

Helping the public shouldn't mean pushing religion on people

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A parliamentary group has removed provisions in its 'faith covenant' that prevent faith groups from proselytising when delivering public services. This leaves vulnerable people open to exploitation, says Megan Manson.

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Is it reasonable for councils to ask organisations delivering public services to do so without pushing religion on vulnerable people? Disappointingly, a parliamentary group no longer seems to think so.

One of the most important contributions of the [all-party parliamentary group on faith and society](#) was its '[faith covenant](#)'. The faith covenant was established as an agreement between faith groups and local authorities, to lay out a set of principles that guide interactions between them and the general public. It helped to address the potential conflict of interests that can happen when religious organisations deliver public services. In the past, the NSS has publicly [supported the faith covenant](#) and recommended its use with public authorities.

One of the commitments for faith groups agreeing to the faith covenant was: "Serving equally all local residents seeking to access the public services they offer, without proselytising, irrespective of their religion, gender, marital status, race, ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation, mental capability, long term condition or disability".

This is a key part of the covenant. A common concern is that faith groups may discriminate against people of different religions and beliefs or LGBT+ identities in particular; the covenant explicitly protects against this.

Another common concern is that faith groups may try to evangelise to service users, which was forbidden by the "without proselytising" clause. That is, until now.

Around the beginning of this year, the APPG on faith and society quietly removed the words "without proselytising" from the covenant. As a result, the covenant offers no protection to the public against unwanted evangelism at all.

[Minutes](#) from the APPG's October meeting reveal that some faith groups opposed the "without proselytising" clause. Stephen Timms said faith groups in Southampton felt that "without proselytising" meant they "can't do any religious outreach work", while Rev Debbie Sellin said the clause was a "stumbling block for a couple of churches". This would suggest that these groups do in fact wish to proselytise to service users - something that the faith covenant was originally meant to prevent, and which demonstrates the need for an explicit non-proselytising clause.

The decision to remove "without proselytising" is a big step backwards, which has been taken primarily for the benefit of faith groups and not for the benefit of public service users. Surely the needs and welfare of the public, particularly vulnerable members of the public who are most likely

to depend on these services, should be prioritised in any agreement between local authorities and service providers?

The problem with proselytising and public services

There are many religious organisations that gladly refrain from proselytising while helping the public. Last year the universities of Sheffield and Leeds published a report, *Faith responses to modern slavery*, which [found](#) several religious organisations working to tackle modern slavery have self-imposed safeguards that warn against discussing faith with clients. It concluded 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](#).

But not all religious groups abide by this. One such group is Azalea, which [says](#) it provides support to women involved in sex trafficking. Azalea is expanding: it registered as a charitable incorporated organisation last year in Luton, and appears to have [opened](#) a High Wycombe branch last month.

Azalea's work helping survivors of sex trafficking is a noble and important undertaking. Doubtless it had helped many individuals dealing with appalling circumstances. But some of Azalea's policies and methods are cause for concern.

Azalea's website says the organisation "was established in prayer" and that prayer is "essential for the fulfilment of the vision that we will see an end to commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking". It [says](#) prayer is "always offered" to the vulnerable sex-trafficked women and men its volunteers work with, and the prayer is "almost always accepted".

However well-intentioned this offer of prayer, one must question the extent to which Azalea's clients feel they can refuse the offer. *Faith responses to modern slavery* 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. Offering assistance to desperate people with 'religious strings attached' can cross the line into exploitation.

Azalea has received funding from public authorities, including the Bedfordshire Police & Crime Commissioner, and is [partnered](#) with Luton Borough Council. It's worth noting that Luton is one of six local authorities [identified](#) by the APPG on faith and society as interested in adopting the new faith covenant. If the council had adopted the previous covenant, it could easily rein in any desire to evangelise that partner organisations may have. But there is nothing to prevent this at all in the new covenant.

The key purpose of the faith covenant was to increase confidence around commissioning services from faith-based organisations. Removing the no-proselytising clause does the opposite. It can only undermine confidence in faith groups delivering public services.

Partnerships between local authorities and support groups, both religious and secular, can provide much needed support to the most vulnerable members of our communities. And we should expect the highest standards of ethics from any organisation that's working with local authorities to provide a public service. That must include an agreement from all parties not to exploit their position to try and gain converts or save souls through proselytising. When delivering services to the public, the priority should be the welfare and dignity of the public – and not the missionary objectives of faith groups.

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