

Church of England faces a fresh blow with the loss of leading role in prisons

Richard Ford Home Correspondent

The Church of England could lose its role as head of religion in jails under a plan to open the post to other faiths.

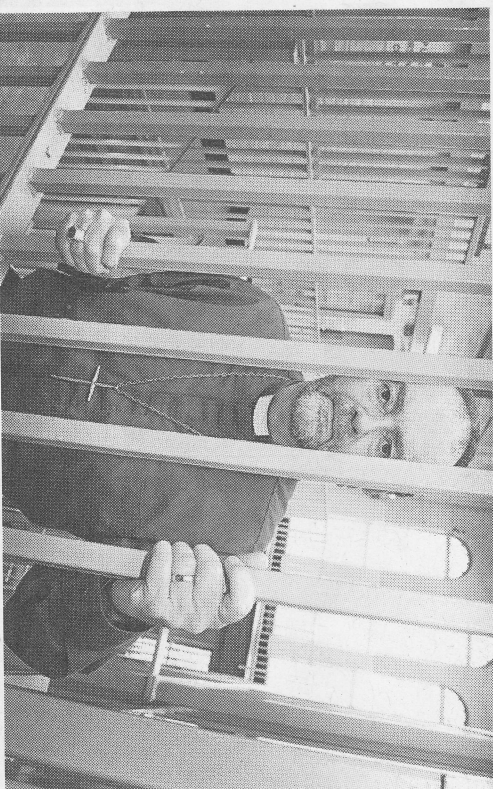
Opponents of such a radical step will see it as a further erosion of the influence of the Church and its relationship with the State. The Bishop of Liverpool, who is also bishop for prisons, is understood to be one of those who is unhappy at the proposal, which is being discussed at the Ministry of Justice.

One retired bishop said that there would be "grief" among some Church of England clergy at the idea of allowing applicants from all faiths to seek the job of Chaplain-General of the Prison Service.

He said that there were people who believed that greater co-operation among all faiths in jails had led to the loss of a strong Christian ethos in prisons. But he said that the Church of England could not hold on to the post of Chaplain-General for ever.

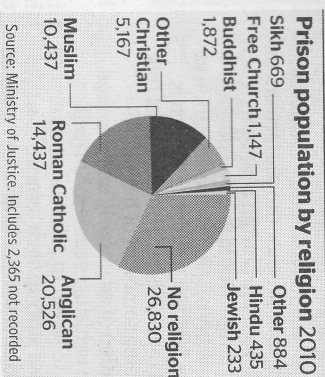
"Will there be some grief at the passing of our hold on this office? There will be some people who think about it in that way," he said. But he added, "It cannot be a non-discussible topic."

The Chaplain-General develops policy for faith matters in the 144 jails in England and Wales, spreads good practice and handles complaints and disagreements, particularly rows over



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The Bishop of Liverpool at the city's prison: unhappy at the planned change



the provision of space to worship in prisons.

Many believe that giving the job to a non-Anglican is a logical development of the multi-faith manner in which religion is conducted in jails in England and Wales.

James Beekford, Professor Emeritus at the University of Warwick, said: "Resistance to such far-reaching change would certainly be intense in some quarters, but a good case could be made for thinking that the religious diversity of the prison population of

England and Wales should be reflected in the choice of a Chaplain-General."

The Ministry of Justice is considering the change after the retirement late last year of the Venerable William Noble, who had been Chaplain-General of the service for ten years.

Discussions about allowing non-Anglicans to apply for the job have been taking place in the Ministry of Justice for several weeks but no firm conclusion has been reached. Officials are understood to be anxious not to provoke controversy and are focused on not upsetting the hierarchy of the Church of England.

The Bishop of Liverpool, the Right Rev James Jones, did not wish to talk about the matter. But in a statement he said that the Church of England was being fully consulted.

Sources in the Prison Service said that there were a number of Roman Catholic and Muslim clerics in senior positions in the prison chaplaincy who would be eligible for the post. Ahtsham Ali, the current Muslim adviser to the service, is not believed to be interested in the job.

Under the 1952 Prison Act every prison must have an Anglican chaplain. They are assisted by more than 100 other Christian chaplains and 200 full and part-time imams. Those with no religion made up the biggest group among the 85,002 prisoners in 2010.

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Hindus 'bullied to quit ahead of temple vote'

Ruth Maclean

A council leader is under investigation for trying to replace her Hindu councillors with Christian ones ahead of a planning decision on a controversial Hindu temple. Ann John, the leader of the ruling Labour council in Brent, northwest London, is accused of instructing four of her Hindu councillors to vote against planning permission for the Sai Baba temple and trying to replace them when they refused.

One of the four, who did not want to



Planning dispute: Ann John denies colleagues' claims

be named, said: "I was utterly humiliated by her. She bullied me and blackmailed me. She wanted to have me out of the planning committee and replace me with a Christian guy. It's nothing personal — it's my being Hindu. I was in favour of the temple. It has everything to do with my being Asian."

The council's standards committee has now decided that there is a case and an investigation has begun.

Ms John said: "It's rubbish and I've got nothing to hide. As far as I'm concerned — bring it on."