

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

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FROZEN OUT BY POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

In January this year Birmingham University's Evangelical Christian Union was banned from using Student Union Guild rooms and facilities. It also had its bank accounts frozen by Guild authorities after refusing, on religious grounds, to make politically-correct changes to its charitable constitution.

The Students Union at Birmingham University wanted to impose one of its own leaders onto the Christian Union (CU) executive, to insist on the CU opening up its membership to people of all faiths and beliefs, and instructed the Christian Union to change its constitution. The Guild raised concern at the words 'men' and 'women', as these could be seen as excluding transsexual/transgender persons.

However, these impositions conflict with a Vice-Chancellor's report, *Extremism and Intolerance on Campus*, which advises Universities that '...some clubs or societies to have restricted eligibility, say on religious or nationality grounds. Otherwise, it could be open to a group hostile to the club or society to join and take it over in a way that would be quite wrong. But we urge care in this area.'

The Christian Union instructed solicitors who have advised the Guild that unless funds are returned, and a democratic way forward can be found, they will be forced to issue court proceedings against them.

Pod Bhogal, communications director of the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF), to which BCU is affiliated, said at the time: 'In all our years of working with hundreds of HE establishments, this action by Birmingham's Guild is unique.' Six months on and little has changed.

While the freezing of bank accounts may be a unique feature of this ban, other Christian Unions have been banned or have faced bans in similar circumstances in recent years. For example, Warwick CU was banned for two years in 2002 because a homosexual student was told he could never become president of the CU. In 2004 Hull University's UCCF-affiliated CU was banned from

the Students Union because it refused to allow non-Christians to run the CU. It was later reinstated after threatened High Court action. Also in 2004, the Christian Union and the Christian Medics group at University College, London, were banned from the SU on a spurious technicality associated with their affiliation to UCCF. Again, reinstatement followed a legal challenge.

In most of these cases the root cause driving the bans appears to have been hostility to the proclamation of the gospel. Thankfully, current laws protect our witness, but they are under challenge and we must be ever watchful and active.

Peter Fearnley

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