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Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
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I was seriously concerned to read the recent cover article in the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)* about the Church of England's plans significantly to expand its role in state education, and your apparent support for these plans.¹ In particular, I have concerns about the reported plans to allow community schools to convert to 'faith' Academies in one step. I am writing to you to detail those concerns and ask for further clarification about the government's role in assisting the Church of England potentially to become the largest provider of state education.

The Church of England is an organisation that represents a tiny percentage of the population, with only 20% regarding themselves as belonging to it in the latest British Social Attitudes Survey and only 18% of that 20% (that is, 3.6% of the population) self-reporting as going to Church once a month.² Actual attendance figures suggest true attendance is less than half of this.³ In addition, surveys consistently show that 'faith' schools are extremely unpopular with the public, with most people believing the government should not be funding them.⁴ For example, a 2010 survey by ICM for Channel 4 found 59% of the public endorsing the very strong statement that 'Schools should be for everyone regardless of religion and the government should not be funding faith schools of any kind'.

And yet at the same time, the Archbishop of Canterbury is now proposing that the Church may become the largest provider of secondary education in the country,⁵ not because of any sudden increase in religious belief (in fact that continues to decline) but because a consequence of the Academies programme is that many newly independent schools find themselves looking for support from a larger organisation – and being far and away the largest and the oldest of 'providers', the Church of England is easily the best equipped to be that organisation.

Further to the above, the TES article states that the Department for Education is supporting this takeover. We would like to know, is it true that the Department are helping draw up plans to allow community schools to convert to 'faith' Academies in one simple step? As you know, we have been working with civil servants in your Department on various topics of related interest. However, the issue of the Church potentially becoming the largest provider of state-funded schools, supported by

¹ *An answer from above?*, TES, 23 December 2011 – <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6158763>

² *British Social Attitudes 28th Report*, December 2011

³ *English Church Census 2005*

⁴ See opinion polls in the Accord Coalition's *Databank of Independent Evidence on Faith Schools*, December 2011, in particular the 2010 survey by ICM for Channel 4, 2005 ICM poll for the Guardian and 2009 YouGov poll for Accord – <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Databank-of-Independent-Evidence-on-Faith-Schools-Dec-20111.pdf>

⁵ *C of E vows to be the biggest and the best*, TES, 30 September 2011 – <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6114406>

the government, is not an issue that has been raised with us before, nor have we been alerted to it or consulted about it.

There is ample evidence that state-funded 'faith' schools are socially and religiously divisive, and we have serious concerns that any expansion would see increasing numbers of parents, pupils and staff who chose an inclusive school find themselves in a 'faith' school, or subsequently left without inclusive community alternatives to the 'faith' schools in their area. So we would also like to ask whether you intend to put any protections in place for existing pupils and teachers at schools that the Church takes over – or to ensure that every parent who wants their child to attend an inclusive school has that option.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Copson
Chief Executive