

Equality loophole 'allows culture of abuse' at church

Kaya Burgess
Religious Affairs Correspondent

The Church of England should be stripped of its exemptions under the Equality Act to help it to stamp out a culture of abuse, homophobia and sexism, a serving bishop has said.

Under the 2010 act, the church as a religious institution has special permission to insist that those it appoints are Christians, but can also discriminate over sex, sexuality, marital history and gender identity if they conflict with "strongly held religious convictions".

These exceptions should be scrapped, the Bishop of Buckingham has told *The Times*, for the established church to adhere to the law of the land. This includes allowing priests to conduct same-sex weddings, he said.

The Right Rev Dr Alan Wilson, 62, also set out seven failings in the church's safeguarding policies, warning that despite "good intentions" they did not provide survivors with enough protection from abuse.

The Archbishop of Canterbury faced a protest from sexual abuse victims outside Canterbury Cathedral last week. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse said it would ask if the Anglican church had a "culture of secrecy" and if its "approach towards sex and sexuality" had played a part.

"If the church were far more observant of the Equality Act, then deep structures of abuse, homophobia and sexism would not be embedded in the church in the way they are," the bishop said.

Dr Wilson was the only serving bishop to sign a letter sent by more than 20 retired bishops this year condemning the church's House of Bishops for failing to reflect the voice of gay people in its report on same-sex relationships, which was later rejected by the General Synod.

Asked if the act should be amended, he said: "Yes. The Equality Act is used as an accountability standard in modern Britain. It describes how we understand public accountability in

every institution except the church. That does seem quite extraordinary."

A document approved by the House of Bishops in 2013 said that the church could discriminate against candidates for parish roles, mainly clergy, based on sex and sexuality, and could insist that they were "not a transsexual" and were not married to a divorcee with a living ex-spouse. Archbishops said this year that appointments for bishops should proceed "as if the act applied" but said that the Crown Nominations Commission could vote to use exemptions.

Dr Wilson said a result of the exemptions was that "very few people in the church actually understand how to operate equalities legislation". He said: "It's in Romans 13," a Bible passage that states: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities." He said priests should be able to conduct same-sex weddings with objectors able to decline on religious grounds.

Asked about abuse, Dr Wilson said: "I think the church needs to rethink the whole safeguarding thing." He said the stock response was still to "hide behind the sofa and call the lawyers".

He set out seven improvements, including mandatory reporting of abuse disclosures; an independent safeguarding body; an overhaul of the "clergy discipline measure"; better pastoral support for survivors; an anonymous reporting system; better liability insurance; and more pastoral care for alleged abusers, following a number of suicides.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, said that the church was working hard to put right a "legacy of failure" and added: "This is one of the things I am most aware of and ashamed by." He said the church "constantly engages" with victims and said that new rules mean "any clergy person who fails to report a disclosure of abuse is liable to disciplinary action". The Bishop at Lambeth, the Right Rev Tim Thornton, told protesters on Friday: "I want to say on behalf of the archbishop we are deeply, deeply sorry for the abuse that has happened."

Heath PCC wants review into his own police force

Fiona Hamilton Crime Editor

Wiltshire's police and crime commissioner has acknowledged that there should be an independent review of the force's inquiry into allegations of sexual abuse by Sir Edward Heath.

In June Angus McPherson, a Conservative, said that he was in discussions with Mike Veale, his chief constable, about how to bring about a review, perhaps by a retired judge, of the inquiry into the former prime minister who died in Salisbury in 2005.

Last week Mr Veale defended the £15million inquiry, Operation Conifer, and said that a review led by a judge would not be cost effective. Yesterday he told a newspaper that he had been told "the establishment will get you".

Mr McPherson, whose job is to hold Mr Veale to account, appeared open to the idea of an inquiry in June when he wrote to Lord Campbell-Savours in reply to his concerns that Heath's reputation was being "traded". "I am, however, in agreement with you that an

independent review of the evidence, perhaps by a retired judge, is required," Mr Veale wrote. "I am in discussions with the chief constable as to how this can be brought about."

Operation Conifer's summary report concluded that seven allegations of sexual abuse would have led to Heath being interviewed under caution. Its findings are to be sent to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse [IICSA], but its remit is such that it will not be able to evaluate any merits or flaws in the police investigation.

Yesterday Mr McPherson said that he had changed his mind about the prospect of a retired judge, and IICSA was the right place to send the report.

Heath's supporters want a retired judge to test the claims in the way that Sir Richard Henriques evaluated Operation Midland, the Met's inquiry into allegations of VIP abuse. The Midland complainant, "Nick", will learn soon if he is to be charged with perverting the course of justice.

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