

Copyright [The Guardian](#) 14-01-2016



Thursday 14 January 2016, two members of the Church of England, John and John – one of them an Egyptologist, one a care home manager – got married in a church in the heart of the City of London. They entered a civil partnership some years ago but, in accordance with the state’s silly rules, weren’t allowed to mention God on that occasion. Instead of religious music (which is banned) they opted for Cole Porter. But this time it was different. “Praise, my soul, the King of heaven” we sang. And the service itself was couched in the familiar language of classic Anglicanism: “It is very meet, right and our bounden duty” etc. It was a privilege to be invited to take communion with them both.

As the two Johns were quietly pledging their love for each other in London, 50 miles away in Canterbury the appointed leaders of world [Anglicanism](#) were locked in an undignified death match about homosexuality. Some of them would have the Johns thrown into prison for even whispering about the love that dare not speak its name. Church commentators have been carefully monitoring the proceedings, looking for the faintest of signs of who will emerge triumphant from the global culture wars. But the truth is, it doesn’t really matter. The Anglican church is only nominally a top-down organisation. What matters most is what happens on the ground. And on the ground,

in pews across England, Scotland, Wales, Canada, Brazil, Korea, Japan and the US, the movement towards marriage equality is inexorable. Whatever piece of paper Justin Welby emerges with, it won't hold back the tide of history. The best the conservatives can hope for is a few speed bumps.

Interestingly, the London ceremony wasn't a blessing or a carefully cobbled together service after a civil ceremony. It was a proper marriage, something the current C of E hierarchy has banned priests like me from undertaking. But the Rev Joost Röselaers, minister of the Dutch church in Austin Friars, is able to conduct the ceremony because of a little-known historical loophole. In 1550, Edward VI granted a charter to Protestant refugees living in London, giving them the same privileges as the C of E. He permitted the Dutch "freely and quietly to practise, enjoy, use and exercise their own rites and ceremonies, and their own ecclesiastical discipline, notwithstanding that they do not conform with the rites and ceremonies used in our Kingdom, without impeachment, disturbance or vexation".



The Rev Joost Röselaers presides over the marriage of John and John

When Edward granted this charter he obviously didn't have gay marriage in mind. It was his father, Henry VIII, who had first introduced the civil crime of buggery in 1533 – though no one took much notice. The only notable court case during the Tudor period was of the Rev Nicholas Udall, the headmaster of Eton. And even this didn't much harm his career, as he went on to be headmaster of Westminster. The purpose of Edward's charter was to further the cause of the Protestant reformation of

England. And within 20 years the Dutch church at Austin Friars was being held up as a model congregation to which the Church of England should aspire – as it should again today.

For as with the current ecclesiastical wrangling among Anglican top brass, the Reformation itself was largely a question of authority. It was about who gets to tell whom what to think about what the Bible says. The heroically martyred William Tyndale first translated the Bible into English, thus breaking the church's monopoly on what the Bible actually says about things. After Tyndale, the English could read the Bible for themselves and make up their own minds up about what it says – he deliberately wrote it so that even a ploughboy could understand for himself. And from then on in, the bishops were always going to be fighting a losing battle to assert their hermeneutical dominance.

Whatever the prince bishops of Uganda and Nigeria think, they fundamentally misunderstand English [Christianity](#) if they believe they can bully us into their own reading of scripture. What I find in the Bible is a gradually expanding consciousness that God is love and not an instrument of oppression. And there is always more of that inclusive love to discover. So congratulations to John and John. You are why the reformation of the church in England remains a work-in-progress.

[@giles_fraser](#)