

Sexuality time-bomb set to explode under Kirk

Ron Ferguson May 22 2006

The ticking time-bomb on Edinburgh's Mound may explode tomorrow.

Damage-control experts are looking into methods of preventing the detonation of the dangerous device, but they are not entirely confident of success. Even if they are able to clear the area, the collateral damage may be extensive.

What is it with the churches and sex? No, it's not Catholics and condoms this week, but Protestants and gay relationships. The issue threatens to disrupt the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland amid mutterings about another Disruption.

It was only a matter of time before the explosive issue of homosexuality burst through the attempts to sideline it. The Rev Basil Fawley's nervous admonitions not to talk about the war have failed. Strangely, what has triggered the contentious matter's rise to the top of the agenda is a report from a group which is not normally associated with controversy.

The Kirk's legal questions committee is no sleeping cell for theological terrorists. But tomorrow it will ask the assembly to permit ministers to conduct ceremonies marking civil partnerships. This is the Presbyterian equivalent of lighting the blue touch-paper and retiring.

The committee, in its wisdom, decided to take up the question of whether ministers and deacons, if approached, could bless such partnerships without being disciplined by the Kirk. They opted for the view that ministers' freedom of pastoral conscience must be safeguarded. This means that if a cleric were approached by, for example, a couple of Christian gays, he or she should be free to consider the case on its merits. The committee also sought to safeguard the rights of those who, in conscience, could not affirm legally-recognised same-sex relationships. In other words, the legislation would be permissive rather than mandatory.

The innocent-looking report has let loose the theological dogs of war. The Kirk's evangelical pressure group, Forward Together, has drawn a line in the sand. In its pamphlet, *A Step Too Far*, which has been distributed to all commissioners, it argues that by acting in this way, the Kirk would be flying in the face of the Bible, and would fracture the unity of the church.

Since then, another group has been formed. Calling itself Affirmation Scotland, it argues for an inclusive and open church that welcomes gays. Its leading figure is Professor George Newlands of the divinity faculty of Glasgow University. But there's more: a third group, OneKirk, consists of moderates who simply back the report of the legal questions committee and seek to defend the right of ministers to make their own pastoral decisions. Its big

hitters include Professor David Fergusson of New College, and former moderators John Miller and Andrew McLellan.

Behind the scenes, there are allegations of dirty tricks, including the buying up of internet domain names to "spoil" others. Just as well Christians are superior to politicians, eh? Over the weekend, I had conversations with ministers from both sides of the divide who said that they would not be able to continue in ministry if the vote went against them.

I've been reading *Church at War*, by Stephen Bates, the religious affairs correspondent of the Guardian. In describing the damage caused to the Anglican communion, he shows convincingly how C of E evangelicals wanted to make a stand on the issue of the ordination of women, but were divided on the matter. The question of homosexuality offered a united place around which the conservative theological wagons could be circled.

The evangelicals are right to argue that the church shouldn't allow its agenda to be dictated by cultural trends; the weakness of their case lies in their talk about the "plain meaning of scripture". The same phrases were used not only in relation to women's ordination, but in the historic argument about slavery. The few biblical texts about homosexuality are not free from ambiguity; not only that, evangelicals are as guilty of "pick'n'mix" in relation to texts as anyone.

Historically, churches have made up their minds on major issues both by studying the scriptures and by seeking the guidance of the spirit in the light of new knowledge. We know things now about the spectrum of human sexuality which were unknown to biblical writers.

My own mind was changed by the experience of meeting Christian gays. I know same-sex couples of tremendous faith and long-standing commitment to each other who would put many heterosexual couples to shame. Bless their relationship? Of course. They should be part of an inclusive and open church.

There is a real struggle here. But the Kirk, like other churches, needs to engage in that struggle without becoming an over-my-dead-body war zone. In the way in which it handles this debate – and it may need time for more study – its credibility as a community of integrity and reconciliation is publicly on the line.