

Christians risk rejection and discrimination for their faith, a study claims

Christians are facing discrimination at work, and ridicule and rejection at home, according to new research.

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The first poll of Britain's churchgoers, carried out for *The Sunday Telegraph*, found that thousands of them believe they are being turned down for promotion because of their faith.

One in five said that they had faced opposition at work because of their beliefs.

More than half of them revealed that they had suffered some form of persecution for being a Christian.

The findings suggest a growing hostility towards religion in this country, which has been highlighted by a series of clashes between churchgoers and their employers.

Church leaders, including the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, have urged Christians to "wake up" and defend their beliefs after the suspension of Caroline Petrie, a community nurse, for offering to pray for a patient.

Churchgoers are likely to be further concerned by new guidelines that warn that employees face dismissal if they share their faith with colleagues at work.

Employers have been given new advice in a campaign, funded by the Government's equality watchdog, that says people who evangelise in the workplace are "highly likely" to be accused of harassment.

The guidelines have been drawn up by the British Humanist Association (BHA), an atheist group, with the help of a £35,000 grant from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), a taxpayer-funded body.

Andrew Copson, director of education at the BHA, claimed that attempts to convert colleagues could amount to harassment under the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003.

He said: "The law specifically protects people from being intimidated or confronted with a hostile environment in the workplace.

"Systematically undermining someone's beliefs or persistently attempting to convert someone would lead to the creation of a hostile environment."

However, legal experts have attacked the guidelines as "nonsense" and Christian groups have condemned them as "propaganda".

Churchgoers interviewed in the ComRes poll said that they are already facing discrimination at work and one in 10 churchgoers said they have been rejected by family members because of their religious beliefs.

As many as 44 per cent said they had been mocked by friends, neighbours or colleagues for being a Christian, and 19 per cent said they had been ignored or excluded for the same reason.

They also claimed that they are being discriminated against at work, with five per cent saying they had been turned down for promotion due to their faith. The same number said they had been reprimanded or cautioned at work for sharing their faith.

There has been a series of cases over recent months featuring Christians who have been suspended after expressing their religious views, including a teacher who complained that a staff training day was used to promote [gay rights](#).

Churchgoers believe that these incidents reflect growing intolerance towards Christianity in Britain.

Nearly three out of four of those questioned said that there is less religious freedom in the UK now than 20 years ago, and one in five said persecution of Christians is worse in this country compared to other European nations.

Although the EHRC declined to comment on the content of the BHA guidelines, a spokesman said: "The commission's funding programme supports a wide range of organisations, both faith and non-faith groups, in keeping with its aim of promoting good relations and a better understanding between those from different religions and beliefs.

"This is one of many such projects to that end. This isn't about supporting a particular belief or lack of belief over another, but encouraging debate."

ComRes asked 512 worshippers between April 21 and May 1. The respondents were selected through different Christian media, from liberal publications through to evangelical websites.

The results are weighted to the exact denomination and churchmanship profile as defined by the 2005 Church Census.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/religion/5413311/Christians-risk-rejection-and-discrimination-for-their-faith-a-study-claims.html>