

Row over blessing for gay marriages has split the Kirk

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Rev Bill Wallace:
Opposes plan

GAY marriages are set to cause a damaging split in the Church of Scotland.

A leading Kirk committee wants to give ministers official approval to perform blessings for same-sex couples who have formed 'civil partnerships'.

But the plans have been blasted by a group of clergymen who say they would break 2,000 years of church tradition.

Now the Forward Together organisation says it will air its hard-line views on the issue at this month's General Assembly.

The group - which has 300 members and claims widespread support within the Kirk - says it will block any attempts to allow ministers to bless gay couples.

It is now unlikely that a compromise deal will be secured by the time the General Assembly opens in Edinburgh on May 20.

And there are fears that a heated debate on the church's stance on gay marriages could lead to a rift within the organisation. The row erupted after the Kirk's Legal Questions Committee (LQC) announced its plans to introduce a Declaratory Act at the Assembly.

The move would recognise the 'reality' of the civil partnership legislation, which came into effect last December and which brings the full financial privileges of marriage to gay couples.

But there is no religious element to civil partnership ceremonies and the LQC claims it is 'not surprising' that some couples turn to a 'sympathetic minister' in search of a blessing.

The committee says a minister should have freedom of conscience on whether to carry out blessings — and should not face disciplinary action whether they agree to perform one or not. It adds that couples who are rejected by one minister should be able to approach another.

But Forward Together insists the move would legitimise gay marriage and will strongly oppose the Act at the General Assembly.

Leading member the Rev Bill Wallace, a former convener of the Kirk's Board of Social Responsibility said: 'It is a major departure for the church.

'Many people want to make Civil partnerships appear to be similar to marriage.

'Traditionally, the church has been opposed to such things.

Many people are very concerned at the way the LQC has tried to slip this Act in.

'The church has to make clear where it stands on this issue.

'The church has to make up its mind'

There is very strong opposition.'

Mr Wallace, who also accused the LQC of trying to 'forget' the

Bible's teachings, added: 'There will be a very vigorous debate at the General Assembly.

'People are concerned that for a number of years the Assembly managers have tried to sweep these things under the carpet and push through their liberal viewpoints. A significant number believe the time has come for a good, open debate. We must come to a conclusion. The church has to make up its mind on this.'

Forward Together has spoken out in the past against the Kirk's liberal stance on issues such as sex education.

But the Rev George Newlands, professor in theology and religious studies at Glasgow University, says the church must guard against the row escalating.

He said: It will be difficult to find a compromise but there has to be an element of live-and-let-live on this issue.

'With the number of churchgoers in considerable decline, this is not the biggest issue facing the Kirk.

'There is a danger the church will seem more and more out of date if it appears to go against what society has accepted.'

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