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Alarm in the Kirk as new Moderator backs blessings for same-sex partnerships

By Liz Gibson

GAY couples should be allowed to have their relationships blessed in church, according to the newly-appointed Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

But the Rev Sheilagh Kesting's remarks have alarmed many of the Kirk's more traditional members, with some declaring they now have 'no confidence' in her.

Miss Kesting, who takes over as Moderator next May, said she would be happy to bless a gay couple's union - and added that the 'time is now right' for the Kirk to bless and recognise same-sex partnerships.

But conservatives in the Church have reacted to her comments with dismay - arguing that Miss Kesting's views are contrary to the Bible and that, by airing her opinions on the issue, she has undermined her position as an unbiased Moderator.

Following a huge drop in Church of Scotland membership - which has plunged from 1.36million in 1960 to 536,000 in 2004, a fall of 60 per cent - many will also question Miss Kesting's priorities.

More than 900 gay and lesbian couples have had their relationships formalised in Scotland since the Civil Partnership Act came into force last December.

The Kirk's general assembly last year narrowly approved the idea of blessing civil partnerships in principle — but after fierce opposition it agreed that each of its 46 local presbyteries would have to ratify the vote.

So far, only three presbyteries have approved the proposal, while ten have voted against. The voting is still in progress and the final results are unlikely to be known before the end of the year.

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But Miss Kesting, who comes from the liberal wing of the Church, said: 'I would personally have no problem blessing a civil partnership. I was personally sorry about the way the vote went last year'.

The comments seem likely to cause further rows and division.

The Rev Ian Watson, secretary of Forward Together, an evangelical group within the Kirk which opposes the blessing of civil partnerships, said he was 'surprised' at Miss Kesting's decision to express her views.

He added: 'The Moderator is expected to be even-handed. This takes away any confidence we have that she will be a fair Moderator at the next assembly.'

'It is unwise of her to have spoken out while the debate within the Church is still going on. The constitution of the Church of Scotland states that the Bible is the supreme authority for doctrine and for lifestyle. Even our opponents agree that the Bible is against homosexual sex.'

'We believe God has said sex is for husbands and wives, for a man and a woman in a stable relationship. Sex outwith marriage — whether it is premarital, adulterous or homosexual sex is wrong. 'The Church is trying to back something that God is against.'

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

The Catholic Church last night responded to Miss Kesting's comments by restating its opposition to gay civil partnerships.

A spokesman said: 'The Church has no authority to change such rules.'

'We are regressing in our social policy on family and sex. We are regressing because we have separated sex from its natural context — a lifelong exclusive relationship.'

'We cannot change the rules of nature, sex is sacred. It's not a toy for us to play around with.'

