

General Assembly 2015 — Civil Partnerships Debates

Introduction

Given the complexity of this issue and the challenge of gleaning accurate information from the media coverage, here are the facts of what was decided at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Ministers and Deacons in Civil Partnerships

On Saturday 16th May, the General Assembly voted in favour of permitting people in Civil Partnerships to serve as ministers and deacons within the Church of Scotland, by 309 votes to 182. This decision follows the decision of the General Assembly of 2014, which was approved by a majority of Presbyteries (31 for, 14 against) under the terms of the Barrier Act. Actual voting figures were much closer (1,381 for and 1,161 against).

The Church has adopted a position which maintains a traditional view of marriage between a man and a woman, but allows individual Kirk Sessions to decide if they wish to 'opt out' of that traditional position and to call a minister or a deacon who is in a same sex civil partnership.

Same Sex Marriage

The wider issue of what Same Sex Marriage means in the church was also mentioned in the reports on Saturday. However, there were no moves to allow Ministers and Deacons to solemnise Marriages of Same Sex couples. Further exploration of this particular issue will be reported on in two or three years' time.

Ministers and Deacons in Same Sex Marriage

On Thursday 21st May, the General Assembly debated whether to extend the provision covering minister and deacons in civil partnerships to those who are in a same sex marriage. After a long debate, Commissioners voted by 213 votes to 205 against deferring a decision on this until the Church's Theological Forum had presented a report on the subject of same sex marriage.

However, Commissioners then voted, by 215 votes to 195, to defer the final decision until Presbyteries have been consulted under the terms of the Barrier Act. Presbyteries will now debate this question and return their votes by the end of this year.

Given the numbers attending, a significant proportion must also have abstained from both votes.

Special provisions were agreed which protect any minister or deacon ordained before 31st May 2009 who is now in a same sex marriage, as is the case for at least one serving Church of Scotland minister.

Summary

As a result of the decisions taken at this year's General Assembly, the Church of Scotland continues to affirm that it stands by its historic and current doctrine and practice in relation to marriage and human sexuality; while at the same time permitting individual congregations, by decision of the Kirk Session, to depart from this position and therefore be able to call a minister or deacon in a Civil Partnership.

This permission does not extend to ministers and deacons who have entered into a same sex marriage (other than the special provisions mentioned above}, until Presbyteries have voted prior to the end of this year and the 2016 General Assembly has given final approval.

