

## **Move to calm gay wedding storm**

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A new organisation has been set up inside the Church of Scotland to head off a damaging split in the wake of what is expected to be a fierce general assembly debate tomorrow on civil partnerships.

OneKirk is the third new grouping to be established in response to the potential crisis.

By advocating a middle way and a less polarised debate, it hopes to avert a schism over ceremonies to bless what have become known as gay weddings.

The potential crisis arose when the Kirk's legal questions committee was asked to consider an appropriate response to the creation of same-sex civil partnerships in Scots law.

The committee has proposed a declaratory act of the assembly leaving participation in such blessing ceremonies up to the conscience of individual ministers, with no disciplinary action either way.

But an evangelical grouping within the Kirk formed last year, Forward Together, recently published a pamphlet, A Step Too Far, condemning the proposed act because it would "for the first time enshrine in a clear and public way in the law of the church something which the Bible unambiguously calls sin".

The group will move a counter-motion debarring ministers and deacons from conducted services to mark civil partnerships.

This prompted the formation of Affirmation Scotland, which supports the legal questions committee's position as being in the Kirk's historic position of recognising liberty of opinion to interpret the Bible and its consequences for the Christian gospel in different ways.

But this group's stated intention to "offer support, friendship and affirmation to all people equally, gay and straight alike" puts it on a collision course with the evangelicals.

The incoming Moderator, Alan McDonald, has spoken of his determination to avoid a damaging schism during his year in office.

Launched on the eve of the opening of the assembly, OneKirk hopes that by fostering debate and seeking ways out of entrenched positions that the split may yet be avoided.

The Rev Bryan Kerr, minister of the Douglas Valley Church, is one its founders.

He said: "The aim of OneKirk is not to be in opposition to any other groups within the church, but rather to foster open engagement and discussion of current issues, giving everyone an opportunity to share their beliefs and interpretations of scripture.

"If we find that people do not finally agree with each other, it will still have been good to learn more about each other's viewpoints.

"The debate gives an indication of the breadth of viewpoint that members within the Church of Scotland hold, which is and has been one of its great strengths for many years."

However, the new grouping still calls for an "inclusive" church within which God's grace "is for all people, regardless of race, age, sex or sexual orientation", so the evangelical wing may be difficult to win over.

The assembly opened on Saturday with the election of the Moderator and address by the lord high commissioner, Lord Mackay of Clashfern.

Yesterday the Moderator gave the sermon at the High Kirk in St Giles' and last night the assembly was addressed by the retiring Moderator, David Lacy.

During his year in office he visited HIV projects in Africa and Scotland, and tomorrow, as part of the Kirk's HIV/Aids Project, he will speak out against the stigma involved in the disease.

"If you are afraid of what others may think or say about you being HIV positive, then you may never wish to be tested, even though you know you may well have been infected; and that may kill you and spread the disease further, as well as cause you to exist in lonely isolation.

"Stigma, in every case, is always negative," he says in a supplementary deliverance.