

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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STREET-PREACHING IN BRITAIN: THE FREEDOM IN PRACTICE

Over the past three years street-preaching by the Open Air Mission has been challenged in at least 15 different places around the country. These incidents have often required follow-up phone calls, emails or letters to appropriate local authorities. Sometimes the complaint has been over the message we preach, but often it has centred upon the display boards we use. We find these to be extremely useful in our witness as they provide a focal point, advertise free literature and show Bible verses and the headings of our messages.

In every one of those 15 cases the authorities have had to back down when they realised that:

- a) we were acting in a lawful way and
- b) we were not just going to disappear

Perhaps for too long, Christians have backed down at the first whiff of trouble instead of making a stand for the Lord when we have had a legitimate right to do so.

Most town centre pedestrianised areas are part of the public highway, where no permission is needed, either to preach, hand out tracts or witness to people one-to-one. We can evangelise very directly, very simply and very cheaply, if we have the will to do so.

OAM has always sought to avoid asking for permission to preach. This has prevented our being put under the authority of a Council who, although they may say 'yes' to our being there today, may well decide tomorrow to change their minds.

Some Councils have mooted the idea of setting aside a designated area for preachers, but the problem with having to accept this is that their chosen spot is not likely to be where most of the people are to be found.

If we put ourselves under someone's authority, then it is very difficult to go against what they may ask of us. For as long as the law is on our side we should go out with confidence without feeling the need for anyone's permission.

What has turned out to be of tremendous help has been the suggestion of our friends at the Christian Institute in 2007 that we should ask a solicitor to write a letter to the Open-Air Mission setting out not only our rights, but also our responsibilities before the law. All of our 14 full-time and 35 associate evangelists carry a copy of this letter¹ and it has proved to be invaluable, not least because it has shown Council officials that we have taken these issues seriously. A copy can be down-loaded either from the Institute's website www.christian.org.uk or from the OAM website www.oamission.com.

In two of the above cases, we enlisted the further help of the Christian Institute, who wrote strong letters on our behalf. As a result, in both cases the Councils involved agreed to allow our evangelism to go on unhindered. We are thankful to the Lord for the Christian Institute's legal expertise and the support they have been to us.

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It is very easy, when someone challenges us, to react 'in the flesh.' However, the Lord Jesus never did this and, as his representatives, neither should we. Public officials may be antagonistic towards us and we may feel justified in responding in kind. However, the danger is that this will enflame a situation and not only that, it will also be a bad witness. Yes, we are to exercise our rights and at times we have to do so firmly. But that never excuses bad manners or bad tempers. Proverbs 15:1 says, '*A soft answer turns away wrath*'. On numerous occasions we have seen the effectiveness of these words in action. It can have a totally disarming effect to speak in a friendly way. It can also be very helpful to tell someone our first name and ask for his or hers, and try to conclude any discussion with a warm handshake.

One thing we must be prepared for when we 'stand up' and 'stand out' for the Lord, is that false accusations may be made against us. Late last year one of our evangelists was approached by the police and told that someone had complained about him preaching in a very aggressive way and further suggested that he had made homophobic comments. Actually, he hadn't even done any preaching that day. He had only chatted personally with a few individuals as he stood near his display board. Thankfully, the police officer who came to investigate realised that '*someone obviously has it in for you*' and decided to take no further action.

More and more we are finding that our view of homosexuality is the subject being used to challenge the legitimacy of our message. Called to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves, our approach is not to focus on any one particular sin. We may mention sexual sin from time to time as part of a list of many other sins, but it seems desirable to avoid focusing on an issue that we know at best will raise hackles and at worst will provoke deep antagonism.

We know that the gospel is an offence. Our pluralistic society likes to pride itself on how tolerant it is. However, in reality it is not so tolerant of those who want to speak up and suggest there is only one God who has revealed Himself in one book, which points to one Saviour. These precious truths are becoming increasingly incompatible, especially with the influential secularists and liberals, who just want Christians to keep quiet. How we need the Lord's strength to make sure we don't accede to their wishes.

'Overwhelmingly the law is still our friend and we need to communicate that to those who may try and hinder us'

At the same time, how we need the Lord's grace to ensure we don't add to that gospel offence, in anything we say or anything we do. Instead, may we always be those who speak the truth in love!

It is not an easy thing to stand among those with no love for the Lord and tell them of their need of him. It is certainly not easy when police officers, or CPSOs (Community Police Support Officers) or town centre managers approach us and say we have to stop what we are doing.

Overwhelmingly the law is still our friend and we need to communicate that to those who may try and hinder us.

Andy Banton, Director, The Open-Air Mission

The above was published in The Bulletin [March 2010]

'What the legal letter contains

The letter carried by OAM preachers, and available on the Christian Institute and OAM web sites, contains information and advice in connection with the following:

- The need to take account of whether any by-laws apply to the chosen location
- Whether the preacher or those with him are causing an obstruction of the highway (if there is a clear danger, the authorities can remove obstructions immediately)
- The need to demonstrate 'reasonableness,' based on 'amenity' and 'public safety' considerations.

The following are some sensible considerations:

- Use temporary displays, enabling easy removal
- Displays should not interfere with other street furniture or signs
- Minimise obstruction by ensuring a good width for pedestrians to pass by

- Don't block pedestrian visibility
- Being sensitive to other reasonable needs of the area
- Avoiding areas of highly-concentrated pedestrian flow
- Be sensitive to those with mobility disabilities who may need to negotiate any obstruction
- Keep boards stable
- Ensure no damage is done to the fabric of the highway
- Remove all displays at the end of the day
- Limit the duration of any display
- Complying with requests from others in the area, for example shop owners

Other issues covered are nuisance, human rights, the distribution of printed materials (allowed without permission *for the purposes of a religion or belief* under The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005), and reacting, in a spirit of cooperation but without conceding proper legal freedoms, to guidelines and codes of practice sometimes introduced by Councils to 'manage' on-street activity.

Salt and Light Papers is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.

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