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New Moderator in Gay Weddings Row

By Kate Devlin

THE first female minister appointed Moderator of the Church of Scotland has stirred Controversy by declaring her backing for gay marriages.

Conservative clergy yesterday accused the Rev Sheilagh Kesting of taking the church "towards a split". Miss Kesting, 53, who was named as moderator designate last week, said she believed the "time was right" for the church to conduct same sex marriages.

Last year the Church of Scotland's general assembly voted to approve ministers conducting same sex ceremonies, but the decision has been stalled by the insistence that it is ratified by all of its 46 local presbyteries.

Miss Kesting had previously announced that she would make reaching out to other Christian denominations a priority of her time as moderator.

In an interview with a newspaper yesterday, she indicated that she would also like to lead the church towards accepting same sex unions.

"I would personally have no problem blessing (civil partnerships)," she said.

"I was personally sorry about the way the vote went last year. I didn't think that was necessary".

Dr Ian Watson, the minister at Kirkmuirhill in south Lanarkshire and secretary of Forward Together, an evangelical group within the Church of Scotland, criticised Miss Kesting's comments.

He said: "I am very surprised that, so soon after her nomination as moderator designate she has spoken so publicly about such a controversial issue.

"It has left us lacking in confidence in her as an impartial moderator on this or any other issue." He added: "The church is not at splitting point quite yet but when radical liberals like Sheilagh Kesting say the things she has they are hammering a splint in the log that is the church and taking us towards a split. "

Forward Together is conducting a survey of presbyteries to discover how many are for civil partnerships.

Only three have declared favour so far, with 10 against.

Miss Kesting was defended by Kim Cran, a minister at the Chapel of Garioch in Aberdeenshire, and chaplain to Affirmation Scotland, which campaigns for the rights of homosexual clergy. She said: "I am in complete agreement with her comments. I hope that people will hear them in the spirit of love and compassion and warmth that is there in her words.

"I am sorry that we have to decide this presbytery by presbytery.

"It would be better to have a situation where ministers can exercise their conscience and those who want to perform these ceremonies do and those who do not, don't."

The first female minister to take the post of moderator, Miss Kesting's appointment was hailed as a milestone when it was announced last week. She was unavailable for Comment last night.