

‘Sin of Racism’ Could Lead to Excommunication in This Denomination

The Church of England may dismiss clergy if they back political parties promoting the “sin of racism,” its bishops agreed on Tuesday in an unprecedented move by the mother church of the world’s 80 million Anglicans.

William Fittall, secretary general of the Church’s General Synod, said they would be disciplined if they joined or sought support for the British National Party or National Front, whose views the Church considers incompatible with its teachings.

It was the first time Church of England clergy have been banned from joining a political party.

The move is likely to be welcomed by many congregations in the worldwide Anglican Communion, particularly in Africa, where relations have been strained by differences over women bishops, gay clergy and other liberal reforms in western churches.

Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, spiritual leader of the world’s Anglicans, has faced an uphill struggle in his first year in office to re-unite the deeply divided Communion.

The ban on clergy or lay staff from joining the British National Party (BNP) and National Front is expected to come into force in July after a declaration by bishops is approved by the Church’s General Synod, its governing body.

“Support for either party, whether expressed privately or publicly, would be unbecoming or inappropriate conduct for clergy under the new provision,” Fittall said in a statement.

The decision came after European Parliament elections last month saw a surge in right-wing anti-immigration parties such as the UK Independence Party and France's National Front.

Cardinal Reinhard Marx, head of the COMECE group of Roman Catholic bishops conferences in the European Union, said after that vote that the "nationalistic and xenophobic" policies of such parties was "unacceptable for Christians."

BNP Scoffs at 'Excommunication'

The move by the Church of England does not mean the other Anglican churches have to follow suit because the Anglican Communion is not a single church but a family of independent national churches.

The General Synod urged the Church in 2009 to adopt a ban on links to the two parties that police and prison officers agreed on about a decade ago.

But the bishops did not agree to push ahead with affirming disciplinary action for party affiliation until receiving legal advice that this would not restrict clerics' free speech.

A Church spokesman said no current Anglican clergy were known to be active members of either group.

Outlining the reasons for the ban, the Church quoted from statements by the two parties published on their websites.

The BNP, a far-right party set up in 1982, said it would do all it could to stop immigration driving "indigenous British people" into a minority and halt "Islamic immigration ... as one of the most deadly threats yet to the survival of our nation."

The National Front described its mission as being to "ensure the survival and advancement of the White Race and the British Nation."

BNP spokesman Simon Darby said it was ridiculous that the Church had “excommunicated” the party and would back any clergy who faced action by the Church for their political views.

“The Church is more interested in putting out politically correct platitudes than following the lines of scripture and what is in the Bible. You can understand why people don’t go to church any more,” Darby said.

“It’s like the dark ages when people used to hunt witches.”

The National Front could not be immediately reached for comment by email or phone.

Editing by Tom Heneghan

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