

Faith groups should practice without preaching when helping the vulnerable

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As a report shows some religious groups are helping survivors of modern slavery without proselytising, Megan Manson says public sector bodies must ensure all organisations that provide services adopt similar policies.

Recent research has reaffirmed something secularists have been saying for years: faith-based organisations in the business of helping vulnerable people should not proselytise.

And this recommendation comes from faith-based organisations themselves.

According to the recently published [Faith responses to modern slavery report](#) from the Universities of Sheffield and Leeds, a number of religious organisations helping survivors of modern slavery have self-imposed safeguards that warn against discussing faith with clients. The report mentions one such organisation which employs "a careful separation of faith" from "day-to-day operations". The report concludes that all organisations in contact with potential survivors of modern slavery should implement the 'non-proselytisation clause' of the [Human Trafficking Foundation Slavery and Trafficking Survivor Care Standards](#).

Mixing evangelism with victim support poses a very real risk of exploitation and harm. The report found some survivors who had sought help from religious organisations had experienced pressure to attend religious services because they felt it was a requirement of the support. Scenarios like these understandably damage public trust in faith groups, which is one reason why some faith groups have rejected evangelism entirely in their work.

It is encouraging to see some faith-based organisations taking a robust position against proselytising or evangelising to the people they help within this field. By adopting specific non-proselytising guidelines, they have set high standards and expectations for those operating in the area of challenging modern slavery and trafficking.

But why aren't these standards replicated elsewhere?

There are many faith-based charities and other organisations that do genuine good. But sadly, there are many others which take advantage of their position to proselytise and attempt to convert vulnerable people.

At the NSS we deal with such cases on a regular basis. Recently we've been advising a town councillor who has [challenged](#) Woodley Town Council's contract with a 'youth outreach' group called Just Around the Corner (JAC). He is concerned that JAC is using its position to proselytise to young people. We advise local councils to adopt the '[faith covenant](#)' of the all-party parliamentary group on faith and society, which includes a statement of non-proselytising.

We've also seen this problem in charities claiming to help rehabilitate drug addicts. In one incident, we heard from a former 'patient' of a Christian 'rehab centre' who said the charity banned him from reading anything apart from religious texts, compelled him to take part in long and intensive prayer

sessions, and expressed hostility towards homosexuality.

The problem of inappropriate evangelism even exists in the public sector, as shown by the case of Bethesda Medical Centre. This NHS surgery has a Christian ethos and [instructs](#) its patients that they must tell the doctor or practice manager if they do not want to discuss matters of faith, resulting in [multiple complaints](#). We have raised this issue with the General Medical Council on several occasions.

But the most common issue we deal with regarding inappropriate proselytising is [evangelism in schools](#). In 2019 alone, I dealt with 24 separate cases in which parents were concerned about religious groups being invited into their children's schools and preaching the word of God. This can be hard to challenge because schools often react defensively when parents raise legitimate concerns about groups with an evangelistic agenda being given access to their children.

But the fact is the education system enables such evangelism to take place. Laws requiring [collective worship](#), locally-determined and compulsory [religious education](#) and a [lack of guidance](#) on best practice for schools in engaging with religious groups all contribute to the problem.

One way we could combat inappropriate proselytism would be [to abolish 'the advancement of religion' as a charitable purpose](#). The vast majority of religious groups that seek to help people are registered charities. Although many charities do excellent work in the name of religion, it isn't the religion *itself* that benefits the public in these cases. In fact, faith-based charities that exercise best practice are those that *don't* allow activities that advance their religion, i.e. proselytising and evangelising, as the modern slavery report demonstrates. Such organisations would not need to list 'advancement of religion' as their charitable purpose to qualify as charities – there are several other categories in the relevant legislation that match what they do.

But schools, local authorities and other public sector bodies also have a part to play. They need to learn from the self-imposed standards adopted by organisations helping modern slavery survivors. They need to actively seek guarantees that faith groups they work with will not proselytise, evangelise or otherwise bring their faith into their work uninvited. It is naive to the point of negligence to assume a religious organisation recruited or contracted by the public sector will not attempt to use its position as a mission field, because there are already too many examples of faith-based organisations that do just that.

Public sector bodies must also be unafraid to raise the issue of evangelism out of fears of looking 'anti-religious' or 'Christophobic'. If religious organisations themselves can expect their employees and volunteers to adhere to a code of non-proselytism, councils and public bodies should expect the same.

As cuts to public services continue to bite, we can expect to see the third sector shouldering a greater burden in helping those in society in the greatest need. And all those in the third sector, regardless of whether or not they are religious, should be consistently held to the same high standards in guaranteeing fair provision for all, with no religious strings attached.

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