

Notorious American cult to picket Scottish church over gay ministers

6 AUG/Scotsman - Members of a notorious homophobic American congregation are planning to picket the Scottish church at the centre of the threatened schism within the Kirk over the ordination of gay ministers.

The extremist Westboro Baptist Church is also threatening to stage a demonstration at the autumn ecumenical conference of Church of Scotland in Edinburgh later this year.

The Kansas-based church, founded by the Rev Fred Phelps and his family, featured in Louis Theroux's 2007 television documentary, *The Most Hated Family In America* and in his 2011 programme *America's Most Hated Family in Crisis*.

Members of the fundamentalist church have staged a series of anti-gay protests at military funerals across America, proclaiming their incendiary view that American deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq are God's punishment for the nation's tolerance of homosexuality.

However, the church has now announced on its website that members are planning to come to Scotland to picket Queen's Cross Church in Aberdeen - the church that sparked the threatened split in the Kirk two years ago when the congregation decided to induct the Rev Scott Rennie as the first openly gay minister in the Church of Scotland.

They plan to target the church on 30 October and to picket the Church of Scotland's autumn conference at its headquarters in Edinburgh's George Street on 28 October.

Mr Rennie, however, insisted yesterday that anyone would be welcome to visit his church.

He said: "Everyone and anyone is welcome at Queen's Cross Church - that's the way Jesus was, and that's the way we are. If they don't want to join us in worship and choose to protest, then that will be up to them."

Mr Rennie added: "I know a lot of people are concerned by their visit, but I am quite relaxed about it.

"At the very least, it is a good reminder to us all of the dangers of fundamentalism, and the absurdity of where it can lead you.

They happen to shout a lot, whereas others hold their hateful views more secretly."

He continued: "Most Christians are neither homophobic nor extremist, but are moderate people who seek to share the love of God in the community in which they live."

The ordination of gays is not on the agenda at the Kirk's autumn conference.

A Church of Scotland spokesman said the autumn ecumenical conference was due to debate Scotland as a national Church and the "international ecumenical peace convocation".

He said: "The Church of Scotland would not want to associate itself with any of the extreme views voiced by the Westboro Baptist Church and do not regard any of its statement as

pertinent to the theological discussions that are ongoing within the Kirk following the decision of the General Assembly in May."

The spokesman added: "They [Westboro Church] said they were going to come to the General Assembly in 2009 and they never turned up."

When the Westboro Baptist Church tried to enter Britain in 2009, the UK Border Agency refused entry to two members of the Phelps family.

The agency said at the time: "These individuals have engaged in unacceptable behaviour by inciting hatred against a number of communities.

"We will continue to stop those who want to spread extremism, hatred and violent messages in our communities from coming to our country."