bill passed the House of Commons on a vote of 366 to 161.

Other observers cautioned against reading too much into the Church of England's move, saying it is just part of the political process.

“I think it’s been over reported that the church has given in,” said Chris Sugden, an Anglican minister and secretary of the traditionalist group Anglican Mainstream. “It’s as if the church is saying, ‘We don’t approve of gambling, but if there are going to be betting shops, they would put an amendment to say they should not be near schools.’”

The statement by Stevens still notes the redefinition of marriage. “If this bill is to become law, it is crucial that marriage as newly defined is equipped to carry within it as many as possible of the virtues of the understanding of marriage it will replace,” Stevens said.

The bishop’s statement is subtle enough that the bishops could end up voting against the bill once it comes out of committee, says the Rev. Peter Ould, a commentator and Anglican priest.

“I wouldn’t put it past the bishops to say we didn’t get what we wanted so we are going to vote no,” Ould said. “The underlying tone of the statement is that this bill isn’t good. It needs to be improved.”

The bishop’s move comes a few days after the head of the Church of England, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, said the redefinition of marriage would undermine a cornerstone of society.

The current legislation bans the established Church of England from conducting gay marriage ceremonies.