



United We Stand?
***A report on current conflicts between Christian
Unions and Students' Unions***

Background

Disputes between Students' Unions (SUs) and Christian Unions (CUs) have a long history which spans decades. However there are currently a handful of CUs based in British Universities who are in very public disputes with SUs. These disputes have made national headlines. The issues of conflict have arisen, as they have in the past, from some of the procedures and activities undertaken by CUs. Some SUs feel that some CUs are at odds with the requirements of SU membership which CUs have agreed to abide by when affiliating to SUs.

There has been significant misreporting in the media of the actual details of the cases, and the issues involved. Factually incorrect allegations have also been made.¹ The terms 'political correctness' and 'banning' have been used to describe the attitudes and actions of SUs. The conflict has also frequently been portrayed as one of 'secular liberals' attacking Christians. There has been little acknowledgement that many Christians are involved in SUs and that many Christians at universities choose not to belong to CUs. Many Christians also belong to other Christian societies which enjoy fruitful relationships with SUs.

There is a genuine fear however amongst some CUs and some parts of the wider Christian community, that the freedom to express certain Christian beliefs is under threat. In a letter to *The Times* newspaper² several (mainly evangelical) Church of England Bishops, including the former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey, as well as representatives from Christian campaigning groups described the perceived actions of the various SUs as "intolerant and unlawful".

They suggested that Christian students were; "facing considerable opposition and discrimination in violation of their rights of freedom of expression, freedom of belief and freedom of association".

'Some commentators have also praised CUs and those backing them, suggesting that Christians are standing up for themselves and what they believe in the face of 'liberal dislike'.³

Ekklesia's investigation and research suggest that there is no overriding intent by SUs to ban or suppress Christianity or the preaching of the Christian faith. Many want to encourage CUs to be active and prominent members of Student life and engage fully with university institutions. They also seek the protection of Christians, as they do other religious groups on campus. Indeed, many SUs have Christians on their executives. The real issues are about the extent to which the resources and facilities of SUs should be used to support initiatives by CUs which some students find offensive, but also whether CUs have a right not to hold free and democratic elections to their executives, although they have joined SUs and agreed to abide by their principles.

¹ For example see 'Student union tactics are intolerant and unlawful', Letter to The Times, 24th November 2006 in which it is claimed that "there is no restriction imposed on who can and who cannot join the CU." There often is, in fact, a restriction. See for example the website of Heriott Watt CU which states: "to be a member of the Christian Union you have to be able to sign to say that you accept the doctrinal basis of the CU" http://www.heriotwattcu.co.uk/about_member.html

² 'Student union tactics are intolerant and unlawful', Letter to The Times, 24 November 2006 see also 'Bishops back student fight for religious freedom on campus' The Times, 24 November 2006

³ Minette Marrin 'Hallelujah, they're standing up for Jesus' The Sunday Times 19 November, 2006
<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,24391-2460047,00.html>

Ekklesia has identified significant common ground between the parties involved. At the heart of the controversies are desires for tolerance, integrity, inclusiveness, human rights, freedom of speech and freedom of religion. These values are being endorsed by those on both sides of the arguments, though there are differences about what they mean in practice and on the 'equalities agenda'.

This briefing offers a concise overview of the points of contention, an analysis, as well as recommendations for finding a way forward.

Why has Ekklesia undertaken this report?

As a think-tank Ekklesia has worked in the area of religion and public life since its formation in 2002. Its co-directors and associates have much longer experience in the area, coming from a wide variety of backgrounds. This year, Ekklesia published a book⁴ which amongst other things highlighted the issues and tensions surrounding university CUs and their relationship to SUs. It also located what was happening within a wider debate about the role of religion in public life.

Ekklesia has monitored the media coverage of the issues and the developing controversy and has an understanding of the theological issues involved for CUs. It has also had discussions with both the National Union of Students (NUS) (who represent SUs) and the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF), to which CUs are affiliated.

Ekklesia wishes to see such controversies addressed constructively and has a commitment to conflict transformation work. One of Ekklesia's directors was president of the Christian Union at the London School of Economics in the early 1990s, and has first hand experience of many of the issues that are raised by the current controversies.

Ekklesia is, moreover, an independent think tank which is not formally linked to any Christian body.

Ekklesia intends to update this report periodically as the situation develops. The paper will be available online at: www.ekklesia.co.uk

Christian Unions

Christian Unions were set up by a group external to universities, called the Universities and College Christian Fellowship (UCCF) in the 1930s. They operate in universities as well as other educational establishments throughout the country.

CUs came into existence after several groups left the Student Christian Movement (SCM). The disagreement was over 'doctrinal statements'. Such statements are yardsticks of what is considered 'correct belief'. SCM felt that doctrinal statements were not necessary or desirable for Christian groups in universities. The groups who formed UCCF felt that they were. CUs were therefore formed, based around such statements.

UCCF has four main sources of funding:

CUs - some CUs, though by no means all, contribute to central funds.

⁴ Jonathan Bartley, 'Faith and Politics After Christendom: the church as a movement for anarchy' (Paternoster, 2006)

Churches - around 10% of UCCF's income comes from churches, often from the budget allocated to support 'missions'.

Trusts - A number of charitable trusts have given support. According to UCCF this is "often in recognition of the strategic importance of Christian witness among students".⁵

Individuals - over 65% of UCCF's income comes from individual donors.

CUs are overseen by UCCF Staff Workers (CUSWs). These staff workers are employed on a full-time basis by UCCF to look after CUs.

UCCF is a founding member of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES). It comprises approximately 130 university CUs and 130 FE / sixth-form college CUs throughout the UK.

UCCF operates according to three core principles:⁶

- (i) That the Bible is central to its identity.
- (ii) That it is 'mission' driven - meaning it focuses on conversion through evangelism on campus.
- (iii) That it is committed to a particular doctrinal statement of belief.⁷

Included in the doctrinal statement are convictions that:

- a. "The Bible, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible Word of God. It is the supreme authority in all matters of belief and behaviour."
- b. "The whole of humankind is sinful and guilty, so that everyone is subject to God's wrath and condemnation"
- c. "Sinful human beings are redeemed from the guilt, penalty and power of sin only through the sacrificial death once and for all time of their representative and substitute, Jesus Christ, the only mediator between them and God. "
- d. "Those who believe in Christ are pardoned all their sins and accepted in God's sight only because of the righteousness of Christ credited to them; this justification is God's act of undeserved mercy, received solely by trust in him and not by their own efforts."

Whilst many Christians have no problems agreeing with such statements, a very considerable number do. These beliefs would be characterised by academics both within and beyond the churches as theologically "conservative evangelical". In particular the assertion that the Bible is both "infallible" and that in this form carries "supreme authority in all matters of belief and behaviour" would be disputed by many orthodox Christians.⁸ "Infallibility" is a concept rejected or omitted by most mainstream Christian denominations and by "open evangelicals". Catholics read the Bible in relation to the teaching of the church. Pentecostals and others read it in the context of a Spirit-impelled community. Anglicans and Methodists acknowledge tradition, reason and Christian experience as important sources of divine insight alongside the Bible. And even those who do adhere to 'infallibility' (a concept which theologians point out is

⁵ <http://www.uccf.org.uk/supporters/giving/index.php>

⁶ <http://www.uccf.org.uk/about/corevalues.php>

⁷ <http://www.uccf.org.uk/resources/general/doctrinalbasis/doctrinalbasis.php>

⁸ By 'orthodox' is meant simply those who accept the central tenets of the historic Christian faith.

a modern and extra-biblical one) disagree vigorously about what it says and what it means. Likewise the 'penal substitution' theory of atonement is not contained in the historic Christian creeds and is rejected or by-passed by much mainstream Christianity.

UCCF has no accurate numbers for the membership CUs but places an estimate of 10 – 20 thousand throughout the UK. This would mean that the average membership of a university CU would be somewhere in the region of 40-80 members.

Narrative evidence suggests that UCCF workers have discouraged CUs from getting involved or joining students' unions in the past, because in so doing they would often have to agree to abide by policies which they believe would conflict with the policies and procedures of CUs.

Students' Unions

Students' Unions (SUs) are autonomous associations of students which consist of the "generality" of students at a particular Further Education or Higher Education Institution. Most affiliate to the National Union of Students (NUS). The NUS has 500 constituent members from higher and further education establishments. Through Students' Unions the NUS represents approximately 5 million UK students (approximately 98% of all students). Individual SUs are also sometimes called Student Associations or Guilds.

Not all SUs operate with the same structures, policies and procedures. Some are much more decentralised due to college systems (e.g. Oxbridge). At other institutions the SU is the central body. Generally the SU provides entertainments for students, campaigns for student welfare, oversees the booking and renting of some rooms and also acts as an advocate for students in issues of discipline.

Membership of SUs by societies such as CUs, is voluntary.

For SUs there is an expectation that running a society requires some level of responsibility and the leadership of those societies are made aware that they can be held accountable for their group's actions. When difficulties may arise the SU will generally try to achieve a working agreement with a society and its leadership.

It is usually expected that societies draw up a constitution which informs the union of its practice and which guides the society in its work. These can be changed. Constitutions work to help and protect both the union and the society and help to ensure that no society is treated with greater or lesser preference.

SUs, particularly NUS affiliated ones, will strive to be equal opportunities organisations and therefore expect societies which affiliate to them to adhere to such principles.

Affiliation with an SU allows various benefits for a society. These may include:

- The opportunity to book rooms in which are under care of the Union for free or a reduced price
- The right to place notices on Union noticeboards
- Help with promotion of events through official union channels including society publications and a web page (either space on a main website or its space which may be maintained by the union)
- Stall and space at Freshers' Fayres

- A student union bank account
- Financial support

Other Religious University Groups

On most university campuses a number of Christian and other religious groups operate in addition to CUs. These may include:

Anglican chaplaincies
Baha'i societies
Baptist societies
Buddhist societies
Catholic chaplaincies
Catholic societies
Christian campaign groups
Christian music and drama groups
Christian graduate societies
Christians in science
Christians in sport
Ethnic Christian fellowships
Faith forums
Hindu societies
Islamic societies
Jains societies
Jehovah's Witnesses
Jewish societies
Krishna consciousness societies
Methodist societies
Orthodox societies
Religious cultural societies
Sikh societies
Student Christian Movement
Worship groups

In addition another Evangelical network of students operates called 'Fusion'.⁹ CUs have had ongoing disputes with a number of the groups listed above, including Fusion. Christian Chaplaincies have also often expressed reservations about CUs. CUs have been accused by other Christians, including university chaplains of being:

- (i) Extreme
- (ii) Dogmatic
- (iii) Anti-intellectual
- (iv) Intolerant
- (v) Oppressive

In a letter to *The Times*, one university chaplain described the CU network as; "representing the more extreme wing of evangelicalism, and is dogmatic and anti-intellectual in its approach. Its

⁹ See <http://www.fusion.uk.com/Group/Group.aspx?id=32186> for Fusion's doctrinal statement which does not need to be agreed upon by people who join cell groups.

enthusiasm for the Bible does not extend to scholarly or critical study of it, and it is intolerant of Christians with differing views.” He continued; “Their methods of recruitment are dubious, and the control they seek to exercise over their more vulnerable or insecure members can be oppressive. Many of us who have been teachers or chaplains in educational establishments have spent time counselling their casualties.”¹⁰ Not all would put it like this, but such concerns are not uncommon.

Campaigning groups

Since the most recent disputes between CUs and SUs began, a number of campaigning groups, (as well as high profile public figures), have taken up the cause of the CUs. These have by and large been Christian, and of a conservative evangelical character similar to Christian Unions. Some have put their name to letters of protest, and others have played an active part in launching campaigns to support CUs. Some are actively seeking funds for legal action.

The conflicts

Different CUs are coming into conflict with their University students' unions for different reasons and with different outcomes.

Birmingham

Following a routine audit of student groups in autumn 2005 the university's Guild of Students became aware that the Christian Union, among other societies (such as the Dance Society), was not abiding by the procedures it had agreed to as a member. Specifically the failure was in the area of its elections, constitutions and membership. There were concerns about the CUs transparency and accountability.

Examples cited included the election of the CU's leadership through a weekend of prayer rather than a ballot. Other problems related to the CU's refusal to let the Vice President of Student Activities and Development onto the leadership team of the group, which all official student groups agree to do. Concerns were also expressed about the restrictive membership of the group. The other 179 societies at the University (13 of which are religious, 6 of these being 'Christian' in character) were considered to meet the requirements

In December 2005 after lengthy dialogue, the CU was de-recognised by the Guild of Students. The Guild of Students is currently in dialogue with the Christian Union in an attempt to find a mutually acceptable resolution.

Exeter

A Christian student at Exeter University from the Orthodox tradition complained that he was unable to become involved in the CU because of the narrowness of its statement of faith. At the request of the Christian student a name change was proposed and voted on by the student body. The CU had to change its name to the more specific 'Evangelical Christian Union.'

¹⁰ 'Faith Unity and Free Speech' Letter to the Editor from Rev Alan Robson, The Times, 25 November 2006 see also 'What Should Christian Students Believe?' by Rev Stephen Laird, Anglican Chaplain and Honorary Lecturer in Theology and Religious Studies, University of Kent at Canterbury, on the chaplaincy web site:
<http://www.kent.ac.uk/chaplaincy/christianfocus/discussion.html>

A referendum amongst the students was subsequently held to determine whether the Evangelical Christian Union should be able to reverse the name change. The CU lost the referendum.

In October the Evangelical Christian Union's accounts were temporarily frozen, and their privileges as a Guild society removed, pending a full review into the society's Equal Opportunities policy. The Evangelical CU can still use the Guild's rooms but will be charged the standard rate for rooms or facilities within the Guild's jurisdiction.

A letter was sent to the SU, by the CU on 13th November 2006, stating that the CU was prepared to take legal action against the Guild.

Edinburgh

The CU's running of a course about sex and sexuality has been the point of contention at Edinburgh University. Students and the Student Association felt that it was not appropriate for university funds and resources to support such a course.¹¹

What Some of You Were by Christopher Keane is one of the texts recommended by the course. It tells the stories of "ex-gays" who have rejected the 'temptations' of homosexuality. It cites the case of Christopher, a "reformed homosexual", who says: "I shudder to think what may have happened to me if I had gone to a counsellor (or to a church) who had not upheld the Scriptures and had affirmed me in my homosexuality. If that had happened I may well have been dead from AIDS now." The book also comments on the characteristics of gay relationships, claiming that lifelong, quasi-marital fidelity in homosexual partnerships is a myth, contradicted by the facts. "The truth is that gay relationships are characterized more by promiscuity than by fidelity."

The University agreed that the course contravened its Equality and Diversity policy. The course is continuing to be taught, but in a private residence.

The CU has sent a letter to the University authorities stating that the students have taken legal advice and are prepared to take legal action.

Heriot-Watt University

Although media reports and campaign groups have sometimes implied otherwise, Heriot-Watt University's UCCF-affiliated CU has never been affiliated to Heriot-Watt University Students' Association (SA). The CU is currently seeking affiliation to the SA and is in dialogue with the SA. However, there is conflict as the Students' Association requires all affiliated societies not to restrict membership and to have a democratically elected leadership. CU committee members are not currently decided upon democratically, and every member of the CU is required to sign their doctrinal statement. This is stated on the CU's website: "...to be a member of the Christian Union you have to be able to sign to say that you accept the doctrinal basis of the CU" and "You are unable to serve on the committee unless you are a member".

The CU explains the situation further on its website: "The Christian Union is unable to affiliate to the Students' Union, because their constitution states that affiliated societies must not discriminate."

¹¹ 'Online students fight anti-gay Christian course', The Times, 15 October 2006

Similar to the case in Birmingham, Heriot Watt University SA has the same procedure and requirements for all student societies including religious based societies.

An evangelical Christian based society, called the Flunky Society, has in fact been affiliated to the Students' Association for a number of years. The Muslim Student Society is also an affiliated society of the SA.

On the 21st November, the CU sent a letter to the University authorities and the SA to state that they had taken legal advice, and that they were prepared to take legal action.

What do the CUs say in response?

CUs say that it is an issue of religious liberty for CUs to be entitled to the benefits of SU membership but at the same time many:

- (i) Require that all CU members sign their doctrinal statement.
- (ii) Require that all official speakers sign their doctrinal statement
- (iii) Appoint their own executives without free and open democratic elections.
- (iv) Reject any representative of the SU that would normally sit on every student society executive.¹²

They further point out that anyone is welcome to attend their meetings as a visitor, and ask questions, without signing their doctrinal statement.

Regarding the 'Pure' course at Edinburgh a spokesman from UCCF told *The Times* newspaper: "Surely it's completely reasonable for a Christian to believe what he or she believes and to say what he or she believes. I am perfectly happy for LGBT members and the gay community at large to be gay – I don't agree with it but I will defend their right to be gay." ¹³

"Remember that you choose your partner, it is a choice, and Christians should have a right to voice their beliefs and not be labelled homophobic." ¹³

So strongly do UCCF feel about the controversies they have said in a statement that they believe "ultimately, the fundamental freedom of all Christians in the UK could be at stake." ¹⁴

Campaigning

An added dimension to the conflict has been the intervention of campaign groups, in support of the CUs. Some of these groups have been watching the situation between CUs and SUs for a number of years.¹⁵

¹² 'UCCF Defends Christian Unions against University Bans' by Maria Mackay, Christian Today, 24 November 2006

<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/uccf.defends.christian.unions.against.university.bans/8467.htm>

¹³ 'Online students fight anti-gay Christian course', The Times, 15 October 2006

¹⁴ 'Freedom to Preach the Gospel Under Threat' UCCF Press Release

<http://www.uccf.org.uk/news/supportersnews.php?NewsID=1310>

¹⁵ See for example Christian Institute Press Release 'Hull Christian Union banned for being run by Christians' 30 March 2004

http://www.christian.org.uk/pressreleases/2004/march_30_2004.htm

To give an idea of the campaigning activities, below is an extract of the recommendations from an official email sent by one of the groups, to its supporters:

- *Use the letters pages of local/regional and national press. There will be an email address given on every letters page of your favourite newspaper. Write a letter in support of Christian students and their rights to freedom of speech etc. Keep it under 200 words, don't preach or attack, just explain the Christian point of view in a calmly reasoned manner. We particularly need letters in The Times/Telegraph/Daily Mail.*
- *Question Time (BBC Thursdays): Log on to www.bbc.co.uk/questiontime and click the button Send Your Questions. There is a facility now for anyone to submit questions which the panel may then be asked to answer. The chair, David Dimbleby and the production team will respond to a large number of questions about any one topic, i.e. Christian Students and their Freedoms.*
- *Any Questions: Log on to www.bbc.co.uk/anyquestions and click on the Contact Us button. Same as QT above, send a question for the panel to answer.*
- *If we get a mention on QT and AQ it will keep up the momentum, and even if letters don't get published in the press, it shows the press the level of feeling. If they have not covered the topic before, the newsroom may well decide to do so as editors respond to readers' concerns as they want to sell newspapers!*
- *Financial support for the work that is going on in the Universities cases is essential to enable that work to continue. Please consider making a donation to Christian Concern for Our Nation and express it to be for 'public litigation' work if you want to ensure that the money is used for cases such as those at Exeter, Edinburgh, Heriot-Watt and Birmingham. Make a donation at <http://www.christianconcernforournation.co.uk/donation.php>*

UCCF has also initiated its own campaign. This includes the production of a poster listing ways in which Christians and churches who sympathise can join in the fight for the CU's causes.

It repeats much of the same information as the email above but stresses another point of writing to the Queen as she has '*been a supporter of the historic Christian values of this nation*'¹⁶. The poster also contains the contact details of the principals of Edinburgh, Exeter and Birmingham Universities. It gives a basic outline with what needs to be covered in a letter of support for CUs.

Those speaking out on behalf of CUs have not always been materially accurate in their assertions. In their letter to *The Times*¹⁷, some campaigning groups and bishops claimed that there was "no restriction imposed on who can and who cannot join the CU." They further suggested; "The only restrictions limit the right to amend the constitution and select leaders to those who can affirm the core beliefs of the society." But there often is in fact a restriction imposed by CUs on membership. The website of Heriott Watt CU states for example: "to be a member of the Christian Union you have to be able to sign to say that you accept the doctrinal basis of the CU."¹⁸

¹⁶ <http://www.uccf.org.uk/events/downloads/poster.pdf>

¹⁷ 'Student union tactics are intolerant and unlawful', Letter to The Times, 24 November 2006

¹⁸ See http://www.heriotwattcu.co.uk/about_member.html

Questions which are raised

A number of questions are raised by the unfolding events, not least why, given the number of CUs but also other Christian Societies and indeed societies of other religions at universities, it is only a few CUs who appear to find themselves in these high profile disputes. Other religious groups, including many Christian groups have been able to work well with SUs, without conflict.

The particular contributing factors which make the situation with a handful of CUs different may be:

1. CUs are set up and operated by an external organisation, UCCF, which wants to maintain its control of their constitution and activities
2. CUs have become embroiled in a wider campaign involving Christian campaign groups with wider agendas
3. The CUs have a fundamental attachment to a particular doctrinal statement which is the major source of contention
4. The courses and materials that they distribute have been taken as particularly offensive by some students, including Christians
5. Opposition to them comes from other Christians, who accuse them of being too exclusive

These points warrant further discussion:

1. The influence of UCCF

Unlike many other university societies, CU's are influenced, and to a degree controlled, by an external organisation – UCCF. UCCF has hands-on involvement with CUs, and employs people to watch over them. They often provide the speakers for meetings, or at least provide approval of them. The primary agenda of UCCF is Evangelism and CUs are seen as a tool for achieving that goal. However, UCCF will lose control of CUs, if CUs become more autonomous through their free elections. Control will also be lost if Christians who are not from conservative evangelical traditions are admitted.

2. The wider campaign

As documented in the book by Ekklesia director Jonathan Bartley, *Faith and Politics After Christendom* the controversy over CUs is part of a much wider landscape. Many conservative Christians in the UK feel increasingly that their faith is 'under attack'. A wider 'negative' radicalisation' of such Christians has been identified. The situation in universities has been singled out by campaign groups for many years as a battleground in which Christianity must be 'defended'.

As reported in much of the mainstream media many CUs mentioned are seeking legal advice with the possibility of action against the SU with which they have come into conflict.¹⁹ Funding is already being raised for such legal battles.

¹⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/devon/6159456.stm>

3. Doctrinal statements

CUs were formed in response to a dispute among Christians about the doctrinal expression of faith. UCCF's very specific doctrinal statement therefore encapsulates what other Christians would see as a narrow and exclusive theology. Although defended by CUs as "orthodox", many would argue that elements of these doctrinal positions are, in fact, at variance with what the great majority of Christians have historically believed.

They are different, for example, from the historic Creeds²⁰ which are accepted by most Christians around the world, including the major Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox traditions – in spite of their other disagreements. The Rev Stephen Laird, Anglican Chaplain and Honorary Lecturer in Theology and Religious Studies, University of Kent at Canterbury, identifies what he terms the "added extras" that UCCF's doctrinal statements require (covered in detail above)

4. The materials that they distribute

The Pure course at Edinburgh University was objected to by some students because of what it contained and what it said about homosexuality. While there is clearly an issue of free speech, the central question is whether the Student Association in Scotland should be giving its resources, such as the use of its managed buildings, to support a course which is clearly felt to be offensive by many students.

5. Opposition from other Christians

What makes this situation additionally complicated is that while most other Christian groups on campus try to work together, CUs have stood out historically because of their behaviour, which has been seen as exclusive and rejectionist. This fact alone makes suggestions that Christians are being singled out simply because they are Christians, for discrimination, untenable. Many Christians feel excluded from CUs.

Analysis and recommendations

Ekklesia is extremely concerned that the situation could rapidly descend into a series of legal battles, which will have disastrous consequences for CUs, SUs but also Christianity and its relationships to other faiths as well as to wider society.

Ekklesia suggests that:

- Court battles are not going to resolve the underlying issue of religious identity and how groups relate in a culturally and religiously plural society.
- Antagonistic legal action could lead to widening an 'us' and 'them' mentality on campuses. This does not help with friendly dialogue between the diverse cultures and views that can be found within the UK's educational institutions.
- CUs may end up being used as 'pawns' in a battle being waged by other Christian campaign groups.

²⁰ The first creeds of the Christian Church are called ecumenical creeds because they were decided upon in major church councils before the church permanently split into Eastern and Western traditions in 1054 CE. The Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed are the three most widely known traditional credal statements.

- There is much more justification for pursuit of reconciliation and mediation, since the conviction that 'Christ is our peace' and that followers of Jesus should not sue one another are theologically and biblically well established.
- It is quite possible that Christians will end up taking other Christians to court, as there are undoubtedly other Christians involved in SUs.

However abhorrent the views and approaches of CUs may seem to others, the reality is that progress will only be made if the concerns of CUs that they will be protected and have liberty and autonomy, are addressed.

In light of the above, Ekklesia makes the following recommendations:

1. *Conservative evangelical campaign groups should end their attempts to use coercive pressure in this situation*

Such groups are raising the stakes unnecessarily and turning the current disputes into battles that are escalating out of control. This works against hopes of mediation and settling disputes in a way that is going to help both sides. It entrenches people in their positions further, and works against a constructive resolution.

2. *Greater efforts should be made towards practical mediation and conflict transformation*

It is clear from our research and discussions on both sides, that CUs and SUs want to find a sensible resolution to these issues which respect freedom of religion and belief and allow people to practice and express their faith, whilst respecting agendas of equality and diversity. Professional mediation has to our knowledge not yet been pursued in any instance. There are several respected agencies known to Ekklesia and acknowledged in the field who would be willing to assist with this. It is also suggested that university chaplaincies could play a crucial role in mediation. However it is recommended that mediation should be between CUs and individual SU's, without the influence of either the NUS or UCCF.

If professional mediation proves unsuccessful, then Ekklesia recommends further:

3. *Christian Unions should think long and hard about how important they feel that it is to belong to Students' Unions.*

As many CUs and other Christian groups have shown, CUs can operate happily and effectively outside the structures of SUs. Many CUs gain access to funding, buildings and facilities by approaching the institution directly. CUs can still be supported by UCCF. They can also draw on the support of local churches, and even use their buildings. Alternatively they could meet in Halls or private residences, as other Christian groups such as Fusion do.

4. *Those who wish to belong to Students' Unions should offer to open themselves up to free, fair, and democratic elections.*

This would:

- a) Meet the requirements of Students' Unions.

- b) Allow Christian Unions the autonomy they require to choose their own executive officers.
- c) Give Christian Unions a far more transparent and open feel, making them more attractive to the outside world and able to fulfil their evangelistic mission.

5. If not already there, safeguards should be put in place in CU and SU constitutions to allay the fears of some CUs.

Some CUs and UCCF have expressed fears that they will be “infiltrated” and “taken over” by other groups who are hostile to them. This has not to Ekklesia’s knowledge ever happened to any religious group on any university campus. However safeguards could be built in to their constitutions and SUs and the NUS have shown a willingness to help prevent this from happening. The building in of safeguards is standard practice in other areas of life, such as with political parties, and should not be hard to do.

6. Christian Unions in individual campuses should be able to consider using a statement of values or a recognised orthodox creed, rather than a narrow doctrinal basis.

This would:

- a) Enable CUs to be truly ‘Unions of Christians’. Many individual Christians (and traditions including Baptists, Anabaptists and Quakers) do not sign doctrinal statements out of Christian principle and conviction. Others find the UCCF statement too narrow and prescriptive.
- b) Broaden the CU’s appeal.
- c) Allow for diversity of viewpoint over issues of sexuality

Other Christian groups work in this way. The student Evangelical Group Fusion has six core values.²¹ At present however, CUs are not empowered to consider this option.

We further recommend that:

7. Individual CUs be empowered by UCCF to review their doctrinal statement

The current doctrinal statement which dates back to the 1930s is not subject to procedures of consultation or review. It is also imposed on CUs by the external body UCCF. Procedures of consultation and review should be put in place to ascertain the attitudes of CU members.

8. If they continue to hold narrow doctrinal statements, CUs should consider changing their names

If CUs continue to pursue a narrow doctrinal basis, they should change their names to something more appropriate. This will help to avoid misunderstandings in the future, but also make it clear that they are one Christian Society amongst many.²²

²¹ See <http://www.fusion.uk.com/Publisher/Article.aspx?id=44257> for these in detail

²² However we do recognise that even the label 'Evangelical' is in itself highly contestable and multifaceted and in some cases may be too broad a description for some.

9. In the longer term members of CUs should engage more in student organisation

Although some Christians are engaged in SU's members of CUs are often not. Sometimes they are positively discouraged from doing so. But their failure to engage may be a contributing factor to the difficulties which CUs find themselves in. Other student Christian groups such as Fusion teach their members about engagement in student affairs and politics. If UCCF followed suit it could facilitate the breaking down of barriers between CUs and SUs, and help allay some of the fears that CU members hold.

Appendix A – Frequently Asked Questions

Given the reporting in press and media of the issues involved, it is important to bring some clarity to the debate. These are some of the questions being asked.

Are Christian Unions being banned?

No, Christian Unions are only being “disaffiliated” from the Students’ Unions and only then in a tiny minority of cases. Membership of Students’ Unions is voluntary, and in exchange for the benefits of membership, university societies are expected to adhere to standards of openness and accountability as well as fairness. If they do not adhere to these standards, then they effectively make the decision to disaffiliate themselves.

Doesn't this effectively amount to a ban?

Though affiliation brings many practical benefits CUs are aware that not being part of the SU does not lead to a ban on the expression of their beliefs or their freedom of association. There are examples of CUs in the UK which function without SU membership.²³ Indeed, UCCF has often discouraged CUs from joining SUs. CUs, even when not affiliated to SUs, can still often use university buildings for their meetings. Sometimes they will need to hire them. Some groups choose to meet in halls of residence.

Shouldn't Christian Unions be able to choose their own officers and speakers?

Yes. No Students’ Union is suggesting that Christian Unions should lose the right to select their own officers and speakers for their meetings. In fact what the Students’ Unions are claiming is quite the opposite. Students’ Unions are saying that Christian Unions should have open and free elections, where sometimes there are none. Under such circumstances the membership of the Christian Union would elect who they feel would be most suitable to run the Christian Union. They in turn would have the power to invite who they liked to speak to them.

Are atheists and those of no faith being imposed on Christian Unions?

Occasionally a Student Union will require one of its members to sit on all the executive committee of all its societies, as is the case in Birmingham University. However it is highly unlikely that this one person would be able to attend all the meetings of all the university societies. Even when they do, one person can clearly be outvoted by the other members of the executive when it comes to decision-making. If CUs are deriving financial and other benefits from SUs, then SUs need to be able to monitor how those benefits are being used.

²³ For example see the personal blog of the Vice President of Strathclyde University’s CU for an account of life as a non affiliated CU which has not lead to legal action <http://del1r1ou5.blogspot.com/2006/11/signs-of-times.html>

Are Students' Unions stifling religious liberty?

The perception of uncompromising secularism trying its utmost to ban what they have prejudged as illegitimate beliefs²⁴ does not seem to be the case. The only case of theology directly causing controversy is at Edinburgh.

The majority of Students' Unions in the debate are trying to act fairly so that individual Christians (and other religions) have a means for expression. For example, the case in Exeter shows a Students' Union actually trying to promote religious liberty. A Christian student could not join the Christian Union because the terms were too restrictive. The SU tried to help the student, but the student was unable to join. One thing that has struck Ekklesia as it has talked to Students' Unions and the NUS is the difficult job they have to do ensuring that religious and other minorities are protected. That is one of their primary concerns.

Shouldn't Christians be free to express their non-affirming views about homosexuality?

Yes they should. The issue is not whether non-affirming (usually called 'conservative') views on homosexuality are expressed, but how they are expressed, and who endorses and supports them when they are. Some students (including Christians) are clearly hurt and offended by the way that some non-affirming views are being expressed. The views also clearly are being seen as going against equal opportunities policies. There comes a point, when voluntarily joining a body such as the NUS, and using facilities that are shared with other students, and sometimes maintained by public funds, that one has to respect values of diversity and equality, and protect vulnerable minorities.

This should also work both ways. Other Christians should also be able to express different views on homosexuality and still play a full part in the Christian Union. Divergent opinions on matters of war and peace, wealth and poverty and life and death are tolerated. Minority and dissenting views are accepted and discussed. There is no reason why this should not be so on sexuality.

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ABOUT EKKLESIA: Ekklesia is an independent Christian think tank which examines religion in public life and explores transformative theological ideas. It draws resources from evangelical, ecumenical, catholic and (distinctively) anabaptist traditions of thought. Ekklesia has been listed by The Independent newspaper among 20 influential UK think-tanks, and according to the Alexa/Amazon rankings is the most visited Christian current affairs site in the UK. It is a not-for-profit body registered as a limited company, and raises around £200,000 per year for social justice and peace causes. See: www.ekkleisia.co.uk

²⁴ 'Religion on campus' The Times, November 18th 2006 <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,542-2458692,00.html>