

Evangelism in schools – a parent's perspective

Posted: Mon, 14th Oct 2013 by [Saul Freeman](#)

A first-hand account from a parent on discovering and trying to deal with evangelism in his child's school.

Our son's non-faith junior school in Sheffield has been the object of a 'mission' campaign by a local evangelical Christian Church, hell-bent on 'capturing' nearby schools.

We were rather late to catch on to the fact that the venue where our son's carol concert was held was not in a mainstream CofE Church (not that this would have necessarily been in line with a 'secular' school) but, in fact, carol concerts were held at Christ Church Fulwood – a conservative evangelical Church (CofE) who proudly boasted its retrogressive, sexist and homophobic beliefs in a series of well-produced and clearly displayed podcasts on its [excellent website](#).

We saw the 'brand name' CofE and stupidly assumed that this meant 'friendly' and 'mainstream' and 'not extreme'. What we hadn't realised (as we don't take a great deal of interest in such things) is that the CofE is of course, a very broad church and the evangelical wing has been gaining ground, power, and influence within the CofE. Indeed Christ Church Fulwood funds itself by tithing its middle-class congregation (some of whom it turns out are on the governing body of our son's school) in a wealthy area of Sheffield to the tune of £1.5m per year.

In terms of interference in our son's junior school and in the local infants' school, Christ Church Fulwood, we discovered (through a chance remark by our niece who attends the school) had been going into school on a very regular basis, leading assemblies which included getting the children to repeat a 'mantra' — the contents of which we still are unclear on — but was something along the lines of 'Jesus is the light of the world' which had to be repeated a number of times. We were unhappy about this and particularly when we looked into exactly who the church was that was pursuing such a close relationship with the school.

Amongst the podcasts, we found one (and we could only bear to listen to one) which was not only sexist, homophobic and misogynist (asserting that women were not fit to lead men because Adam appears in Verse 1 in Genesis and Eve does not turn up until verse 22) but which also made wild allegations about the local infant school and its teachings on personal and sexual education – utterly false and on a par with the more extreme leader columns of the Daily Mail.

Thinking that perhaps we had missed something when we were choosing a school for our son, we checked the school's prospectus and website and found nothing to suggest any links with any religious group – as you would expect from a non-religious state school. However, the school have since admitted openly that they have a 'longstanding relationship with Christ Church Fulwood'. Unhappy — very unhappy — with the continuing relationship between church and school we entered into a protracted, frustrating and at times Kafkaesque dialogue with the school and Local Education Authority. Meetings have been held to which we were not party nor have we been allowed to know how discussions have progressed. We have been told that it 'would not be constructive to share information about discussions on these issues with parents'. Promises were made which resulted in a 'new policy on religious visitors to school' which was approximately the

same as the old informal policy on religious visitors — with the notable addition that in a new gesture of inclusiveness the Chinese School of Dance, that major world religion, would now be coming into school — in between the continued regular visits of Christ Church Fulwood. Coupled with this, a 'Vexatious Complaints Policy' appeared on the school's website around the time that we were making our concerns heard by the school.

11 months down the line we are no nearer a conclusion (from our point of view) to this business, and children in the school are still being visited by this reactionary evangelical church. Responses from both the school and the LEA have made us feel 1) that we are clearly a group of aggressively leftist non-believers who are being entirely unreasonable and 2) that the Powers That Be would rather we shut up and went away quietly. They have given us the requisite 5 minutes of their time and now want us to go away so that the status quo can be maintained. And so far, maintained it has been – with the hate-preaching church continuing to make its regular mission to the school.

The reality is that adults who come in and lead school assemblies are seen by the children as authority figures in the local community – and this means that the school has conferred a status of trust and respect on a group of individuals who preach hate and a fundamentalist, literalist and creationist approach to religion and life.

What of the conflicting feelings of children listening of other faiths, 'other' sexualities, or of course the 50% of the children who are female and therefore apparently unfit to hold positions of authority over men? Will these children look back from adulthood and wonder what on earth was going on? And won't this potentially seed very early feelings of shame and inadequacy in children who don't 'fit' the preached 'norm'? Children at school should be protected from harm and not exposed to potential damage in order to serve the evangelical mission statement of a local church on a mission.

Saul Freeman lives in Sheffield and has a son who attends a community school. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the NSS.

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