

## Kirk stalls on same-sex decision

ROBBIE DINWOODIE May 24 2006

By the narrowest of margins the general assembly yesterday voted to give Kirk ministers freedom of conscience to bless same-sex relationships, but in a procedural manoeuvre, opponents managed to block this for at least a year. Critics of the proposal invoked the Barrier Act, which meant that although they lost the main decision by eight votes it must be sent back to presbyteries for consideration.

The Rev Ann Inglis, convener of the legal questions committee, argued strongly in favour of confirming the right of conscience of ministers and deacons in the face of increasing questions being asked since civil partnerships were established in Scotland.

She said: "There exists and has always existed a freedom of pastoral conscience which allows ministers to act in this, and indeed in other ways. In 1993, the general assembly declined... to forbid ministers from blessing same-sex relationships. Our proposals would affirm the right to extend a pastoral response to a new need which has arisen because of changes in civil law."

But after the assembly backed her committee's position by just 322 votes to 314, and indicated a clear majority for treating any outcome under the Barrier Act, it was her opponents in the evangelical wing of the Kirk who were happier about the outcome. The Rev Gordon Kennedy, whose counter motion stating "no minister or deacon shall conduct any service marking a civil partnership", said yesterday it was just the beginning of the battle by evangelicals.

He said the narrowness of the vote showed the progress his wing of the Kirk was making, and he and others in Forward Together would be stepping up the fight.

"If it doesn't happen next year I have 23 more years to win it. This is just the start of the debate, the beginning of the process," he said.

The Rev Malcolm Rooney, of Kirriemuir, said afterwards: "The move to put this down under the Barrier Act is a pure spoiling tactic in the hope that presbyteries will not approve it," but he added that the subsequent confirming vote by the assembly, by 372 votes to 240, with 122 dissenting, might weigh heavily when it is considered at local level. The problem is that each of 46 presbyteries has a single vote, no matter its size, and that may produce a rural and more conservative bias. The Barrier Act was invoked on the ordination of women, which was passed 40 years ago, and then again on a proposed merger with the Episcopal Church in the 1980s, which was rejected.

It was an impassioned debate during which the moderator, the Right Rev Alan McDonald, fought valiantly to avoid rancour. Among the most moving

contributions was that of the Rev Tom Gordon, who has worked for 12 years in Marie Curie hospices and described kneeling by the bedside on a cancer patient's last night and blessing her union with her partner before she died. "I blessed that couple because I believed it was right to do so... and would do so again."

Several commissioners pleaded rejection of the committee's ruling on the grounds that it would damage the Kirk's relations with sister churches abroad. But it was the pragmatic move by the Rev Ian Watson, of Kirkmuirhill, to invoke the Barrier Act which had the greatest impact.