



forward together

www.forwardtogether.org.uk

An organisation for evangelicals in the Church of Scotland. Editor: Ian M Watson Issue No.4 April 06

Civil Partnerships and the Church

It was headline news. "Kirk to bless civil partnerships!" The Legal Questions Committee has revealed to an astonished nation that at this year's General Assembly they will be proposing that ministers and deacons should be permitted to "mark" civil partnerships without fear of disciplinary proceedings being taken against them. The result was widespread dismay throughout the evangelical community. Within a week of the news Forward Together issued a press release signalling our intention to oppose any such legislation being passed.

To many members of the Church these proposals have come out of the blue. But the Forward Together Steering Group was not taken by surprise. We had heard last year that the Church Pension Trustees were seeking to bring Church rules into line with the law as it applies generally. They wanted a ruling on whether or not they could give pension rights to a minister's civil partner, the same rights that currently apply to the spouses of deceased ministers.

We immediately discerned the theological implications such a ruling would have. It would legitimise, without question, a minister entering into a civil partnership. Civil partnerships are open only to same-sex couples. In other words, the Church would be officially recognizing ministers living within a homosexual relationship without ever having debated the Biblical or moral rectitude of such a state of affairs.

Forward Together was already planning to challenge the Pension Trustees on this when news of the Legal Questions report was made public. We have had sight of the draft Declaratory Act on the condition that we do not make its contents public before the Blue Book (which contains all the reports going to the Assembly) is published. Its terms make grim reading.

Forward Together is willing to give a lead in opposing this draft Act. Our chairman, Gordon Kennedy, has prepared an alternative Act which simply states that no minister or deacon is permitted to enter a civil partnership, nor permitted to conduct any service marking a civil partnership.

We are preparing a briefing paper for commissioners that will explain the Biblical teaching on human sexuality simply and clearly. Make no mistake—civil partnerships may be the presenting issue, but the underlying argument concerns the authority of Scripture.

It may interest members that the United Free Church (a church with which the Church of Scotland is in "covenant") accepted the report of their Panel on Doctrine at their 2005 Assembly not to recognize civil partnerships. The Panel stated that the legislation is "both skewed and discriminatory" and they could see "no reason to commend it to the church."

We call upon our members and others who love the Word of God, to stand with us in this hour. This is the issue which has rocked the Church of England. We fear it will rock the Church of Scotland too. There are good evangelical folk who have refused to identify with us believing that a grouping such as ours is divisive. The truth is, the divisions already exist. We did not create them. We certainly did not create this debate.

In Rev.3:8 the ascended Lord Jesus commends the Christians of Philadelphia:
I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

Though we have little strength and lack political clout may the Lord commend us for having kept his word and for remaining loyal to his holy name.

The Press Release

When news of the Legal Questions Committee's proposals were reported in the national press, Forward Together was able to respond quickly with a press release signalling that the draft legislation would be "fully and vigorously debated at the General Assembly." Forward Together, uniquely within the Kirk, gives evangelicals a voice, which increasingly is being listened to by the media.

Gordon Kennedy was quoted as saying, "There is a danger of putting the cart before the horse here. Before addressing the legal points about pension rights for ministers' civil partners the Church must first reach a clear view concerning such relationships in the ordained ministry."

"The biblical and theological questions about human sexuality have been well aired in the past, but the General Assembly has never passed a deliverance affirming homosexual practice as a valid option for the Christian or for the ordained ministry."

"Many church members have significant and genuine concerns at ministers being allowed to conduct religious ceremonies to mark a civil partnership. There is likely to be a particular concern at the prospect of civil partners living in manses in the future."

He went on to explain that should the proposals be adopted it would "open the way for a significant departure from the Bible's teaching and from historic Christian practice. We believe that such a move would cause dismay to the great majority of church members, and also to many of our ecumenical partner churches."

Our statement was reported in the Herald and in the Press & Journal, as well by two radio stations. It was also reported on a gay internet news service.

The full text of the press release is available on our web-site. We also recommend the statement posted on the Rutherford House web-site.

AN INTERESTING ASSEMBLY

May you live in interesting times. Not a blessing, but a Chinese curse. There is no doubt at all that this year's General Assembly will be interesting.

Here are some of the issues we have identified so far:

Civil Partnerships—the Assembly will be asked to allow ministers and deacons to "mark" civil partnerships without fear of discipline. Also, the civil partners of ministers (that is, gay ministers) will be permitted pension rights just as a widow or widower.

The Westminster Confession—the Assembly will be asked to allow a panel to consider the status of our Subordinate Standard which all ministers are required to assent to, though there is a conscience clause.

Stem-cell research—the Assembly will be asked to over-turn the 1996 decision which insisted on the sanctify of the life of the embryo and give its approval to the creation of embryos for stem-cell research.

Training for Ministry—The Ministries Council has been investigating the possibility of approving the Highland Theological College (Dingwall) and the International Christian College (Glasgow) for the training of candidates for the ministry. We believe the report may be positive. We want to support any such recommendation.

Gay Adoption—during the year Church and Society made representations to the Scottish Executive that the Church of Scotland approved of the adoption of children by gay couples. This decision should be called into question.

Moves are afoot to attack the increasing centralisation of Church in the hands of a few "121" bureaucrats. This has become increasingly the case with the removal of automatic Presbytery representation in certain central committees.

In the past, evangelicals would have been running around trying to muster friends from among fellow commissioners to support them in the cause dearest to their heart. Because of Forward Together this is no longer necessary.

The network now exists for evangelicals to be prepared for the key debates of Assembly, to draw on the wisdom of those most familiar with the issues at stake, and to brief those best able to argue the case on the floor of Assembly.

If you serve on a central committee we need to know from you which other issues will be raised.

The Christian Position

Don't believe anyone who tells you that the General Assembly has never come to a clear decision on the question of homosexuality. Rev. David Court, current convener of Crosswise, sent us these deliverances from the Board of Social Responsibility's report of 1967.

35. The General Assembly state unequivocally and unambiguously the Christian position, namely that sexual intercourse be confined within the married state and emphasising that God's strength and grace are available to help all those who seek to reach that demanding and rewarding standard.

37. The General Assembly receive the Report of the Committee regarding homosexuality and thank it for its thorough and careful study of this difficult matter. The General Assembly, being persuaded that there is need for a clear statement of Christian principles in the face of this grave and growing evil, resolve as follows:

- i) The General Assembly deplore the prevalence of homosexual practices as a source of uncleanness and deterioration in human character, and of weakness and decadence in the Nation's life.
- ii) The General Assembly remind their faithful people of the teaching of the New Testament, which is for us all, whether homosexual or heterosexual (Col.3;1-6): *Were you not raised to life with Christ? Then aspire to the realm above where Christ is...put to death those parts of you which belong to the earth, fornication, indecency, lust, foul cravings... Because of these God's dreadful judgement is impending.*
- iii) The General Assembly, deeply concerned for the souls of all who are subject to homosexual temptations, declare and urge them to believe that there is salvation and freedom for them in Jesus Christ 'Who is able to save absolutely those who approach God through him, and he is always living to plead on their behalf' (Heb.7;25).

We need to know if you will be a Commissioner at this year's Assembly. We also need to know if you have specialist knowledge on relevant topics from which we can draw. We can only be effective if we act together, with one voice. If you are planning to contribute to any debate remember that Forward Together can give you support and advice.

General Assembly Timetable Saturday 20th-Friday 26th May

Saturday 10am

Formal Opening
Includes: Assembly Arrangements, Support and Services, Overtures and Cases

6.30pm

Church of Scotland Trust and World Mission

Monday 9.30am

Includes: Business Committee, Council of Assembly, General Trustees, Stewardship and Finance

Tuesday 9.30am

Includes: HIV/AIDS Project, Church and Society, Legal Questions

Wednesday 9.30am

Includes: Ecumenical Relations, Ministries, Parish Appraisal

Thursday 9.30am

Includes: HM Chaplains, Church Without Walls, The Guild, Mission and Discipleship, Youth Assembly Report

Friday

9.30am

Includes: Nominations, Social Care, Pension Trustees, Selection Committee

7pm

Formal Closing

We urge all Forward Together members to be praying for the Assembly that the decisions taken will bring glory to God.

Forward Together is holding two meetings on the Wednesday. 12.45-1.45pm "Freedom of Speech" at The Quaker Meeting House, with lunch included. 7pm Annual General Meeting at The Royal Overseas League, 100 Princes Street.

Please note that we are now accepting nominations for the two places on the Steering Committeewhich will become vacant in May.