

## The erosion of Christian civil liberties

### *Keeping a biblical perspective*



Last year 'Christians in Parliament', an official All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) chaired by Gary Streeter MP, launched an inquiry called 'Clearing the Ground', which was tasked with considering the question: 'Are Christians marginalised in the UK?'

The inquiry was facilitated by the Evangelical Alliance<sup>1</sup> and the report was published in February 2012.<sup>2</sup> I gave both written and oral evidence<sup>3</sup> on behalf of CMF.

Its main conclusion was that 'Christians in the UK face problems in living out their faith and these problems have been mostly caused and exacerbated by social, cultural and legal changes over the past decade.'

Key developments in 2013 have further underlined this reality.

Two British Christians who refused to act contrary to conscience lost their legal battle at the European Court of Human Rights in May in a move that demonstrates that under British law 'gay rights' now trump 'conscience rights' when the two conflict.<sup>4</sup>

Gary McFarlane and Lillian Ladele had their appeals to the Strasbourg court rejected in January and had sought to resolve the matter in the court's Grand Chamber, its final arbiter. However, judges at the court rejected their request, in effect ending the legal battle.<sup>5</sup>

Ladele, 52, a local authority registrar, was disciplined by Islington council in London for refusing to register civil partnerships for gay couples. Islington accepted that it had enough registrars to provide a civil partnership service to the public without requiring Miss Ladele's involvement. But managers at the council refused her request, and demanded that she carry out civil partnership registrations against her will.

McFarlane, 51, a Bristol relationship counsellor, was dismissed by the charity 'Relate' for saying he might object to counselling same-sex couples about their sex lives. His dismissal for gross misconduct was on principle and it was irrelevant whether he could have been accommodated. A dismissal for gross misconduct is the most severe sanction available to an employer.

In both these cases reasonable accommodation could have been made, but the respective employers decided instead, backed by the law, to put these two employees in an impossible situation. At a stroke this puts at risk the job of any employee objecting to helping homosexual couples in activities they believe to be wrong (eg celebrating a civil partnership, adopting a baby, having sexual counselling etc).

Whilst neither Ladele nor McFarlane were

healthcare workers, the same principles will certainly apply to doctors, nurses and others who find themselves in similar moral dilemmas.<sup>6</sup>

The decision of the Grand Chamber has understandably prompted calls for more robust protections to be put in place for Christians in the Government's Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Bill<sup>7</sup> but at the time of writing, with the bill about to pass unamended through both houses of parliament, this is looking increasingly unlikely.

If this latter bill goes through, those who refuse to endorse or recognise gay marriage (eg teachers, council workers, healthcare workers) could also find their jobs to be at risk.

However, it is not all bad news. The General Medical Council's new guidance on 'Personal Beliefs and Medical Practice' (PBMP),<sup>8</sup> published in March, recognised a doctor's right to conscientious objection to certain procedures<sup>9</sup> and gave scope for sensitive faith discussions within the consultation.<sup>10</sup>

However it applied a very narrow scope to the conscience clause on participation in abortion, holding that it only applied to those directly involved in the procedure.

Ironically the GMC may now have to modify this guidance in the light of a court ruling in a case involving two Glasgow Catholic midwives in which the judge found that 'the right of conscientious objection extends not only to the actual medical or surgical termination but to the whole process of treatment given for that purpose'.<sup>11</sup>

In a Britain increasingly hostile to Christian faith and values, Christian doctors need to be aware of where they stand before an evolving law so that they can prepare for conflict, show courage in the face of fire and also work hard to ensure that unjust laws and regulations do not go unchallenged.

The Bible tells us that 'everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted'.<sup>12</sup> It is part and parcel of following Christ and should not surprise us.

As Christians contemplating possible conflicts we need, like the prophet Daniel and his friends<sup>13</sup> and the Apostles,<sup>14</sup> to draw a line in the sand and not be intimidated.

But we also need to trust God and leave the eventual outcome in his hands knowing that, whether we are vindicated or condemned by others, he will be glorified.

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#### references

1. [bit.ly/MVVISz](http://bit.ly/MVVISz)
2. [bit.ly/JkNkOk](http://bit.ly/JkNkOk)
3. [bit.ly/LTurSK](http://bit.ly/LTurSK)
4. [bit.ly/t1vw39A](http://bit.ly/t1vw39A)
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11. [bit.ly/16dIDAM](http://bit.ly/16dIDAM)
12. 2 Timothy 3:12
13. Daniel 1:8, 3:16-18, 6:10
14. Acts 5:29