

Religious charities face Charity Commission investigations

Posted: Mon, 17th Nov 2014

Three Christian charities have recently faced investigations or "operational compliance cases" from the Charity Commission for a range of offences, including fraud and accounting irregularities, whilst a fourth has seen a statutory investigation closed after trustees agreed to re-pay £100,000 back to the charity.

The first charity, Bethel United Church of Jesus Christ Apostolic UK, whose website speaks of the "privilege" and "duty" of donating to the Church, was left facing further action by the regulator after a bishop "misappropriated" £186,000 of the charity's funds. The bishop was [sentenced](#) to two years in prison for fraud earlier this year.

After discussions with the charity, the Commission found that "several trustees had been aware of the suspected fraud for some time, but had originally attempted to deal with the problem without reporting it to the police." Since then, the charity was found to have taken "very little action" on the failure of their financial controls, and one branch of the church was still paying a stipend to the imprisoned bishop. Bethel United Church was registered with the Charity Commission in 1995 to "advance the Christian religion in the UK."

The Commission's "operational compliance case" has now been closed.

The second charity, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church, is now the subject of a statutory [inquiry](#) after the Charity Commission was forced to "escalate" its engagement with the church. The inquiry will look into the church's "repeated failure to comply with legal obligations in relation to the filing of annual accounts" and the reported "misapplication" of the charity's assets.

The Charity Commission is also understood to have pursued an operational compliance case into the UK Winners' Chapel of Nigerian bishop David Oyedepo; this came after an [allegation](#) last year that charitable funds were "misapplied." The Charity Commission also considered the "charity's management and policies" and is still considering information supplied by the Chapel before reaching a conclusion about outstanding financial questions.

Bishop Oyedepo, known as the 'witch-slapping pastor', is thought to be worth more than £90 million, and made headlines in [2011](#) after slapping a teenage girl during a church service. The girl was knelt in front of the Bishop when he called her a "foul devil", hit her and accused her of being a "witch". The Bishop ended the encounter by telling the girl she was "free to go to hell" before moving on to speak to another parishioner.

The Winners' Chapel is now looking to open an independent school in Kent. NSS campaign manager Stephen Evans told [BBC News](#) that, "the Metropolitan Police this year alone have investigated 27 cases of child abuse related to witch craft" and warned against allowing the church to open a UK school. The NSS [previously](#) raised concerns about the church in August of this year, which plans to teach "biblical truths" in every subject if the school is approved. The Charity Commission began its investigation into the church's finances in 2013, and the [Guardian](#) reported that Oyedepo's UK branch alone had "received more than £16 million in tithes between 2008 and

2011."

The fourth Christian organisation is the Life Changing Ministries Church South Cheshire Trust, who recently came out of an inquiry after trustees agreed to re-pay £100,000 to the charity. The Charity Commission [inquiry](#) had found that funds meant for the charity were being paid into personal bank accounts and that the Life Changing Ministries Trust did not have "proper financial controls in place." The trustees claim the "inquiry came about as a result of complaints coming in about us... from a subversive group" who wanted to "destroy" the Trust.

Meanwhile, the Charity Commission has placed 55 unidentified Muslim groups on a watchlist, over fears that they "may be involved in radicalisation and extremism", according to [The Times](#). The paper also reports that "nearly four out of ten formal inquiries recently begun by the regulator are into Muslim-linked charities controlling tens of millions of pounds."

Adam Belaon, research director of the think-tank Claystone, which campaigns against "Islamophobia", wrote that "Muslim charities have been disproportionately affected by investigations" by the Charity Commission. Belaon's research found that one quarter of Charity Commission inquiries are now investigating Islamic groups.

The Commission is said to be looking particularly closely at charities which work in Syria. Sir William Shawcross, chairman of the Charity Commission, has said that money donated to aid and relief funds may have already found its way to the Islamic State, and that the "regulator has begun scrutinising 86 charities which it believes could be at risk from extremism, including 37 working to help victims of the Syria crisis."

The Guardian [reports](#) that "full statutory inquiries – the commission's most serious kind of formal investigation – have begun into five British charities operating in Syria." The five charities in question are Children in Deen, Syria Aid, Aid Convoy, Human Aid and al-Fatiha Global.

Responding to accusations that Muslims had been unfairly targeted, the Charity Commission said that all of their casework was "prioritised and assessed for action against the risk framework" and that "the commission does not target Muslims."

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