

The Church of England's offensive in FE colleges must be resisted

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C of E proposals to increase its influence in FE colleges have little to do with education and more to do with reversing its declining numbers among young people, say Chris Higgins and Keith Sharpe.

The Church of England is on a missionary offensive in our FE colleges. This is the thrust of a recent report, [Vocation, Transformation and Hope: a vision for the Church of England's engagement with further education](#), fronted by the bishop of Winchester, Tim Dakin.

How is it that the "bishop for higher and further education" can produce a report that has so little to say about the realities of education and so much to say about how the church might increase its membership?

The report rather gives the game away by acknowledging that the aim of engaging with FE colleges is to "build a younger and more diverse church" and that "colleges can, especially, be a way to engage with what is often a missing generation... There is genuine potential here to help revitalise the local church in the long term."

It appears the Church of England views FE colleges as a potential source of new recruits, rather than the pluralistic communities of learners and educators that they are.

The lord bishop of Durham confirmed this strategy, stating in the recent Queen's Speech debate: "We as a church recognise that we must become younger and more diverse. Engaging in further education needs to be at the core of what we do."

He added that the church is "committed to an ongoing working partnership with the secretary of state and the government to explore these issues together".

The report laments the fact that, unlike HE, no Christian church now operates an FE institution, and suggests the establishment of a church "FE Colleges Group".

Even more worryingly, this latest report follows a report published in 2020 called [Faith in Higher Education – A Church of England vision](#), also under Bishop Dakin, which states that the church's approach to further and higher education is theological, not educational.

That report declares that education and wisdom are achieved by "aligning all our ways – our thinking, acting, belonging – with those of God".

Most strikingly, it adds "sustained theological attention is needed on the distinct questions of the content of any particular discipline or field, the methodologies with which these are examined and interpreted, and the curriculum through which it is taught".

In the 21st century, no educational institution should be subject to the constraints of theological doctrine.

One proposal being considered by the Church of England is that "each diocese should engage with further education and sixth-form colleges in its strategic planning and an appropriate member of the bishop's staff should have responsibility for linking diocesan strategy with FE and sixth-form college activity".

But fewer than one per cent of college students are members of their particular church. Meanwhile, governors of FE colleges are charged with developing an independent strategy for the benefit of all their students.

Another proposal in the report is to provide house-for-duty posts and to "reimagine chaplaincy provision". This neglects the fact that FE colleges already have a cadre of professionally qualified and committed staff who work diligently to enhance the welfare and wellbeing of students of all backgrounds, abilities and aspirations.

Support for all students' wellbeing is fundamental to the pluralistic life of our FE colleges and the communities they serve.

While, of course, most individual chaplains are well-intentioned, a "cuckoo-in-the-nest" chaplaincy whose first loyalty is towards a particular church would privilege a very small minority of staff and students. This would undermine every college's purpose of building a community in which people of all faiths or none have equal opportunity.

The potential for conflict between the doctrinal beliefs of chaplains – for example, on same-sex marriage, other faiths or LGBT+ rights – and the inclusive support provided by the professional pastoral support teams in FE would also be ever present.

Support for further education from any source is, of course, to be welcomed, but the Church of England's latest proposals have little to do with education and skills and much to do with reversing its own declining numbers amongst young people.

That's why the specific proposals in this report must be resisted.

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