

# Anglican stance on women and gays could trigger disestablishment

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*Keith Porteous Wood argues that, with the CofE's hierarchy so at odds with the values on equality held by the country at large, an Anglican vicar is right to question its status as the 'national church'.*

Andrew Foreshow-Cain, the first Anglican vicar to have married a same sex partner, has left his job because of hostility from the Church. He reportedly feels that the Church is "[so at odds with the country and its lay members that it risks becoming a 'sect'](#)" and that it is "an institutionally homophobic organisation that blindly denies its policies and practices are deliberately and harmfully discriminatory and wrong".

For me, Groucho Mark's best one-liner was "I don't want to belong to any club that would accept me as one of its members." I am starting to reconsider the classic secularist reaction to complaints such as AF-C's: "if you don't like the rules, leave the club", or perhaps "don't join it in the first place". But what if, for example, the rules were not always thus – as I suggest below?

It is not difficult to verify that the CofE is an "institutionally homophobic organisation". Even the Archbishop of Canterbury generously admitted to an audience ([as reported](#)) "I am constantly consumed with horror at the way the Church has treated gay people".

How else could its bishops have unanimously voted in the Lords against civil same sex marriage for the population as a whole, a vote which was absolutely not about religious marriages? And this was not just a polite expression of doctrinal dissent by the so-called Lords Spiritual. They used their privileged power in the Lords in 2013 to introduce what even the *Church Times* described as [wrecking amendment](#).

And I think Justin Welby belatedly realised the reputational price the Church paid for that institutional homophobia. He was clearly shaken by what he described as the "[noticeable hostility to the view of the churches](#)" and that their "opposition to the Bill ... was utterly overwhelmed".

In February 2017 the bishops issued a report on sexuality to the Church's Synod that was essentially "no change". One of his bishops made a last ditch plea to avoid the report being voted down reading: "I honour the anger and, indeed, fury, of the LGBTI community who see in this report hard stones when they looked for bread." But it was too little, too late. Synod rejected the bishops' homophobic report.

Back in 2003, Canon Jeffrey John, who lives – he says celibately – with a same-sex partner was required to withdraw from almost certain appointment as Bishop of Reading by Rowan Williams, caving in to pressure from evangelicals [here and abroad](#), some reportedly encouraged by monetary incentives. John's repeated attempts since to land a bishopric, the latest this year, have all failed and provide telling evidence of the evangelical supremacy and its human consequences.

It is not of course a secular issue, but liberals are frustrated by why biblical injunctions on same-sex relationships are enforced now with so much more gusto than others that call for the capital punishment.

Andrew Brown and Linda Woodhead argue in *That was the Church That Was* that opposition to homosexuality is a recruiting sergeant for their churches in Africa and favoured by the American evangelicals who fund them. This is not a trivial matter for the UK: I am convinced it is the largest single reason why Anglican schools have become ever-more religious and where prayer spaces and Eucharist have become routine, and publicly-funded chaplains increasingly common. Nor is it trivial for many in the churches, given that the proportion of gay clergy is massively greater than in the population. An American study suggests "from 23 percent to 58 percent, with even higher percentages for younger priests". I am even told by a reliable source of Anglican bishops living with other bishops of the same sex. Your palace or mine?

A vicar's live-in same sex partner remarked to me casually at a party that he couldn't take the dog out. I was shocked and saddened when, after a moment, the penny dropped. If he did, parishioners would realise the intimacy of their relationship. It almost seemed if the partner was being relegated to a lesser importance than the dog. I am starting to see what Forshew-Cain is complaining of.

Bizarrely, twenty or thirty years ago when the country was pretty homophobic, the Church was relatively liberal on homosexuality even (or perhaps particularly!) in the clergy. And this complete reversal in opposition to the attitudes of country has been engineered by the hierarchy of the Church that still likes to kid us it speaks for the Nation.

Why? Brown explains it in 200 pages with brilliantly perceptive analysis, albeit it is clear he "doesn't get" secularism. This secret revolution, or episcopal punch up (as you prefer) comes down to *The Rout of Liberal Anglicans by the Evangelicals in Less than a Generation*. Successive Archbishops of Canterbury seem determined that the Anglican Communion, of which their primacy becomes ever more nominal, will not fall apart on their watch. I first remarked on it citing George Carey. Andrew Brown puts it with characteristic acerbity: "The Anglican Communion turned out to exist, organizationally, only in the mind of the Archbishop of Canterbury".

In an increasingly futile effort to avoid disunity, successive archbishops for decades have been quietly ensuring that all the promotions go to the evangelicals: I've heard the frustrations of those passed over since the 1990s. So it was no surprise when Justin Welby bragged to his fellow primates at a private meeting at the 2016 Lambeth conference that "the Bench of Bishops is described by the longer standing members as the most orthodox since WWII". However this almost state secret was clearly for their ears only, so he must have been rather miffed when one of the African primates shopped him by telling the press.

Welby himself is a product of the ultra-evangelical for the rich Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB). Brown recalls that Welby was steered to his wife by the pastor at HTB, with which she has remained closely connected.

It is no coincidence that HTB nestles in the most expensive residential real estate in the country just around the corner from Harrods. HTB should not be underestimated, also being behind the Alpha course, "The slickest, richest, fastest-growing division of the Church of England". It is well ensconced in every prison and astonishingly taken up with enthusiasm by churches of all denominations. It will be no surprise though that HTB thinks gays should remain celibate and that this has been an issue over the Alpha course.

As Brown recounts: the head of PR for HTB watched on as Welby was installed as Archbishop of Canterbury: "The long march through the Church of England had finally ended for them. Their man was in post."

I agree, but quibble that the march wasn't long at all for the Eton and Oxford-educated Welby HTB protégé, it was Archbishop of Canterbury from dean in around five years and from bishop in one, less than twenty years after being ordained as a priest. The most blatant demonstration yet, if any were needed, of the almost nuclear propulsive force of the evangelicals and HTB.

So all that is left for Mr Foreshew-Cain and the liberals is to lick their wounds at each further loss.

The conventional wisdom is that the question of women bishops is resolved in the Church, but recent events cast doubt on this. Parliament got very close to forcing the Church to accept women bishops. The Church has now done so itself, but only got this through by creating a parallel system for dissenters, most of whom refuse even to accept the legitimacy of those ordained by women. But this sticking plaster compromise proposed by the hierarchy is manifestly proving to be unworkable. One such bishop recently appointed to be bishop of Sheffield was ousted by indignant parishioners, and it is not the first appointment he has failed to land.

Both women and gays are hot button equality issues, not just arcane theological details. I suspect that in less than a decade the opposition from the pews or Parliament to this contempt for equality will force a *volte face*, and/or result in schism particularly as the rejection is out of step with the majority of Anglicans in the pews.

Such disunity and plunging attendance also demonstrate how hollow are the Church's claims to unite or speak for the country.

Fuelled by American-funding and animated by the severe prejudices of African Christianity, an ultra-conservative Anglican Church would face incredible public pressure to cut its links with the state.

If the ever-more evangelical church is so determined to become increasingly out of step with the country for its own doctrinal reasons, it may have to choose to forego establishment to retain its own religious freedom. Justin Welby has [acknowledged](#) disestablishment would "not be a disaster" for the Church and would "just be another event in a very long history". He has said as well that, "[I]f we're going to abuse establishment as we have done in the past, then absolutely [the Church should be disestablished]".

He seems nearer contemplating it than any other Archbishop of Canterbury I know of. Could the antisestablishmentarianists be heading for a disappointment?

## **Keith Porteous Wood**

Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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