

Same-sex marriage a decade on: More choice for all couples is the best legal way forward, study argues

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An increasing number of places of worship are offering same-sex weddings, a decade on from same-sex marriage in England and Wales

becoming legal, a new study shows.

Professor Rebecca Probert of the University of Exeter Law School has analyzed how the availability of religious same-sex weddings varies geographically and between religions.

She found that most Christian [same-sex couples](#) in England and Wales now have the option of marrying in a Christian ceremony if they wish, with more than a thousand churches having opted in to conduct same-sex weddings.

Of the 175 registration districts, 84% have at least one place of worship offering [same-sex marriage](#). Same-sex weddings are also an option for Liberal and Reform Jews, Quakers, Buddhists, and Pagans.

As of September 2023, 1,018 places of worship were registered for same-sex weddings. While that is only a small percentage of the total number of registered places of worship, analysis of the nature and distribution of these places of worship suggests that most same-sex couples are now able to access a place of worship where they can marry.

The vast majority of places of worship registered for weddings belong to Christian denominations, with most being Methodist. There are 675 Methodist places of worship registered for same-sex weddings, 133 by the United Reform Church, 95 Unitarian, 63 Spiritualists and 23 Baptists. In addition, the Society of Friends has also opted in to conduct same-sex weddings, as have the relevant governing bodies of Liberal and Reform Judaism.

The study, soon to be published in the journal *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, also shows the number of opposite-sex couples marrying in a religious ceremony has declined sharply since 1995, when it became possible to marry in attractive venues such as stately homes and hotels.

The study warns against interpreting this decline in religious ceremonies as evidence couples are choosing to marry in a ceremony stripped of religious meaning. Many couples still lack easy access to a place of worship where they can marry in accordance with their beliefs—for example if their local church, mosque, gurdwara, or temple is not registered for weddings at all. Others might want to include hymns or prayers in their civil wedding ceremony, but this is not currently allowed. And followers of non-religious belief systems such as Humanism are unable to marry in a ceremony that reflects their beliefs.

There have been calls from some quarters for religious marriage to be outlawed completely and the introduction of "universal civil marriage," with all couples required to go through a one-size-fits-all secular ceremony.

Professor Probert's investigation found that serious issues of capacity would arise if universal civil marriage were introduced, as well as the prohibitive cost of employing registration officers to conduct tens of thousands of additional ceremonies each year.

She said, "The law governing entry into marriage in England and Wales is clearly in need of reform, but universal civil marriage is not the answer. As well as increasing costs for couples and the taxpayer, it would take away any option for a couple to marry in accordance with their beliefs, whether religious, atheist, or humanist. More choice is needed, not less."

Across England and Wales, only 28 of the 175 registration districts have no place of worship registered for same-sex weddings. This suggests most Christian same-sex couples in England and Wales will now have access to a Christian place of worship that is registered for same-sex weddings in their own registration district. Most will have a choice: 130 registration districts have more than one place of worship registered for

same-sex weddings, and in 107 of these at least two of those so registered are from different denominations.

There are considerable disparities between registration districts in the provision of places of worship offering same-sex weddings. But the majority of the larger registration districts—for example those that are coterminous with counties—had multiple places of worship registered for same-sex weddings. Lancashire heads the list with 38, followed by North Yorkshire with 31 and Kent with 26.

A number of the registration districts that still lack any place of worship registered for same-sex weddings are geographically small. Over a third—Barking and Dagenham, Bexley, Brent, Hammersmith and Fulham, Haringey, Harrow, Havering, Hounslow, Southwark, and Tower Hamlets—are located in Greater London. This makes access to a place of worship in another district a realistic possibility. Under the Marriage Act 1949, a schedule can be issued to authorize a [wedding](#) outside the parties' district(s) of residence if the intended location is the usual place of worship of one or both of the parties.

Professor Probert said, "England and Wales is still a long way from achieving equal marriage for same-sex and opposite-sex couples, but there is room for some cautious optimism about the direction of travel. Given that hundreds of places of worship were registered for same-sex weddings in 2023 alone, moving to universal civil marriage would deprive same-sex couples of an option that they have only just acquired and that is hugely valued by those who have availed themselves of it."

Provided by University of Exeter

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