

Home  
News  
Sport  
Business  
Politics  
► **Features**  
Going Out

## LIVE UPDATES

News  
Sport

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Picture archive  
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Contact us

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Crosswords  
The Diary  
Local news  
Local weather  
Fantasy Football  
Week in photos  
Today's page 1

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## Is this the start of a Kirk schism?

Harry Reid

February 22 2005



This week in the douce and closed environs of a retreat near Newry in Northern Ireland, Dr Rowan Williams, leader of the world's 77 million Anglicans, has a stark and incredibly difficult task. It is simply to prevent the worldwide Anglican Church imploding. The warring factions are lined up with the liberals in the churches of Canada and the US and the conservatives based for the most part in Africa and Asia. The catalyst for the visceral fury consuming the Anglican Church was the consecration of Gene Robinson, an openly gay cleric with a live-in lover, as Bishop of New Hampshire in the US.

But England itself, the historical cradle of Anglicanism, has not been immune from this increasingly rancid dispute that may lead to permanent disintegration. In May 2003 a celibate homosexual, Jeffrey John, was appointed Suffragan Bishop of Reading. There was an immediate and bitter furore. John was summoned to meet Dr Williams for a "chat", after which the appointment was withdrawn, amid much acrimony. The Dean of Southwark, the Very Rev Colin Slee, claimed that Jeffrey John had been subjected to "appalling prejudice and abuse". John later became Dean of St Albans, but the way the matter was handled seemed to many to constitute a fudge that failed to help the church to cohere, and instead encouraged more division.

The Church of Scotland is tiny compared to the worldwide Anglican Communion and superficially much more united. For example, it obviously lacks great numbers of eloquently led conservatives in continents such as Africa and Asia. So could similar events tear it apart? I'd bet against it, but the stakes will be considerably raised with the relaunch today of a group of conservative evangelicals within the Kirk called Forward Together. Among those involved are high-profile figures such as Professor Andy McGowan and Ann Allen. Three experienced and respected parish ministers, Gordon Kennedy of Stranraer, Norry Maciver of Bucksburn and Ian Watson of Kirkmuirhill, are also behind the relaunch.

To be fair to the organisers of the group, they do not want to concentrate on homosexuality. They are much more concerned with issues such as our dissolving society and the related breakdown of marriage and family values; sex education in primary schools; and the apparent inability of the Kirk to communicate to the wider Scotland. In this context, the Church's position on homosexuality may be seen as an irritating diversion. As one minister put it to me: "In terms of front-line pastoral work, family breakdown accounts for far, far more of the average minister's time and work than homosexual issues." Another said: "Many Christians are failing in their marriages. We want to support people in marriage and help them to sustain their families, just as we want to strengthen the Church, rather than weaken it."

My personal views do not matter overmuch in this matter, but I do believe that a mature modern church should be able to tolerate frankly homosexual clergy without too much difficulty. I believe that it is promiscuity, homosexual or heterosexual, which is the cause of many of our society's problems.

Nonetheless, there is rightly or wrongly a widely held expectation that the liberal tendency which has dominated the Church of Scotland for so long is moving towards a position where openly gay ministers will be ordained and the Church will undertake gay marriages. Such developments would undoubtedly be intolerable for most of the members of Forward Together. Four years ago Ian Watson told me that if he, as a Kirk minister, was ordered to marry a homosexual couple, he'd not be slow in quitting the church.

And the fact that the worldwide Anglican Church is at this very moment publicly and wrathfully dividing on the issue of gay priests means that, like it or not, the issues of gay clergy and gay marriages are very current. In that sense, the timing of today's relaunch of Forward Together is not propitious, if the conservative evangelicals really do wish to play down the issue of their views on homosexual clergy.

Overall, the wider significance of today's relaunch is hard to underestimate. The fact that

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the conservative evangelicals are going to be organised as a specific movement within the Kirk means that they are going to be taken notice of, and that they have every chance of steadily gaining influence and power, after being in the wilderness for many years. The Church of Scotland is Presbyterian and supposedly democratic, but when a large and significant minority – representing, I'd guess, over a third of the ministry and possibly even more of the laity – is systematically sidelined, then the Church's democratic integrity is threatened. Of course, today's developments could benefit the liberals too. They have had it far too easy; the emergence of a schematic and coherent body to oppose them will concentrate their minds, and perhaps encourage them to communicate more effectively. In sum, Forward Together will change nothing overnight, but in the mid-term the conservative evangelicals will either become much more influential within the Kirk and more vocal outside it – or there could well be a schism. And a schism would be in no-one's interests. It would be a disaster.

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