

# OneKirk Journal

working for an inclusive, affirming and progressive church

www.onekirk.org

Issue 1, Autumn 2006

## A New Network in the Church of Scotland

You may never have heard of OneKirk. Let us introduce to you what OneKirk is, why it has formed, and how it can help you.

OneKirk is a growing network of ministers, members and friends of the Church of Scotland. This network formed out of a shared desire to see the Church of Scotland remain and develop as an open, inclusive and progressive church. We pray for a church that continues to live out Christ's Gospel of grace and love to all people in Scotland



and further afield.

Recognising that members of the Church of Scotland agree on far more than we disagree, OneKirk seeks to create space for different voices to be heard within the Kirk in a spirit of humility and respect.

It is also our hope that OneKirk will provide you with resources to help you inform yourself and participate in discussion about a variety of issues that are facing the Church and society. This will be achieved via the

## SPECIAL SECTION

Civil Partnerships, Declaratory Acts and Ministerial Freedom

### INSIDE PAGES

*A special section on the Declaratory Act anent Civil Partnerships and ministerial freedom of conscience.*

website, via publications such as this, and by meeting together.

Those of us who have been involved in OneKirk for the last few months are excited about the future prospects. Find out more from the OneKirk website.

## AN END TO POVERTY? IF ONLY...

Over a year after the extraordinary outpouring of energy, passion and support for brothers and sisters across the world in **MAKEPOVERTYHISTORY**, perhaps the biggest chance to make a real and lasting difference to the lives of the poorest people of our planet has been declared dead. "With the sun finally setting on the hopes for Doha, there may be very dark times ahead for trade." (*The Economist*)

The latest round of World Trade Organisation talks that began five years ago in Doha, Qatar, had exciting plans for alleviating poverty, reducing farm subsidies and stimulating economic development. After the horror of September 11, 2001 there

was a desire by world leaders for real change to world trade rules in order to alleviate extreme poverty. Poverty is often cited as a cause for terrorist sympathy. Sadly, this round of talks has not been successful.



It is increasingly unlikely that President Bush will be able to get an agreement on liberalised agricultural subsidies through an increasingly protectionist US Congress and Senate. The EU has also been accused of dragging its feet.

The World Bank estimated last year that successful trade liberalisation would lift 66 million people out of poverty in developing countries.

That will not happen in the foreseeable future. Bilateral agreements on trade will help some countries (though usually not the economically weakest, who have no bargaining power). It is a tragedy of wasted opportunity, and with the current crisis in the Middle East is almost going unreported.

As Christians with a compassion for the weakest of our world, do we wring our hands in despair, reminding ourselves of Christ's chastisement to Judas, "You will always have the poor among you," or do we, as his followers, remember that in Christ all things can be made new? Now, more than ever, we are called to remain steadfast in our fight against injustice and for fairer trade rules to benefit all God's children.

# SPECIAL SECTION

## Introduction

The purpose of the following articles in the *OneKirk Journal* is to look at some of the questions that may be asked when the Declaratory Act anent Civil Partnerships is discussed in Presbyteries in the autumn.

We hope that these articles will prove useful to presbyters and the wider Church as the issues surrounding a minister's freedom of pastoral conscience are explored.

If these articles whet your appetite for more, then we would encourage you to visit OneKirk's website where you will find many more articles, particularly on issues of human sexuality, but also outlining, for instance, the Church of Scotland's position over the years on same-sex relationships, which may be helpful in understanding the wider aspects of this current debate, which centres on a minister's freedom to exercise their ministry according to their conscience and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

[www.onekirk.org](http://www.onekirk.org)

For further information from other sources, you may also wish to visit the following websites:

**Affirmation Scotland**  
[www.affirmationscotland.org.uk](http://www.affirmationscotland.org.uk)

**Forward Together**  
[www.forwardtogether.org.uk](http://www.forwardtogether.org.uk)

**The Church of Scotland**  
[www.churchofscotland.org.uk](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk)

## Stepping Forward



The booklet, *Stepping Forward*, produced for Commissioners and Ministers prior to the General Assembly is still available to read on the OneKirk website and is also available to download.

# THE DECLARATORY ACT ANENT CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS

*Rev Dr Derek Browning*

At the General Assembly in May, the Legal Questions Committee brought forward a proposal to meet concerns relating to the Church of Scotland's position about whether or not ministers and deacons could bless civil partnerships. The issue was also raised through the Chaplains' committee.

The Legal Questions Committee's proposal asks the Church to simply state what the Church of Scotland position is on the freedom of conscience of ministers and deacons with respect to civil partnerships.

Presbyteries have been instructed to debate and vote for or against the following proposal that was approved (372 vs 240) by the General Assembly and to report back by December of 2006:

The General Assembly proposal:

1. A minister or deacon who conducts any service marking a civil partnership does not commit a disciplinary offence in terms of current Church of Scotland legislation (Act III 2001 – as amended).
2. No minister or deacon shall be compelled or obliged to conduct such a service against his or her conscience.
3. Where a minister or deacon of-

ficiating at such service has been approached by the parties in the first instance, or where a minister or deacon so approached officiates in circumstances where the parish minister has declined to officiate, such minister or deacon shall not be deemed to have intruded upon the sphere of ministry of a parish minister in terms of section 18 of Act II 2000.

*What are Presbyters being asked to decide?*

Given that civil partnerships are now recognised by the civil law and have implications for human rights, housing and pensions, the Church cannot ignore the issue. It is worth noting that in 1993 the General Assembly declined to forbid ministers from blessing same-sex relationships as it has done

again this year. The measure proposed by the General Assembly affirms the freedom of conscience ministers and deacons currently have—whether to accept or decline an invitation to conduct a blessing as their conscience dictates.

The proposal affirms the right to offer a pastoral response to a new need that has arisen because of changes in civil law. The remit of the Legal Questions Committee was to provide a response to the disciplinary issue potentially faced by ministers and deacons, and not to respond to the wider area of the Church's attitude to human sexuality that will be debated at the 2007 General Assembly in a report from the Mission and Discipleship Council.

# What is "Minister's Freedom of Conscience?"

*Rev Scott M Rennie*

Ministers in their parishes are held responsible for the exercise of care and jurisdiction over their pastoral charge. Our induction to a pastoral charge, as well as being a heavy responsibility, is for most of us also the greatest

privilege of our work. In the practice of ministry, we discover that all of our theological thinking remains only words and concepts until we go to the coalface of ministry: our parishes. It is in our parish, and not simply in our

congregation that our theology must prove itself to have relevance, worth, and to be life affirming.

There are many different parishes, served by many different ministries and ministers, all of whom bring to the Church's work their integrity, faith and experiences. In recognition of this diverse and rich resource, the Church of Scotland has historically allowed ministers to exercise freedom of pastoral conscience and to use their own judgement in their ministries. This is our heritage and a much valued right. Moreover it speaks of a church that trusts its own ministers, respects their personal and theological integrity and finds a place for each of them in a broad church. Attempts by some to take away this freedom of pastoral conscience, to replace it with their own dogmatic understanding of ministry and scripture would be a serious deviation from the best traditions of our broad national Kirk.

In the matter of civil partnerships the Legal Questions Committee has struck a balanced, centre way. The Declaratory Act respects the integrity of all ministers and their theological viewpoints by recommending permissive legislation which forces nothing on to ministers, whatever their view. This Act leaves room for those of diverse views within the practice of ministry, without forcing one viewpoint on the whole church. Such a consensual and enabling approach respects the integrity and strongly held views of all.

The larger question for the Church is where does the attempt to remove the right of pastoral conscience end? If a vociferous lobby on this issue succeed, which aspect in the pastoral life of ministers will next be under review? Why are some in the Kirk unable to trust the judgement of their colleagues, and why do they seek to deny others the same pastoral freedoms and respect that they enjoy?

We all hope for Church unity even in the midst of difficult and contentious debates. For that unity to flourish, there must be an understanding that we all hold our opinions with sincerity and integrity. A church which allows its ministers freedom of pastoral conscience is much richer than one which descends into a narrow legalism which says some are "in" and some are "out".

# A View from the Eldership

*Marjory J B Williamson*

I'm an elder, not a theologically trained minister. I attended this year's General Assembly as a commissioner. Naturally I was disturbed by the advance press coverage of what was headlined as "the big challenge to the Kirk". Some claimed that the issue of blessing same-sex couples in a civil partnership was threatening a schism in Scotland's national church.


On the right to mark civil partnerships, we were told that, "There has always existed a freedom of pastoral conscience, which allows ministers to act in this and, indeed, other ways.

"The UK government's decision to establish civil partnerships means that the Kirk had to give its ministers clear guidance. The DTI will find it unacceptable if there were a situation where ministers were unclear whether they could be disciplined for a particular course of action. This is exactly the kind of situation which could result in increased state regulation in an area of discipline."

During a measured and respectful debate, the Rev Tom Gordon, a chaplain

for a Marie Curie Hospice, said he had blessed a lesbian couple, one of whom was dying of cancer, and would not be deterred if the assembly voted against the Act: "I blessed that couple because I believed it was right to do. I will do so again in extremis or in other proper pastoral circumstances because, in compassion and healing in my ministry, I could do no other."

Recently a minister I know announced from the pulpit that no civil partnerships would be blessed in her church. While I accept that minister's right to decide according to conscience, I expect that freedom of conscience to be available to all ministers and deacons to act pastorally in accordance with their beliefs. I find it sad that those wishing to deny this freedom of conscience for all emphasise a few Jewish legalities in the Old Testament laws and a few verses from Paul's letters, and make no mention of the love and compassion of Christ. Surely those who are seeking a Christian blessing on a civil partnership are making a commitment to love each other, beyond the legal vows? And 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:7b tells us, "Everyone who loves is a child of God and knows God".

 *Monica Stewart, a Church of Scotland elder says, "My partner and I decided to have a civil partnership to mark and celebrate our love for one another and our commitment to one another. I believe that God is a God of love and a God who cares about justice. It is inconceivable to me that such a God could condemn a relationship based on love and faithfulness."*

## Blessing a same-sex relationship

*Rev Elisabeth G B Spence*

I have conducted a service of blessing for a gay couple, and will do so again. I use the word "blessing" because I believe God is at the centre of the union and celebration: that God delights in the love that brings the couple together.

Gay people who seek out a blessing do so because there is a spiritual side to their lives. Why would they come looking for a religious ceremony if not because they believe that to be an important part of their relationship with each other?

Now that civil partnership is here, I

would anticipate that gay Christian couples, as a matter of integrity of faith and life, will seek a blessing. Having a blessing ceremony is as integral to the happy day as the legal obligation and the following celebration. For a significant number of gay couples, the blessing is the pinnacle of the day not an add-on extra.

In my ministry, I believe God calls me to offer a positive pastoral response to those people who come to seek a blessing of their relationship. I do not believe I have the right to withhold the grace and blessing of God from anyone.

# A Biblical Perspective on Civil Partnerships

Rev David M Beckett

Those who are opposed to ministers having freedom to bless a same-sex union resent, understandably, being branded “homophobic”. Those who perceive in some homosexual relationships qualities of love, nurture and affirmation that they cannot believe are odious to God resent being told they have abandoned the Bible.

It would be difficult to make a case for Scripture saying anything approving about homosexuality, but so far as we can tell it says nothing at all about stable homosexual relationships. We read of David and Jonathan loving one another (2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel 1:26). David even speaks of his friendship with Jonathan “surpassing the love of women”, although there is nothing to suggest that theirs was an erotic relationship. Leviticus 18:22 includes homosexual acts in a list of forbidden practices. This Old Testament prohibition is reinforced in the New, by references in Romans 1 to unbelieving idol worshippers, and in Jude to those who “pervert the free favour of God into licentiousness”. Some in the Church feel that these texts constitute an absolutely binding moral law which makes any recognition of civil partnerships a betrayal of the faith.

Those of us who welcomed the Assembly’s upholding of ministerial freedom of conscience in 2006, however, believe that its decision was entirely true to the insights and the ethos of the gospel. We believe that Scripture witnesses to Christ, who is the living Word of God, and we perceive in Christ a Shepherd who invited everyone and who condemned no one other than the smug and the hypocritical.

Jesus affirmed, as we all do, the traditional relationship of marriage (Mark 10:1-12). Marriage as an institution will not be undermined by

civil partnerships but by alternative lifestyles amongst the heterosexual majority. For those who seek the affirmation of their civil partnership, successful marriage is not likely to be an option. It cannot be repeated too often that sexual orientation is not a matter of choice. Those who are happily married are hugely blessed; but it is not pastorally helpful to claim for that blessing a position of moral virtue from which to condemn others, neither is it gospel if Gospel means “good news”.

There is no recorded instance of Jesus denouncing any group or individual for things outwith their control. There are many indications that he found attitudes more telling than behaviour: his relationship with “tax-collectors and sinners” (Mark 2:16), his story of the Pharisee and the tax-collector praying in the Temple (Luke 18:9-14), his blistering condemnation of religious leaders in Matthew 23. His problems seem to have been with the ultra-orthodox; and in a revealing comment (John 5:39) he points out that even when we study Scripture diligently and think we are being true to it, we may still draw mistaken conclusions from it.

This is the crucial divide in the present debate: the way we read the Bible. When we acknowledge that some parts are weightier than others and that some selection and interpretation are necessary, we lay ourselves open to the charge of relativism, picking and choosing, being subjective. On the other hand, if we regard the sentence in Leviticus 18:22 as “the clear and unambiguous testimony of the Bible”, we must take note that some equally clear but unwelcome instructions come with it. Descendants of an “irregular

union” are to be excluded from the fellowship of believers, to the tenth generation (Deuteronomy 23:2); disobedient sons are to be stoned to death (Deut. 21:21); women engaging voluntarily in pre-marital sex are also to be stoned to death (Deut. 22:21).

Groups firing proof texts at each other like weapons will not resolve the Church’s attitude to civil partnerships. Perhaps it never will be resolved with unanimity, but it is important that neither side should seek to impose its viewpoint on the other. For those who find fulfilment, support, nurture and joy within marriage, it is a grave responsibility to claim that there are groups for whom God definitely does not want these things. From the time when Love incarnate walked in Galilee,

reaching out to those who had previously been outside the circle, the good news has been heard most clearly when the frontiers have been widened and barriers lowered. The admission of Gentiles in the first century, the empowering of the laity at the Reformation, the equal status finally accorded to women in the twentieth century, are now acknowledged to have brought the Church huge benefits without any loss

of integrity, though at the time all these changes were fiercely contested. If Presbyteries focus on people and relationships rather than categories we may see a growing conviction that “those who dwell in love are dwelling in God, and God in them” (1<sup>st</sup> John 4:16) whatever their sexual orientation.

*A fuller version of this article and other articles on Biblical issues are available at [www.onekirk.org](http://www.onekirk.org).*

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“It seemed to me as a ‘bible-believing’ [gay] Christian that there were only three ways to resolve the situation. I could end my life: I knew that was wrong – but then so was being gay in my evangelical worldview so what was the difference? An alternative would be to abandon my faith but I couldn’t do that either. I knew God was real. He’d led me through many times in my life and, oddly enough, in that darkest time he seemed very near. The only other possibility was to question my interpretation of scripture. Had I maybe got it wrong?”

This quote comes from “A Personal Journey” available in full at [www.onekirk.org](http://www.onekirk.org).

# CHURCH RELATIONSHIPS

Rev Isabel H Whyte

## THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Historically, the Church of Scotland's tradition of openness to a range of theological standpoints and sincerely held but differing biblical perspectives has been a strength and an anchor.

The freedom of ministers to use discretion in matters of pastoral care and in the practise of ministry is to be cherished and not lightly relinquished.

Likewise, respect for the sincerely held convictions of others who may, either from biblical or theological reflection, or from pastoral experience in ministry, have reached different conclusions on the matter of human sexuality is a fundamental part of our talking and listening together. Faith, for many, is a journey which is not static but open to being nourished by the experiences of those around us as we offer to one another our own insights and discover the presence of God, in all its variety, in those we meet.

There have been many times in our history when issues both theological and political have been said to "endanger the unity" of the church. These range from the much disputed theology of the Nature of the Atonement of the "heretical" Rev John Macleod Campbell, which caused the General Assembly to sit in judgement throughout the night in the year 1831, to the many disputes and disagreements over the churches' petitions against the Slave Trade.

From the arguments over the ordination of women to the debate about the retention of nuclear weapons, there have been strong disagreements and often the signing of dissent, but the church has eventually found, if not common ground, then at least mutual respect and a way forward.

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER CHURCHES

If the Church of Scotland was to remain silent on issues of world poverty, peace or international injustice, or if we were to ignore the poor and homeless in our own cities, or fail to offer hospitality to asylum seekers and refugees in our midst, then truly we would be failing in our Christian commitment and we

would be at odds with other Christian Churches. But to allow ministers to reach out to those who, loving each other faithfully and tenderly, seek the blessing of God—how can or should this divide us from our Christian brothers and sisters?



South Africa. He may have created dissent within the Anglican Church with his courageous stand, but that's what prophets do!

Archbishop Tutu does not stand in isolation, however. In the recently united Protestant Church in the Netherlands, for example, pastors are permitted to conduct same sex blessings, as are ministers in the United Church of Christ in the USA.

There is an Episcopal Church in California where services are attended by at least 2,000 people each Sunday. The clergy team consists of African American, Hispanic and White clergy, men and women, married, single and "blest". The walls have not fallen! On the contrary, God is richly blessing their ministry.

## INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Interfaith dialogue is, for some, a new and enriching experience. Meeting those of different cultures and beliefs depends on openness, honesty and respect. It does not stand or fall on our views of sexuality or any other issue but on the sharing of our faith and on our respect for the faith of others. It takes place on a level where integrity and the will to share our common humanity are paramount. Just as we don't always agree among ourselves, we will not necessarily agree on all issues with other faith groups.

Rev Bob Brown: "We all know that a significant number of people in society are gay. If this is their God-given orientation are we to say that God wishes them to be gay but not to express their sexuality in a gay relationship? What kind of God would that be?... Where two gay people enter into a loving, committed, faithful relationship as they do a civil partnership, is it unreasonable to believe that they enjoy the blessing of the God of loving faithfulness in the same way heterosexuals making a similar commitment do?"

Rev Mike Mair: "I have recently in Dundee conducted a blessing service for a same-sex couple who had just entered into a Civil Partnership... As I discussed my intention to bless this partnership with people in my church, I was struck how many of them spoke of homosexual persons in their own families or amongst their friends. They were quietly supportive of what I was doing. I think it's time the Church did justice to a very significant proportion of our brothers and sisters."

Rev Bryan Kerr: "Normally people who are in the middle of the road don't do anything while the two extremes argue. We believe that the legislation proposed will not open any 'floodgates' but it will allow ministers to exercise pastoral judgement."

# Radical, inclusive: the Kingdom of God

One of the key elements of OneKirk that we hope will shape its future, and indeed the Church of Scotland as a whole, is inclusivity: the broad welcome that Christ exhibited to those whom everyone else wanted to ignore. The extraordinary ability to gather in the lost that Jesus spoke and preached about is a message of gracious inclusiveness—there is no body who is outside the realm of God’s grace.

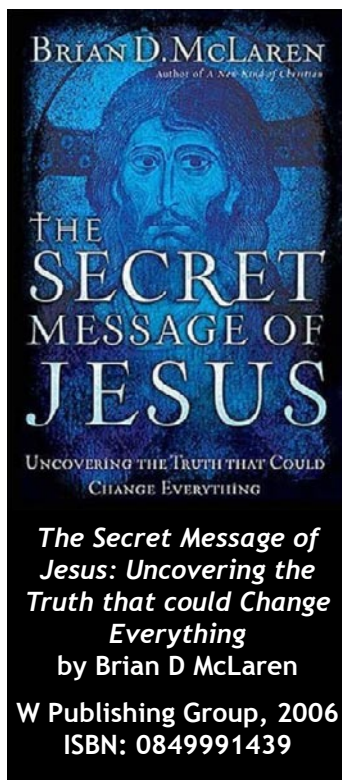
In his latest book, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, the prolific American writer Brian McLaren draws on many modern theologians from Dallas Willard to Walter Wink, N.T. Wright and John Howard Yoder to Tony Campolo. In an attractively written and engaging book, McLaren argues that for too long the “secret message” of Jesus has been lost amidst the cultural issues of the day.

By exploring Jesus’ use of parable as a form of teaching that by its nature separated those who “had ears to hear” from those who could not move from their exclusive view of God, McLaren uncovers how Jesus preached a radical and inclusive message that turned the thinking of the day upside down. But one had to have “ears to hear” what Jesus was saying.

Jesus wasn’t preaching a message of domineering power or aggressive conquest. The Kingdom of God that Jesus tells us about is a Kingdom of compassion and kindness, of healing and peace, of empowerment for the weak, of sanity in an insane world, and of freedom.

This Kingdom of God should not be confused with a “heavenly” Kingdom “up there”, somewhere. This is the Kingdom of here and now, this is the Kingdom for which we pray daily: “on earth as it is in heaven”.

While nothing of what McLaren is saying is new, his readable exploration draws you in. As one reads, exclamations of “Yes, of course!” to the points made are frequent. This book makes so much sense of the “big picture” of Jesus’ message.



It can be easy for us to slip into tried and tested ways of thinking about Jesus’ message: to try to tame the radical edge, to soften the blow of the Sermon on the Mount. We can be guilty of domesticating Jesus.

What of the inclusiveness of Christ? McLaren notes that inclusivity itself has a sharp edge. It is not simply about being nice to people, even those we disagree with. There are limits.

Using the example of a hospital, McLaren describes the inclusivity that welcomes all who are sick, the doctors,

nurses and family members. And yet, a hospital cannot inclusively welcome the child-snatcher or the poisoner. Those who would seek to destroy inclusivity must be resisted.

To jump for a moment to C.S. Lewis, just as Aslan was not a tame lion, so the secret message of Jesus is not tame, but rather wild, infectious and joyous for those with “ears to hear”.

# OTHER CONCERNS?

We hope that the articles provided in this first issue of *OneKirk Journal* have proved helpful to you. Articles on the Declaratory Act anent Civil Partnerships have dominated this issue, as one would expect with this important subject coming to presbyteries in the autumn. Those who are a part of the OneKirk network, however, would like to see other issues explored in greater detail from an affirming, inclusive and progressive position.

These issues will be explored in the future via the website, online forum, and future issues of *OneKirk Journal*.

Areas for further reflection that have been suggested include:

- Abortion
- Assisted suicide
- Atonement: The Purpose of the Cross
- Christian Discipleship
- Creation theology
- Disability (seeing the whole person)
- Emerging forms of Church
- Faith and politics
- Family (what is family today?)
- Gender equality in church & home
- Mission in Scotland
- Reading the Bible: Hermeneutics, Authority, and a History of Interpretation
- Sabbath observance (strict Sabbatarianism)
- Schools (role of religion in schools and religious education)
- World issues (e.g. poverty, trade)

## Supporting OneKirk

OneKirk is an inclusive network of ministers, deacons, elders, members and friends of the Church of Scotland.

As such, there is no dotted line to be signed to join OneKirk or statement of scriptural interpretation that must be adhered to. To join the mailing list, please email us via the website or by contacting Rev J Peter N Johnston on 01698 828633.

However, if you would like to also

become a Supporting Member then your contributions would be gratefully received to enable OneKirk to provide resources to assist members and clergy of the Church of Scotland.

We suggest an annual contribution of £15 (or £5 for unwaged).

Please make cheques payable to ‘OneKirk’ and send c/o Rev Scott Rennie, Cathedral Office, 6 Church Street, Brechin, DD9 6EU.