
Comment

Public scourging of Presbyterian minister shames intolerant Church

Just when you thought the Presbyterian Church's handling of the same-sex issue could not get worse, it has humiliated one of its few female ministers by revealing her U-turn on the issue and by having its commission's ruling read out during her Sunday service - Alf McCreary writes.

The Reverend Christina Bradley, the German-born minister of Armagh Road Presbyterian Church in Portadown, expressed broad support for the Yes vote in the Irish referendum.

She described the result as compassionate and said: "This warm-heartedness is good to see in a world which often is a cold place, as much for women in leadership as it is for gay and lesbian people in the churches. I welcome the Yes vote."

The matter was taken up almost immediately by the Armagh Presbytery, which formed a special commission to consider Rev Bradley's views. It duly reported that: "Mrs Bradley confirmed to the Presbytery that she fully accepts the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith that marriage is to be between one man and one woman."

It also confirmed the Rev Bradley accepted her welcoming of the vote was "open to misinterpretation" and said she "had no intention of bringing the Church into disrepute".

Having verbally caned one of its female ministers, the Presbytery then rubbed salt into the wounds by reading out its findings to her home congregation while she silently looked on.

This is further evidence of a hardline swing in the Presbyterian Church, where the conservatives have virtually taken over and where free speech is endangered by what some call the Presbyterian thought police.

Technically, Rev Bradley was unwise to contradict fundamental Presbyterian teaching in such a direct way, but she is well-known as an

independent thinker, and, in a democratic society, she is entitled to her views.

Instead of the Church taking a wiser course by talking to Christina Bradley at the next meeting of the Presbytery, its members chose to take a hard approach as a warning to anyone else who dared to step out of line.

By doing so the Armagh Commission has flown in the face of the honoured Presbyterian tradition of dissent and free speech, and the Presbyterian Church at large is much the poorer for it.

This hard line, which threatens to reduce the Church to merely a conservative holy huddle, is evidenced in other ways.

Another example of the Presbyterians' current lack of breadth - and plain good manners - was the vote taken in the last Assembly not to send a representative to the next General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. This is because the Scottish Church voted to allow people in same-sex partnerships to serve as ministers and deacons in congregations which accepted them as such.

The vote to boycott was ill-judged, childish and counter-productive. It shows how far our once-great Irish Presbyterian Church, so famed for its

toleration and community leadership, has travelled along the road of intolerance of any kind of verbal or theological dissent.

The way the Church has treated Christina Bradley is the latest evidence of this unfortunate trend, and it is no surprise that many people are now questioning the ethos of a Church in which the rigid adherence to its laws seems more important than compassion, love and understanding of Christ, who formed the Church in the first place.

The trouble is that the Presbyterian situation will probably get worse. There is no harder heart than that of the hidebound Christian who believes that God is always and entirely on his or her side - whatever the issue.

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CNI footnote -

A Presbyterian minister Rev [David Latimer](#) has described the treatment of Rev Bradley as totalitarian. Minister at First Derry Presbyterian, he asked “are we on the verge of totalitarianism where everyone is expected to toe the line . . . I

don't think from my reading of scripture and my everyday living as a Christian Minister that the church should be seeking to crush or silence those that might be seeing things differently."

Speaking on the BBC Northern Ireland *Talkback* programme, he said "I just love the historic record we have as Presbyterians of dissenting, of speaking out and I want to speak out in defence of Christina Bradley".

He said that "in using that word 'totalitarian', I'm looking at states who would have exercised that clamping down and closing in on freedom of speech and the right to express oneself that's foreign to Presbyterianism, which prides itself on being democratic if not the democratic church among all churches".