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Kirk move to bless gay partnerships hits barrier

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The attempt by the Kirk's general assembly to guarantee freedom of conscience to ministers wishing to bless same-sex relationships appears to have failed.

This year's assembly voted narrowly in favour of clarifying the grey area so that ministers or deacons would be free from any threat of discipline if they acted in accordance with their conscience and conducted a blessing to celebrate a civil partnership between a gay or lesbian couple. The evangelical wing of the Kirk, however, used a mechanism called the Barrier Act to block the decision and have it referred back to the presbyteries.

Now ForwardTogether, the grouping which wants to ban anything which smacks of "gay weddings", is claiming victory in that process. With only five presbyteries still to cast their votes, so far 34 have voted down the overture which was agreed by the assembly and only six have voted in favour.

The Rev Ian Watson, secretary of the evangelical grouping, said: "We welcome the vote of presbyteries to reject the proposal that ministers and deacons be allowed to mark civil partnerships with religious ceremonies. This shows a massive rejection of the radical liberal agenda which they were attempting to force on us."

Each presbytery carries a single vote, regardless of size, so next year's assembly will be back to square one, with those wishing to bless civil partnerships left uncertain as to whether they could face discipline for doing so. The Rev Peter Johnston of OneKirk, a moderate grouping which sought to avoid a split in the Church of Scotland, said: "What will happen now is that the proposal that came forward to the assembly will fall, so the status quo will remain in place."

As to whether the evangelicals would now seek to press home their advantage and formally ban ministers and deacons from blessing civil partnerships, he said: "We will have to wait and see if that is what they want to do. I would hope not."

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