



British Gov't: Closed Communion Means Brethren Church Not a Charity

The British government is attacking a Christian church because it enforces its doctrine. The government's [Charity Commission has ruled](#) that the [Plymouth Brethren Church](#), which does not permit outsiders to receive communion, is not eligible to be called a charity for tax purposes. Apparently, maintaining rules for who may partake in religious rituals is discrimination, and thus makes a church ineligible to be called charitable.



The question is what the move means for other churches, most notably the Catholic Church, which forbids Holy Communion to anyone but Catholics in a state of grace. Chillingly, the commission explained to the Brethren that religion wasn't really something intended for "public benefit."

No Charitable Status

The Christian Institute, which has taken up the Brethren's case, reports that it received notice of the decision by letter. According to the Institute, elders from the Plymouth Brethren gave evidence on the matter to a parliamentary select committee last week:

During the evidence a letter from the Commission's head of legal services emerged claiming that churches cannot be assumed to be acting for the public good.

It said: "This decision makes it clear that there was no presumption that religion generally, or at any more specific level, is for the public benefit, even in the case of Christianity or the Church of England."

Frighteningly, the Commission has been attacking the Brethren Church for seven years, the Institute reported, and "began after the Commission denied charitable status to one of the Brethren group's churches in Devon."

The [Institute](#) quoted a spokeswoman for the charity's bureaucrats:

The application [by the Brethren] was not accepted on the basis that we were unable to conclude that the organisation is established for the advancement of religion for public benefit within the relevant law.

The government took up its crusade against the 16,000-member Brethren Church because it will not allow non-members to receive its version of communion. That means Brethren "services are not open to all, a charge which the Brethren deny," [LifeSiteNews reported](#). "The Brethren say that their public services are offered to everyone regardless of religious affiliation."

"If it is upheld, the rule could be extended to the Catholic Church which also officially restricts Communion reception to members," said LifeSite. Catholics also refuse Holy Communion to anyone who is not a Catholic and to any Catholics in a state of mortal sin, such as pro-abortion British politicians. The Church teaches that the [Eucharist contains](#) the actual body and blood of Christ, and the soul of the



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communicant must be spotless. If the commission's edict applies to the Plymouth Brethren, the question would be why it does not apply to the Catholic Church.

Defenders

Two members of Parliament have defended the Brethren. The first is [Charlie Elphicke](#), who called the attack on the church "anti-religion," [LifeSiteNews reported](#). Elphicke, a member of the committee that uncovered the letter from the commission, told members of the Brethren that the charity bureaucrats "are committed to the suppression of religion and you are the little guys being picked on to start off a whole series of other churches who will follow you there."

Another member of parliament, conservative [Bernard Jenkin](#), explained a larger purpose in the government's attack on the Brethren, said LifeSite:

"The Commission seems to be using the group as a test case to establish the meaning of the public benefit requirement in charity law," he said.

"Picking a relatively vulnerable organisation and putting you through huge time and expense is a rotten way to decide what charity law means," Jenkin said.

Christianity on Decline in Britain

The government's opposition to the Brethren is hardly less than that of the British people to Christianity in general, although the opposition of the latter is more passive, research shows. The British simply don't go to church.

[According to Christianity Today](#), citing the research of a top expert on Christianity in Britain, the faith is dying in the U.K. Data from [Peter Brierley](#) predict a steady decline in the number of professing Christians in the years to come. "In 2000 there were 3.5 million churchgoers, a number which has fallen to 2.9 million in 2010," *Christianity Today* reported. Brierley "warned that if present trends continue, church attendance in Britain will drop to 2.6 million by 2015 and 2.3 million by 2020."

The figures [at Brierley's website](#) are a little higher than those in *Christianity Today*, but not by much: Only 4.6 percent of the British population, some 2.6 million, will be Christians in 2020. The magazine noted of Brierley, "He painted a harrowing picture of the decline in attendance across English counties in the last 12 years," adding,

While in 1998, all but five counties in England had a churchgoing population of at least 6 per cent, today there are only 12 English counties with that figure and there are seven counties with a churchgoing population of less than 4.5 per cent. He predicted that almost all counties would have a churchgoing population of less than 4.5 per cent by 2020.

He said the drop in attendance had come about because there was less evangelism. While in 1990, there were 120,000 conversions and 60,000 deaths, in the last year there were only 80,000 conversions and 120,000 deaths.

Brierley's figures show that the young people present the most pressing problem. "While 60 per cent of British people are not in the church, that figure rises to around 80 per cent among the under-15s and around 75 per cent among 15 to 29-year-olds," the [website reported](#). "The loss of young people is especially serious. In the 2020s, many churchgoers will die out," Brierley warned.

Brierley says 59 percent of churches in England have "no members between the ages of 15 and 19."

The government's attack isn't much of a surprise for a country where Christianity is waning. One



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member of parliament in Britain [has suggested](#) that churches which refuse to perform homosexual marriage be denied the right to perform legal marriages for heterosexuals.

Photo of British Parliament building



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