Gay couple may sue Church of England to wed in church

by Trevor Grundy

August 6, 2013

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CANTERBURY, England (RNS) The British government's promise that no religious organization will be forced to conduct same-sex weddings following the passage of a gay marriage bill may soon be tested.

Barrie Drewitt-Barlow, 42, and his partner, Tony, 49 — millionaires who run a surrogacy company in Britain and the U.S. — have been a high-profile couple since 1999 when they became the first gay couple to be named on the birth certificate of their child.

Now they have five children by five surrogate mothers. All the children are American citizens born in California.

While planning for a sixth, they told the Daily Mail they plan to sue the Church of England to get married there.

"I want to go to my church and marry my husband," said Drewitt-Barlow in an interview published Friday (Aug. 2). "It is a shame that we are forced to take Christians into a court to get them to recognize us."

Referring to the legislation that received the queen's approval last month he said: "The only way forward for us now is to make a challenge in the courts against the Church."

The couple own a company based in Essex called the British Surrogacy Centre. It recently opened a branch in Los Angeles.

The new law stipulates that no religious denomination will be forced to carry out such services.

But that's not good enough for the couple.

"We need to convince the church that it is the right thing for our community for them to recognize us as practicing Christians," said Drewitt-Barlow.

"It upsets me because I want it so much — a big lavish ceremony, the whole works. I am a Christian — a practicing Christian — my children have all been brought up as Christians and are part of the local parish church in Danbury."

Neither the Church of England nor the Roman Catholic Church recognizes gay marriages. Other religious groups, including Orthodox Jews, Hindus and Sikhs do not perform such marriages.

Some religious bodies, including Quakers, Unitarians and Reform Jews, say they plan to conduct same-sex weddings when the law goes into effect next year.

The threat of court action against the established Church of England — whose supreme governor is Queen Elizabeth II — has provoked a strong reaction from the Coalition for Marriage, which led opposition to the bill.

Director Colin Hart said Drewitt–Barlow's comments clearly shows that churches are certain to face litigation.

In a statement, he said: "The ink's not even dry on the bill and churches are already facing litigation. We warned Mr. Cameron (Britain's prime minister) this would happen, we told him he was making promises that he couldn't possibly keep. He didn't listen. … Mr. Cameron's chickens are coming home to roost and it will be ordinary people with a religious belief who yet again fall victim to the totalitarian forces of political correctness."