

# **BHA BRIEFING: Plans to expand the number of Church of England schools – background note**

**6 January 2012**



## **Briefing from the British Humanist Association (BHA)**

**In the past, it has been extremely rare for inclusive community schools to become ‘faith’ schools – something that was not an easy process.** Prior to the Academies Act 2010, in order for a community school to convert to a ‘faith’ school, the school had to close and re-open as a brand new establishment. The local authority would have to support such a change, schools did not desire to convert, and so it would only happen a handful of times a year.

**However, there is no such restriction on inclusive Academies, without a religious character, changing to become ‘faith’ schools.** A community school that converts to be an Academy only then needs to hold a consultation if it wants to also change to be a ‘faith’ school, and many community schools, upon converting to be Academies, find themselves looking for support from a larger organisation in place of the local authority. **Being far and away the biggest and the oldest education provider, the Church of England is easily the best equipped to be the organisation that replaces the local authority.**

In September, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said that ‘many, many’ former community schools are looking to join the Church of England, and that *‘We are looking at the middle-term future, where the Church of England will be quite conceivably the largest sponsor and provider of secondary education in this country, which is a rather startling and breathtaking proposal.’*<sup>1</sup>

### **Now, three things are being proposed:**

1. **Community schools converting to be CofE ‘faith’ Academies:** The government is now working with the Church to change the rules to make things even easier, and allow the consultations on converting to an Academy and converting to a ‘faith’ school – which currently have to be separate – to be combined. With many, many schools converting, with converting schools having to hold a consultation regardless, and with the Church actively encouraging the practice, the result is that a large number community schools would be likely to become Church Academies. This change does not seem to us to require any primary legislation, and would allow schools to convert to any type of ‘faith’ school, not just to be Church of England schools.
2. **Academies gaining a Church ‘faith ethos’:** Furthermore, the Church is seeking to sponsor converted Academies that decide they do not want to formally take on a religious character, but would still like some organisational support. These schools will not legally be designated as having a religious character, but will nonetheless acquire a ‘faith ethos’, something not possible with maintained schools but possible for the first time with Academies and Free Schools. With a school with a ‘faith ethos’, the religious organisation will control the governing body, put its slant on some aspects of the curriculum – such as Sex and Relationships Education, and perhaps also put a genuine occupational requirement on some senior roles to share the faith of the school.

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<sup>1</sup> *Church of England looks to being ‘largest sponsor and provider of secondary education’ as BHA calls for dismantlement of the grip of Church on state*, BHA press release, 30 September 2011 – <http://www.humanism.org.uk/news/view/903>

Academies and Free Schools with a 'faith ethos' have existed for a number of years, however this would represent the first time that former community schools will be targeted to gain a 'faith ethos' – in the past, only brand new Academies fell into this category. It is the Church taking advantage of new opportunities presented as a result of the Academies Act 2010.

3. **'Secular' Academies entering into partnership with the Church:** The Church of England is also exploring possibilities where it can enter into formal partnerships with other Academies without a religious character that choose to remain independently run. Again, this wouldn't require any change in the law.

**Any changes to the rules that the government chooses to make to ease the conversion process would open the system up to all faith groups, not just the Church of England,** and all groups are already able to sponsor schools with a 'faith' ethos or enter into partnerships with them. The Roman Catholic Church, in particular, has over four and a half thousand schools, so is also well-placed to take control of a number of former community schools. In the *TES* article, a spokesperson for the Catholic Church says that *'We would not rule [such plans] out, but we will wait and see what happens with the Church of England and take it from there.'*

## **About the BHA**

The British Humanist Association (BHA) is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. It is the largest organisation in the UK campaigning for an end to religious privilege and to discrimination based on religion or belief, and for a secular state.

Our expertise lies in the 'religion or belief' equality strand, which includes non-religious beliefs such as Humanism, and how that strand relates to and intersects with other protected characteristics. We also work closely with others on wider equalities issues in a range of forums. The BHA is a member of the National Children's Bureau Sex Education Forum (SEF) and the Children's Rights Alliance for England.

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**January 2012**