

Same-sex couples denied religious marriage ceremonies, study shows

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Credit: University of Leeds

Discrimination against same-sex couples denied religious marriage is endemic, says a new study.

Research by academics at the Universities of Leeds and York highlights the prevailing extent of discrimination against same-sex couples wanting religious marriage ceremonies.

Professor Robert Vanderbeck from the School of Geography at Leeds and Professor Paul Johnson, from the Department of Sociology at York, examined the legal framework in England and Wales that allows religious organisations to refuse to marry same-sex couples.

Professor Vanderbeck and Professor Johnson found that same-sex couples are excluded from approximately 42,000 places of worship in which opposite-sex couples can get married.

Same-sex couples are not permitted to marry in any of the 17,350 churches of the Church of England and the Church in Wales, or in nearly 23,000 other places of worship, such as Roman Catholic churches, Islamic mosques, and Hindu temples.

Although [same-sex marriage](#) has been legal in England and Wales since 2014, religious organisations are under no obligation to extend their marriage services to [gay couples](#).

The Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 provides the means for organised religions – other than the Church of England – to opt in to conduct same-sex marriages, with the decision left to individual institutions.

Only 139 places of worship are registered to perform same-sex marriage in England and Wales, meaning approximately 99.5 per cent do not offer it. Just 23 same-sex couples had a religious marriage ceremony in 2014, compared with over 68,000 opposite-sex couples.

Professor Vanderbeck said: "As none of the mainstream religious faiths will marry same-sex couples, such couples need to rely on minor faith groups, such as Unitarians, to be willing to marry them. The problem is, the couple might not share that faith."

Professor Johnson said: "The level of discrimination is staggering. If you are a same-sex couple in England and Wales then you most likely live in a town where there is no opportunity to have a religious marriage ceremony. That means you are completely shut out of a mainstream cultural practice that opposite-sex couples take for granted.

"Recent reports describe [same-sex couples](#) 'shunning' religious wedding ceremonies, but the reality is they are simply being denied the opportunity. Parliament has agreed a legislative framework for marriage that is allowing extensive discrimination, and the figures support this."

Church of England Canon law - which defines marriage as the 'union of one man with one woman' – co-exists alongside the contrary general marriage statute law allowing same-sex [marriage](#), due to the religious protections included in the 2013 Act.

More information: Paul Johnson et al. Sacred Spaces, Sacred Words: Religion and Same-sex Marriage in England and Wales, *Journal of Law and Society* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/jols.12024](https://doi.org/10.1111/jols.12024)

Provided by University of Leeds

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