

Single Congregation Local Ecumenical Partnerships

Registering Buildings for Same Sex Marriage

Introduction

Of the four main denominations most often involved as partners in single congregation LEPs, three (Baptist, Methodist and the United Reformed Church) have now established guidelines for whether and how their churches are able to register buildings for the solemnisation of same sex marriage. Although the process regarding Church of England weddings is still ongoing, there has been a clarification of the situation regarding shared buildings, and LEPs in particular.

These notes attempt to explain how these guidelines should be interpreted in LEPs, and to offer reassurance for those concerned as to how differing positions will affect their life together.

Basic Principles

All of our denominations expect that the positions of other partner churches will be treated with respect and sensitivity, recognising that this is not the only area in which we may disagree. As in all other areas of church life, pastoral care and concern for individual situations must remain a priority.

The Legal Position

For a non-Anglican same sex wedding to take place in a church building, the building must be registered with the General Register Office for such weddings. This is a separate registration from weddings of opposite sex couples. There is a process to be followed to register a building for same sex marriage, set out on this government webpage: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/certifying-a-building-for-worship-and-marriage-version-3-sept-2012>

Part of the process is for the 'relevant governing authority' to give consent to the registration of the building for same sex marriage. In an LEP the relevant governing authority of *each* partner must give consent.

For **Baptist Churches**, the relevant governing authority is the local church meeting. It should be noted that, whilst recognising the authority of the local church to govern what takes place in its own building, the Baptist Union Council has also recognised areas of deep disagreement on this issue, and issued a statement in 2016, part of which reads:

In the light of this, recognising the costs involved and after careful and prayerful reflection and listening, we humbly urge churches who are considering conducting same-sex marriages to refrain from doing so out of mutual respect. At the same time, we also humbly urge all churches to remain committed to our Union out of mutual respect; trusting that the one who unites us is stronger than what divides us.

Information on the Baptist Union position and the Council statement is here:

https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/463873/Baptist_Union_Council.aspx

For the **United Reformed Church**, the relevant governing authority is also the local church meeting. This was confirmed by a decision of the 2016 URC General Assembly. More information on the URC position can be found here: <https://urc.org.uk/about-us/marriage-of-same-sex-couples.html>

For the **Methodist Church** the relevant governing authority is the Methodist Conference. In June 2021, the Conference agreed that local churches were able to register, should they wish. However, this is not a blanket instruction for all Methodist churches to register, the local Methodist Church Council needs to agree to register for itself. More information on the Methodist Church decision can be found here: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/marriage-and-relationships/frequently-asked-questions-following-the-2021-conference-votes-on-marriage-and-relationships/>

For the **Church of England** the situation remains that no Church of England buildings may be registered for same sex marriage, and no Anglican same sex wedding ceremonies can take place. However, there is now a process for consent to be sought for a shared building to be registered for non-Anglican same sex wedding ceremonies:

[Once the LEP trustees and the PCC] have agreed they would like the building to be registered they should contact the Diocesan Bishop. The Bishop will then decide, on a case by case basis, whether to recommend to the Archbishops Council that consent to registering the building be given. Again this will be on a case by case basis. It is important to remember that registration is for Authorised Person procedure marriage only (not those under Church of England procedure or by Church of England clergy).

LEP Process

We suggest that if an LEP wishes to consider registering a building for same sex marriage, then the process for consultation and decision should be as follows:-

- If the building was originally a Church of England building, and is still the legally the owner of building, it cannot be registered for same sex marriage.
- The denomination who originally owned the building should initiate the process of agreement.
- If the Church of England is a partner in the LEP, the PCC needs to agree that the building should be registered. The Diocesan Bishop should then be contacted for his/her consent for registering the building.
- If the Methodist Church is involved in the LEP, the Methodist Council needs to agree that the building should be registered. In most LEPs, the Methodist Council primarily consists of the LEP Trustees, with certain additional representatives from the Circuit.
- If the Baptist Union or United Reformed Church are partners, the LEP Congregational Meeting must make the decision. For clarity, this should formally be a meeting of the Baptist Church members of the LEP/United Reformed Church members of the LEP as appropriate. In most LEPs, due to joint and extended membership arrangements this will be normally be the majority of the LEP membership roll, but there may be some exceptions. If there are both Baptist and URC partners to the LEP, the decision needs to be taken by both church meetings.
- Once the decision has been agreed by the congregational meeting(s), the registration can be applied for. The Methodist church has produced comprehensive guidance on how to navigate the registration procedure here: [Guidance for managing trustees about how to register a Methodist church building for same-sex marriage](#). Although written for a Methodist audience, it may well be useful for other churches too.

Other churches sharing buildings

There are situations where a single congregation LEP also shares its building with another church or churches which meet at separate times. This is often a Catholic church, but may be a church of another denomination, or even another faith.

The rules state that all religious organisations which use the building for worship need to give consent to the building being registered for same sex marriage. They do not need to conduct same sex weddings themselves, but they do need to agree that the building can be registered.

Conducting Same Sex Weddings

It is important to note that there is no obligation for a minister of an LEP to conduct same sex marriages. Even if the church has agreed to register the building for same sex marriages, it does not mean that the minister of the church has to agree to conduct such weddings, either in general or a specific marriage in particular.

The position of ministers is specifically protected in the Marriage (same sex couples) Act 2013. Section 2 of the Act protects individuals and religious organisations who do not wish to conduct or participate in a

religious marriage ceremony on the ground that it is a marriage of a same sex couple. The Equality Act 2010 has also been updated to reflect this.

We remind those in LEPs that even though a person, lay or ordained, may have permission from another Church to minister in that other Church, they remain under the discipline of their own Church. This is accepted by all the Churches in relation to one another. Hence, as far as the clergy of the Church of England are concerned, it remains the case that it would be unlawful to officiate at the marriage of a same-sex couple.

*National Ecumenical Officers
February 2025*