

Kirk facing crisis over gay clerics

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THE KIRK is facing its biggest crisis for more than a century after pro-gay ministers set up a campaign group to lobby for the rights of homosexual clergy, Scotland on Sunday can reveal.

Affirmation Scotland wants to lift what it claims is the "climate of fear" and intimidation surrounding homosexuality and is set to call for the admission of openly gay ministers.

It is the first time the church has had a pro-gay group campaigning within its ranks and the stage is set for a bruising battle with traditionalists, who advocate celibacy for homosexuals.

The first skirmish is likely to take place at the General Assembly on Tuesday, when reformers will call for ministers to be allowed to bless gay partnerships.

Rev Kim Cran, one of the founders of the Affirmation Scotland, said: "There is a culture of fear which lesbian and gay people in the church face. That's why we need to support them and end discrimination.

"I think there are people who see the church as being closed. I want to see an open church. I want to celebrate diversity. We are losing the contributions of so many people by not welcoming them in."

Cran, who was originally a cleric with the United Church of Christ in the United States, which allows blessings of gay partnerships, added: "I think we should allow practising gays to be ministers."

The new gay rights group has the backing of one of the Kirk's top theologians, Rev Prof George Newlands of Glasgow University, the former convener of the Church's Panel of Doctrine. He said: "I have been in the situation where gay ministers have come to me not knowing what to do because they were gay. They feel intimidated."

Meanwhile, moderate clergy have formed another group, OneKirk, which backs gay blessings.

Rev Bryan Kerr, one of founders, said: "Normally people who are in the middle of the road don't do anything while the two extremes argue. We believe that the legislation proposed will not open any floodgates but it will allow ministers to exercise pastoral judgment." Even gay members of the church who support the celibacy policy say they experience hatred.

One Church of Scotland member, who asked not to be named, said: "It is very difficult to be gay in the Church. I still believe God loves me, but I have heard

terrible things said from pulpits which never should be said and which cut me to the bone.

"Some don't seem to make a distinction between disapproving of homosexual acts and hating gay people. Some people think you're evil. I have never been asked to do the Sunday school. Like they're implying I couldn't be trusted. There is no support and the loneliness is terrible. Who can you confide in if you feel tempted by seeing a young man at church?"

He added: "I am also fed up of the two sides of the church using us and this subject as an issue to bash each other with. We are people and I want to hear some serious theology and thinking on this."

Ministers and elders from the evangelical wing of the Kirk are unabashed. On the issue of gay blessings they

will call for the decision to be referred to the Church's 47 presbyteries across Scotland and overseas, where they are likely to be defeated.

Rev Ian Watson, secretary of Forward Together - the main evangelical group in the church - said: "If we go ahead with this it will be deeply damaging for the Church and for the many homosexual Christians who are trying to live their lives and resist temptation.

"Those pushing for these changes do not have a monopoly on compassion for homosexuals. The Church of Scotland should not take a position which is at odds with the Bible, with history and the great majority of the World Church."

The Church of Scotland's position on homosexuality is derived from a ruling in 1967 which advocated celibacy for gays. The policy on gay ministers is effectively that of "don't ask, don't tell" but an openly practising gay minister would be disciplined by the Kirk authorities.

At Tuesday's debate on blessings, ministers, elders, and deacons have the option to approve the plan, rejecting it outright, or defer a decision.

Harry Reid, a leading writer on Kirk history, admitted he was worried about the possibility of a split in the church.

The last major split in the Kirk was the Disruption of 1843 which saw a third of the body's ministers leave as part of a bitter row over State control of the church to form the Free Church of Scotland.

Reid said: "I think that senior figures in the church must look very carefully at what's happening in the Anglican communion, which is tearing itself apart.

"The church is likely to be so scared of the catastrophic consequences of a second Disruption that it will not be allowed to happen."

But a senior insider was gloomier. He said: "The evangelicals regard this as something they can't budge on, there are talks of mass walk-outs. And a second Disruption will be the end of Scottish Protestantism in any form we know."

Another senior insider was only slightly less gloomy, saying: "Ministers won't leave because the church still owns all the buildings."

"What will happen is a kind of civil war. Parishes will withhold money from the centre and the evangelicals will never stop trying to overturn the decision."

APPROVAL FOR EMBRYO RESEARCH

THE Kirk is likely to approve limited embryo research in the teeth of determined opposition from traditionalists at this year's General Assembly.

A report by the Church of Scotland's Church and Society Council will give the green light to work on embryos up to a limit of 14 days old.

The debate, to take place on Tuesday, is expected to be one of the most contentious at this year's assembly, which started at the Mound in Edinburgh yesterday.

Although the report will still urge scientists to seek out alternatives to embryo research, the 14-day limit will be seen as a step too far for many, who will point out that the Kirk is giving approval to something that the United Nations, along with many nations and churches, is moving to ban.

The Kirk will also call on the government not to replace the Trident nuclear missile system and will criticise Scotland's two main commercial TV channels, STV and Grampian, for dropping televised church services on Sunday mornings.

Less contentious issues to be debated include calls for a lighter version of the new Kirk hymnbook. The new edition, which was published last year, and which includes tunes as well as words in large print, has been criticised as too heavy and cumbersome for elderly and very young people to hold while singing during services.

This assembly is set to be the most hi-tech ever, with all proceedings to be broadcast live on the internet and podcasts to be produced of the daily highlights.