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Kirk's moderator to fight for gay marriages

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::nobreak::THE new moderator of the Church of Scotland has said that one of her priorities will be to fight for the introduction of gay weddings by kirk ministers.

Sheilagh Kesting, who takes over next May, said she believed "the time was right" for the church to bless same sex partnerships for the first time.

The issue is certain to divide the church whose conservative wing remains hostile to the sanctioning of homosexual relationships. Last year the kirk's general assembly narrowly approved the idea in principle but insisted the vote would have to be ratified by all of its 46 local presbyteries.

Kesting, a liberal, said she was prepared to lead the church down the road to acceptance.

"I would personally have no problem blessing (civil partnerships)," she said. "I was personally sorry about the way the vote went last year. I didn't think that was necessary."

Her comments follow the release of new figures which show that more than 900 gay and lesbian couples have "married" in Scotland since the Civil Partnership Act came into force last December.

Edinburgh, which has staged 318 same-sex ceremonies, is now vying with Brighton and Westminster for the title of Britain's gay wedding capital. It is followed closely by Glasgow, which has staged 206 same-sex ceremonies and by Aberdeen, which has hosted 40.

Kesting's comments come ahead of a theological debate on homosexuality planned for next year's general assembly when she will be inaugurated. To date, the kirk has shied away from taking a firm stance on civil partnerships.

Interim findings from a poll of presbyteries by Forward Together, which represents evangelical members of the Church of Scotland, show that 10 were against civil partnerships. Only three — Edinburgh, England and Europe — voted for them.

Civil partnerships allow same sex couples the same rights as married couples. These include recognition for inheritance and succession to property, employment and pension benefits, social security and tax

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provisions, exemption from testifying in court against their partner and protection from domestic violence.

Dr Ian Watson, secretary of Forward Together and parish minister at Kirkmuirhall, in south Lanarkshire, said he was "surprised" that Kesting had chosen to express her views.

"We say the bible is our supreme guide on doctrine and lifestyle. It unequivocally says homosexual (intercourse) is wrong so therefore why are we even having this debate? I'm surprised that the moderator-designate has so quickly shown her hand. The moderator is supposed to be impartial and must respect the will of the general assembly."

A gay kirk elder who wished to remain anonymous said some gay clergymen would oppose Kesting's views.

Johnston McKay, the clerk of the presbytery of Ardrossan, said: "I agree wholeheartedly with what Kesting is saying. I believe each presbytery needs to be very clear on their position because ministers should know where they stand."

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