

Parents challenge academy's Christian assemblies in court

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A couple have [launched](#) a legal challenge against a primary school over its assemblies where children take part in Christian prayers and watch re-enactments of biblical stories.

Lee and Lizanne Harris have launched a judicial review against Burford primary, a non-faith school in Oxfordshire which joined a Church of England trust in 2015.

At the school's church-led assemblies the parents say children have been encouraged to participate in prayer, Christianity has been taught as truth and biblical stories such as the crucifixion have been acted out.

The school's [website](#) says that during assemblies "Bible stories are read and brought to life through interactive drama using mime, costume, props, puppets and sound effects, with the children also getting involved".

The school has used the local church to host key events and at a recent leavers' assembly children were presented with a Bible as a leaving gift and 'guide in life'.

Burford primary joined the C of E's Oxford Diocesan Schools Trust (ODST) under the condition that its community school ethos would be protected.

The Harrises plan to argue that the school must provide an inclusive assembly as a meaningful alternative for pupils withdrawn from Christian worship. They withdrew their children from assemblies but the school put them in side rooms where they were supervised by teaching assistants.

Schools in England and Wales are legally required to provide "an act of collective worship" under the 1944 Education Act, though many schools ignore the law with the tacit approval of Ofsted and the Department for Education.

Parents have the right to withdraw children from collective worship, but many regard this as an unreasonable imposition on themselves and their children.

The National Secular Society, which [campaigns](#) to scrap the collective worship law, [highlighted](#) the couple's case last year and has provided advice and support to them.

The NSS raised the case with DfE representatives in February. At that meeting the society also raised broader concerns about coercive worship requirements and the lack of protection for the ethos of community schools which are taken over by faith based trusts.

The NSS is now writing to education secretary Gavin Williamson to raise these issues.

NSS supporters can [write to their MPs](#) or [sign the NSS's petition](#) on the subject.

NSS education and schools officer Alastair Lichten said: "It is past time for the government to address the anachronism of mandated worship and the mess it creates. School authorities should have no role directing or imposing worship, especially when it is inappropriate for a school's ethos and community.

"Many community ethos schools conduct inclusive ethical and topical assemblies with no directed worship. This should be replicated elsewhere. We at least need greater clarity on the right to withdraw and meaningful alternatives, though it would be simpler and fairer if any worship that does take place was opt in, voluntary and not school directed.

"We should also remember that this situation has arisen in part because a C of E diocese was selected to run a non-faith school. Time and again we have seen the totally inadequate protection for a community school ethos, when non-faith schools are taken over by faith based trusts. The C of E is absolutely clear that it sees any non-faith school it controls as part of its 'mission', including through imposing worship."

The Harrises' case, which is being supported by the charity Humanists UK, will be heard at the High Court in November.

In a statement, the couple said: "We enrolled our children into a state community school – which is meant to have no religious character – but over time we noticed harmful aspects of evangelism spreading into assembly and other parts of the school which goes against our children's rights to receive an education free from religious interference.

"When our children go to school they shouldn't have to participate in Christian prayers, or watch biblical scenes such as the crucifixion being acted out, nor should they have to hear from evangelical preachers who spout harmful and often divisive messages.

"We also don't think it's acceptable that they be left to play with an iPad because we've withdrawn them. They should be able to participate in an inclusive assembly that is of equal educational worth and which is welcoming and respectful of all students no matter their background."

The parents have previously raised their concerns within the school but they have been dismissed. Their children joined the school before it joined the ODST.

The ODST runs 33 church and community schools, attended by more than 6,100 children.

Its [website](#) says the trust is "motivated by our Christian values to serve our local communities" but claims "we do not impose those values".

In a statement it said it was "confident that Burford primary school, as a community school, has acted entirely appropriately, and has followed all statutory requirements".

See also: [My children's school has become Christian by default](#), by Lee Harris for the NSS.

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