

As church-based civil unions kick in, Church of England says no

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LONDON (RNS) New laws that allow same-sex civil unions to be performed on religious premises took effect in England and Wales on Monday (Dec. 5), but the Church of England says it won't permit them without approval from its top body.

Civil partnerships have been legal since 2005, but until Monday the ceremonies had to be held in secular venues. Civil partnerships, which cannot be called marriages, give same-sex couples the same legal rights as heterosexual couples who are married in a church.

The church said in a letter to its governing body that "the position under the new arrangements is that no Church of England religious premises may become 'approved premises' for the registration of civil partnerships" unless its General Synod approves.

The Synod is the Church's general assembly, and it is considered highly unlikely to permit same-sex marriage ceremonies on church property.

The British government itself has said it has no intention of forcing religious institutions to conduct gay union rites, regardless of the new laws.

The Church of England's legal office said in a statement that it is not guilty of unlawful discrimination because standard marriages and civil partnerships are

legally distinct.

"A gentlemen's outfitter is not required to supply women's clothes. A children's bookshop is not required to stock books that are intended for adults," the statement said. "And a church that provides a facility to marry is not required to provide a facility to same-sex couples for registering civil partnerships."