

Danish gays soon allowed to marry in church

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Denmark, the first country in the world to allow gay couples to enter into civil unions in 1989, will soon allow them to marry in the state Evangelical Lutheran Church, the government said Wednesday.

"The Danish government has decided that same-sex couples are to be able to marry in church on equal terms with heterosexual couples, and that they will be able to call themselves spouses," the gender equality and ecclesiastical affairs ministry said in a statement.

The ministry will submit a bill to parliament on the issue soon.

"We expect to celebrate the first marriage next summer," Ellen Aagaard Petersen, a journalist with the protestant church's official newspaper, told AFP, adding that the vote in parliament and implementation of the law would take about six months.

"All members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark must have the opportunity to be married in church regardless of their sexual orientation," the ministry statement said.

Denmark was the first country in the world to allow gay couples to enter into civil unions, or so-called "registered partnerships", on October 1, 1989. Those unions have given homosexuals virtually the same rights as heterosexual couples, but not the right to a religious wedding ceremony.

Since 1997 the Church has offered gay couples a religious blessing of their union, stopping short of the wedding ceremony and they are not registered as a couple on the parish lists.

In 2009, gay couples were given the right to adopt children.

"When two men or two women join together, it's a marriage and there's no reason to dance around to find another name for it," said George Hinge, spokesman for Denmark's association for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

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"When you use the same word that is used in the everyday language, that sends a clear signal to same-sex couples that they are of course part of the Church," he added.

Neighbouring Norway and Sweden have both taken similar steps in recent years.

The government's decision comes less than a month after the death at the age of 96 of Danish gay rights activist Axel Axgil, who together with his partner Eigil Eskildsen were the first couple to enter into a civil union in 1989.

Under the new law, a pastor will not be obliged to marry a gay couple if he or she does not want to, Aagaard Petersen said.

"A pastor can say no, but another one will say yes," she explained.

Some 80 percent of Danes were members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as of January 1, representing 4.5 million members.

Almost two-thirds of Danes, 63 percent, were in favour of gay marriage in a poll published in March 2010 in the Christian daily Kristelig Dagbladet.

And six of the 10 bishops in the Church, questioned in 2010 by the daily Berlingske Tidende, said they were also in favour of same-sex marriages.