



## Religious leaders launch first manifesto for faith schools

September 2, 2014

Representatives from the Anglican, Catholic and other churches (Methodist, United Reformed, Unitarian, Quaker), along with the Hindu, Muslim and Jewish faiths, yesterday came together to launch a manifesto (below) calling for an end to discrimination in pupil admissions, teacher employment, as well as broadening the curriculum to make it obligatory for all children to study the major faiths in Britain.

Speaking from a position of deep faith, they called the way faith schools currently operate an affront to religious values of openness and equality, discriminating against both children and adults. They will present the proposals to the main parties today (September 2nd), urging them to pledge to make the education system fairer and less divisive in their General Election manifestos.



Back row from left: Derek McAuley (Unitarian Chief Officer), Rev Richard Bentley (CoE), Simon Barrow (Ekklesia). Front row from left: Jonathan Bartley (Ekklesia), Symon Hill (Quaker), Rabbi Jonathan Romain, Martin Prendergast (Centre for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality).

Introducing the event at Bloomsbury Church in central London, organiser Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain declared: ‘It is not good for society to ghettoise its future citizens, nor for the children to grow up in an ‘us and them’ culture, nor is it good for faith to be tarnished by discrimination, whereas it should be positive and teach people to love your neighbor as yourself, not hide your children away from him.’

He concluded: ‘Our message to both political parties and school governors is ‘Thou shalt not discriminate against children’ and we need to introduce legislation to eradicate inequality from the state educational system.’

Another signatory, Revd Keith Trivasse (Church of England) stated: ‘I resent, deeply, the fact that my C of E primary school is 98% Muslim, and none of them stand a real chance of getting into the C of E high school in Bury because that school operates a church-attending admissions policy. I find this profoundly discriminatory.’

Revd Richard Bentley (Church of England) spoke of himself as ‘A loyal serving member of the Church of England, yet during my ministry, I have frequently had cause to criticise the C of E about the unjust position to which it clings over church schools’.

Jonathan Bartley (Ekklesia) warned the political parties of the growing resentment of parents unable to get their children into local schools because of faith barriers. He said ‘Political parties seem to be scared of issues in which there is polarized debate, yet they are losing support for ignoring them.’

Another signatory was Rev Una Kroll (Church in Wales). She wrote in support ‘There are

discriminatory policies in all local faith schools here. Now I am a very old lady and not strong enough to travel to London, but I will support you all through prayer and hope and faith that these kinds of discriminatory practices will come to an end.’

Derek McAuley (Chief Officer, Unitarian Church) called for an end to teaching a mono-religious RE syllabus in schools, and for it instead to be broad and balanced.

Symon Hill (Quaker) decried ‘The fact that employment discrimination by faith schools is legally permissible, yet that is not something as a Christian that I can defend. I might also suggest that compulsory Worship is an assault on religious liberty.’

Martin Pendergast (Catholic) lamented that many faith schools ignored Sex and Relationships Education and urged that it be made part of the National Curriculum.

The text of the manifesto and its list of signatories is reproduced below:

## **TIME FOR AN ACT OF FAITH**

As the new school year begins, and the General Election in 2015 approaches, we write as religious leaders from a broad spectrum of faith groups who are united in our concern over the way faith schools currently operate – both because of their impact on the children that attend them, and their effect on society at large.

We value faith so do not wish it to be abused, be it for jumping ahead of others to gain entrance to a popular school, or blinkering children’s educational experiences. Faith can be a means of enriching children’s lives, but it can also be used to segregate and sow seeds of suspicion. We are calling for a rebalancing of how faith affects the school years of children.

We are especially conscious that many of the practices that caused such outrage in some of the Birmingham schools recently – such as excluding lessons about sex education, avoiding the notion of evolution, and reinforcing a cultural identity to the exclusion of others – would not have been challenged had those schools been classed as faith schools.

We are campaigning for inclusive education and against religious discrimination. Our goal is that all state-funded schools, including faith schools are inclusive, tolerant and transparent.

We call upon all political parties who seek to form the next government to include the following six points in their manifesto, leading to legislation on faith in schools.

1. To work towards ending the anomaly by which state-funded schools are legally able to distinguish between children on religious grounds in their admissions procedure. Such discrimination is astonishing in today’s society, a legacy of previous centuries that would not be tolerated in employment law, housing rules, health care and almost any other aspect of national life.
2. In the meantime, to bring all state schools in line with the system under which religious Free Schools operate, limiting the number of children that can be selected on the grounds of their faith to 50% of the annual intake. This is not an ideal position but does at least introduce an element of consistency, sends a message about direction of travel and eases the path towards the abolition of all religious discrimination in schools.
3. To close the legal loophole which currently allows schools to refuse to employ teachers on the basis of their faith. At present, Voluntary Aided and Academy faith schools (all Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh and 45% of Church of England ones) can deny employment based on a person’s religious identity in all teacher posts. Not only is this morally objectionable, but it is educationally counter-productive, harming the schools’ educational standards and limiting pupils’ social horizons.
4. To recognise that the decision to remove the duty of Ofsted to inspect how schools promoted

community cohesion was a mistake – allowing abuses to go unchecked – and to restore Ofsted’s responsibility to monitor the way community cohesion is approached in schools.

5. To ensure that all children learn about the full range of faiths and belief systems in Britain – not just one or none – by adding Religious Education to the National Curriculum. Having an inclusive RE syllabus that is obligatory will help children in multi-belief Britain understand each other and grow up in harmony.
6. To remove the compulsory nature of Collective Worship, which forces worship on children who either do not hold religious beliefs or who adhere to a different faith from that being promoted (and which often causes discomfort for teachers legally obliged to provide it). Worship has an important role elsewhere, but not in schools. Assemblies should instead be given the role of bringing pupils together in celebration of shared values, and assisting them to explore ethical questions.

Jonathan Bartley (Ekklesia)

Revd Richard Bentley (Church of England)

Revd Jeremy Chadd (Church of England)

Revd Nigel Davies (Church of England)

Revd Steve Dick (Executive Director, International Council of Unitarians and Universalists)

Revd Marie Dove (Methodist)

Symon Hill (Quaker)

Revd Dr Noel Irwin (Church of England)

Revd Richard Jones (Church of England)

Revd Richard Kirker (Church of England)

Revd Una Kroll (Church in Wales)

Jay Lakhani (Hindu)

Revd Stephen Lingwood (Unitarian)

Derek McAuley (Chief Officer, Unitarians)

Revd Iain McDonald (United Reformed Church)

Manzoor Moghal (Muslim)

Martin Pendergast (Catholic)

Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain (Jewish)

Revd Professor Christopher Rowland (Queen’s College, Oxford)

Revd Stephen Terry (Church of England)

Revd Keith Trivasse (Church of England)

Revd Simon Wilson (Church of England)

---

*The statement is taken from the Accord website:*

*<http://accordcoalition.org.uk/2014/09/02/religious-leaders-launch-first-manifesto-for-faith-schools/>*