

Is the Church of England at death's door or has it found a new lease of life?

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The Church of England is either in its last desperate death throes or it is making a concerted effort to revive itself and reclaim the widespread influence it once enjoyed. At its General Synod (parliament) this week it got itself into a humiliating tangle over the issue of women bishops, that's what grabbed the headlines.

But that is not an issue for the NSS. How the Church organises itself internally is its own business (although why any self-respecting woman would want to be part of such a misogynist institution is puzzling). It was other events that almost passed unnoticed that alarm us.

First of all we had the Bishop of Oxford calling for schools to be used as a recruiting ground for the Church, and then consideration of a motion calling on Christians to bring their faith into the public domain and not keep it as a private matter.

Rev Stephen Trott brought forward the motion calling on Christians to act out their faith "in public as well as private life" and take up public service to ensure that the religious voice is heard (as though it ever shuts up). I suppose he had in mind Christians taking up public positions such as councillors, MPs, school governors, members of committees and influential officials.

He said his motion was a "declaration which leaves no doubt that what we believe in the Bible and what we practise as Christians belong very much to the public domain and not private conscience".

Mr Trott then went into Andrea Minichiello Williams mode and said there was a concerted effort to "drive the Church out of the public square". He went on to recite the cases of supposed "religious discrimination" that failed in British courts but will be re-examined in the European Court of Human Rights in September. Inevitably he mentioned the nurse Shirley Chaplin, who was disciplined after she refused to abide by health and safety regulations and remove a necklace with a cross on it.

He also mentioned Gary McFarlane, a relationship counsellor dismissed by Avon Relate because he said he could not in conscience observe the organisation's equal treatment policy and conduct sex therapy with same-sex couples.

Mr Trott said: "Now we are not to be permitted to manifest our faith, or to live and work according to our conscience as Christians, because to do so is increasingly and mistakenly classed by government and the courts as 'discriminatory'."

Although many Synod members supported the motion, there were some voices of sanity who challenged the self-evidently incorrect idea that Christians are being marginalised.

The Archdeacon of Norwich, the Rev Jan McFarlane, suggested Christians need to be more discerning when reading press reports of discrimination cases involving Christians. "The question I always ask is 'What really happened?'" she said.

"I'm not saying there isn't a problem, but what I am saying is that we shouldn't get too carried away with what we read in the press and we shouldn't be too quick to comment, not unless we are

confident that we know the whole story. If there are rules spanning the wearing of jewellery, then why should Christians be exempt? I'm not wearing a cross today but it doesn't make me any less of a Christian."

Rev McFarlane also suggested that in some cases, the fault lies with Christians. The reason she couldn't buy a decent Easter card, she said, was because Christian artists didn't supply good designs. She said supermarkets didn't "ban" greetings cards with a Christian message. They didn't stock them because there was no call for them.

Give that woman a medal for common sense.

But she was rapidly overtaken by the Bishop of Oxford, the Rt Revd John Pritchard, chairman of the Church's board of education, with his outrageous demand that schools should be used for aggressive evangelism.

He claimed church schools were "under attack" from all corners (failing to mention that more and more of them are opening every month – often against the expressed wishes of the local community).

He made his comments as he launched a new report on the future face of the Church of England's schools. We have [reported](#) on this sinister document before, and said at the time that the Church is abusing the privileges it enjoys in schools by using them to try to indoctrinate children rather than to give them a balanced education.

The Bishop confirmed our fears when he told the Synod:

"Do we train our clergy for that opportunity or do we see engagement with schools as optional? The clergy ought to have a camp bed in there for heaven's sake! We don't have to bemoan the fact that our Sunday School has collapsed if there are 200 children at the local church school. The first big challenge is truly owning the centrality of our church schools in our mission and that's a real culture change..."

"Make no mistake, the days of equivocation are over. Church schools are under suspicion or attack in many corners of society. I've been involved in debates on the Today Programme, the Time Educational Festival at Wellington, in academic seminars and newspaper articles.

"The pressure is on. And our response must not be defensive but confidently on the front foot. We have so much to offer. In an age of creeping scepticism about religion we know we have the greatest story ever lived, one with never ending relevance to every human life. So we need to make sure our schools are so rooted in the Great Story, so distinctively Christian in beliefs, values and behaviour, that people will be thrilled and challenged by what they see. We are working on a new scheme for teaching Christianity in our schools and on what a teaching curriculum looks like when it reflects in every part, the Christian spiritual foundation of the schools life."

The Bishop's speech smacks of pure desperation.

It is outrageous that the Church is shamelessly proposing that that its schools, run entirely from public funds, should become virtually Christian madrassas, simply to save the dying church. Surely it is children's education that should come first, not evangelising in a faith that the vast majority of children and most of their parents have abandoned.

The Government needs to seriously rethink its own unhealthily close relationship with the Church over education. Religious evangelisation should be kept outside schools and children should be

taught together regardless of faith, and without parents being forced to attend church, simply to have their children admitted to the local school.

And did the Bishop of Oxford really say that he thought that the clergy ought to have a camp bed in every school? I'm not sure that parents would be too keen on that given what has happened in other religious institutions.

So, we return to the question – is this an indication that the Church is taking its last dying gasps and clutching at anything that might save it? Or is it going to succeed in reviving itself and impose its often unpleasant doctrines on us all?

Terry Sanderson

Terry Sanderson was the former president of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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