

Should I pray or

Professionals who take their religious beliefs into social work practice can end up in a disciplinary hearing. **Maria Ahmed** asks whether religion should be kept behind closed doors

In his 1933 account of being down and out in London, George Orwell recalled meeting a Christian woman in a small, tin-roofed shed who offered tea, buns and prayers to homeless men. “She talked upon religious subjects – about Jesus Christ always having a soft spot for poor rough men like us...and what a difference it made to a man on the road if he said his prayers regularly. We hated it,” he wrote.

The sketch provides a glimpse into the early roots of many social care organisations in the UK, when faith was a driving force and dared to speak its name – whether service users liked it or not. But today the role of religion in the caring professions is causing increasing controversy.

Several cases involving Christians have hit the media this year, including community nurse Caroline Petrie, who was suspended from her job for offering to pray for an elderly patient. Her employer, North Somerset Primary Care Trust, claimed she had failed to “demonstrate a personal and professional commitment to equality and diversity”.

Later reinstating Petrie, the PCT said that, although it recognised she “felt she was acting in the best interests of her patients”, nurses’ personal beliefs should be “secondary” to the needs and beliefs of the patient.

Petrie’s case was backed by the Christian Legal Centre, an organisation that supports believers to “defend their freedom and promote biblical standards” and is extremely vocal in the media. Andrea Minichiello Williams, a barrister and director of the CLC, says the centre is dealing with an increasing number of similar cases involving social workers, none of which have yet been made public.

Williams claims such cases are evidence of how equal opportunities and human rights legislation have made Christians in the caring professions “more vulnerable” if they bring their faith into the workplace, adding that some employees are being compelled to “choose between the rules of their job and contravening their conscience”. “In

21st century Britain, there should be true diversity,” she argues. “Christians should be able to operate in the public sphere without compromising their beliefs.”

Many of the centre’s inquiries from social workers centre on the controversial area of fostering and adoption by same-sex couples. In another case supported by the CLC earlier this year, Northamptonshire paediatrician

Dr Sheila Matthews was dismissed from an adoption panel for asking to abstain from voting to recommend children be adopted by same-sex parents. Northamptonshire Council later allowed Dr Matthews to continue in her role as medical adviser to the adoption panel, but said she could no longer act as a full member with voting rights.

Last month, an employment appeal tribunal heard the case of Christian Gary McFarlane, a relationship counsellor employed by Relate who was sacked because his Christian beliefs prevented him giving sex therapy to homosexual couples. McFarlane, who won his wrongful dismissal claim at an earlier tribunal, questioned whether having a Christian faith would act

“If someone said they were in a crisis and asked the social worker to light a candle and say a prayer for them, it would be appropriate to do so”

PETER GILBERT, PROFESSOR OF SOCIAL WORK AND SPIRITUALITY

