

## KIRK IN CRISIS OVER GAY MINISTER



**ROW:** Scott Rennie is at the centre of a dispute

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*By Judith Duffy*

**THE Church of Scotland faces its biggest crisis in a century following a row over whether an openly gay minister should be allowed to take up a new post.**

Reverend Scott Rennie was appointed as minister at Aberdeen's Queen's Cross Church in January with the backing of the congregation.

But the move was blocked following a complaint from around 12 dissenting members of Aberdeen Presbytery on the grounds that they objected to his lifestyle.

Yesterday a powerful Church of Scotland committee voted by 42-41 to pass the appeal to the General Assembly in May for further scrutiny. The outcome is expected to have "huge implications" for the Kirk and threatens to lead to a split between different factions in the church.

Divorced father-of-one Mr Rennie, who is minister of Brechin Cathedral, Angus where he lives with his gay partner David, said the decision would cause "continuing distress".

He said: "The 2009 General Assembly will be a seminal moment for the Kirk, for the many gay people in its membership, and especially for those who serve as ordained elders and ministers. We will discover whether the Church's own anti-discrimination legislation, passed as recently as 2007, means anything – or whether it is worthless."

However, Reverend Ian Aitken, of New Stockethill in Aberdeen, who was one of the complainers, argued the anti-discrimination legislation allowed gay ministers to fulfil their position, as long as they did not engage in homosexual acts.

He added: "This debate is crucial and what we need to do is make a decision whether we should move away from what links us with our sister churches.

"This is not a witch hunt, but we should not be making ad-hoc decisions without considerate reflection."

Reverend Lindsay Biddle, chaplain of Affirmation Scotland, a pro-gay group in the church set up three years ago, said the decision by the General Assembly would set a "very important precedent".

She said: "The climate in the Church of Scotland is such that gay and lesbian ministers are not free to be out, especially ministers who have partners. What Scott Rennie has done is brave in making his life and relationship open. This is not just about one man and one church, it's about all of us."

Evangelical group Forward Together claimed the situation is the biggest crisis facing the Kirk since 1843, when hundreds of ministers broke away to form the Free Church of Scotland.

Yesterday chairman Reverend Douglas Cranston backed the decision by the Commission of Assembly to refer the case to the General Assembly.

He said: "While the Commission has the power to deal with the case, its outcome carries such wide implications for the whole Church that as representative a constituency as possible should make the final decision.

"For at least 4,000 years, those who have based their ethics on the teachings of the Bible have regarded the practice of homosexuality as inconsistent with the profession of faith of the God of the Bible."

Same sex marriage has long been a thorny issue for the church.

In 2006, a decision by the General Assembly to allow ministers to conduct civil partnerships was subsequently rejected by local presbyteries.

The Church's position on homosexuality is derived from a ruling in 1967, which advocated celibacy for gays. It has previously stated there are openly gay ministers within the Church, but this is the first time such an appointment has been challenged.

A spokeswoman for the Church of Scotland said the Commission had decided to refer the case on as it was a matter of "important principle".