

Submission

to the
Independent Police Complaints Commission

Police ban on display of Scripture in London

by
The Maranatha Community

August 2006

Preface

This Document

This document has been prepared for the Chairman of the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

It is addressed to the Chairman, Nick Hardwick, Independent Police Complaints Commission, 5th Floor, 90 High Holborn, London, WC1V 6BH, Tel: 08453 002 002, Fax: 020 7404 0430, Email enquiries@ipcc.gsi.gov.uk.

The Maranatha Community

The Maranatha Community is a Christian movement with many thousands of members throughout the country active in all the main churches. Its membership includes a substantial number of people involved in the caring professions and in a wide-range of voluntary service. Maranatha actively works for reconciliation and the establishment of good community relations. It has consistently taken initiatives to uphold Human Rights and to promote good governance. Since its formation 25 years ago, it has been deeply involved in work amongst children and young people both in this country and abroad, people with drug and alcohol problems, the elderly, the disabled and the disadvantaged. It has taken the initiative in a broad range of projects directly contributing to the welfare and health of the nation, and it also has extensive international experience.

The Maranatha Community

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The Maranatha Community Trust is a registered charity number 327627.

The Leader and co-founder of the Community is Mr. Dennis Wrigley.

Mr J Banda

This document is submitted on behalf of, and with the full approval of, Mr J Banda.

Police ban on display of Scripture in London

1. The Incident

- 1.1 In October 2005, a 74-year-old gentleman, Mr John Banda, was standing near London Bridge Station. Around his neck he displayed a small sheet of paper bearing quotations from the bible.
- 1.2 He was approached by three policeman who ordered him to immediately remove the little poster. They warned him that if he failed to do so they would arrest him. He was told that the words on his poster were offensive and that by displaying them he had broken the law. They specifically referred to Mr Banda having been in breach of the Public Order Act 1986.

2. The Situation

- 2.1 In this situation the conduct of Mr Banda could not conceivably be deemed to have been a breach of the peace or remotely likely to lead to such a breach. Mr. Banda's conduct could not in any way be regarded as a threat to public order.
- 2.2 Mr. Banda is a courteous, kindly, and highly respected Christian. An accountant by profession, he was formerly treasurer of the United Church of Zambia, and now lives in east London.
He was not causing any trouble.
He was not in any way disorderly, intrusive, or obstructive.
His action could not conceivably be described as insulting, provocative, or an incitement to hatred.

3. Display of Scriptural Texts

- 3.1 The sheet displayed by Mr. Banda bore two short texts from the New Testament 'Jesus Christ is Lord' (Philippians, Chapter 2, verse 11). and 'Repent therefore and be converted so that your sins will be forgiven' (Acts of the Apostles Chapter 3, verse 19).
- 3.2 These are central statements of faith which have been freely proclaimed by the Christian Church in the United Kingdom for centuries.
- 3.3 For generations biblical texts have been publicly displayed in various situations and locations throughout our country without let or hindrance. It is unbelievable and even outrageous that in this incident the police took it upon

themselves to intrude into a perfectly peaceful situation and cause distress to an upright, law-abiding citizen. They clearly denied him his right to express his religious belief and threatened him with arrest and prosecution.

4. Liberty of the Subject, Religious Discrimination & Persecution

- 4.1 Article 10 of the European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, states *“Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.”* It also states in Article 9 that *“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.”* Article 19 of the UN declaration on Human Rights states *“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”*
- 4.2 In this instance Mr. Banda was clearly deprived of his freedom of expression by the police. It would appear that the infringement of his Human Rights was directly related to the specific religious message on the poster he was displaying and which the police interpreted as being offensive.
- 4.3 It could readily be construed that by choosing to act in this manner the police could be deemed to be guilty of religious discrimination. Already their action, which has been featured in the national press, has been widely seen as a totally unacceptable form of religious persecution. The police action in stopping the open display of scripture and threatening those responsible with arrest and prosecution clearly establishes a very serious precedent.
- 4.4 This raises the question about whether the police are now taking upon themselves a religious censorship role. If in future the public display of scriptural texts is deemed by the police as potentially causing ‘an offence’ notification of this new situation should clearly be made to the public. Those responsible for public hoarding boards and panels, newspaper advertisements, shop window displays and church notice boards should immediately be warned. They should be made fully aware that they run the risk of being investigated, prosecuted and even punished.
- 4.5 Unless the police apologise to Mr. Banda, which so far they have failed to do, and make it clear that they are not in future going to harass individual believers

in this way, it can only be assumed that a totally new situation has been created.

- 4.6 The adherents of all religions fully recognised that the Bible has for centuries been a formative influence on our culture and civilisation. It is foundational to our judiciary and legislative system and, to a considerable extent, our education and health services. It is equally foundational to thousands of Christian charities which undertake invaluable work for the good of our society. It should be noted that in the most recent national census over 71% of the public claimed to be believers in the Christian religion, and a fundamental characteristic of our Christian inheritance is the exercise of tolerance, which was not evident in the case of Mr. Banda.

5. A significant comparison

- 5.1 Some time ago a group of militant Islamists carried large placards in London, shouting, urging violence and inciting murder. To the astonishment of the general public their march was allowed to continue and even appeared to be afforded police protection, although an obvious offence was being committed. It is beyond dispute, and a matter of the greatest concern, that the police did not treat them in any way as severely as they treated the isolated and innocent gentleman Mr. Banda.
- 5.2 The Islamic offenders were apparently not warned, restrained or threatened, as Mr. Banda was. The contrast between the police treatment of a yelling and potentially violent mob and a harmless individual causing no trouble could hardly be greater. In this context it is significant that the message of the Islamist mob was one of war, hatred and killing, whereas the message of Mr. Banda was gentle and non-threatening.
- 5.3 The police code of conduct published by the IPCC states “*Police officers have a particular responsibility to act with fairness and impartiality with all their dealings with the public and their colleagues*” and to avoid “*unreasonable discrimination*”.

6. Concern of London leaders of minority ethnic churches

- 6.1 A meeting was held in a committee room of the House of Lords earlier this year, attended by the leaders of African, Asian, Caribbean, Hispanic, Far-East and Eastern European churches active in London. They asked Mr Banda to show the little poster which the police had forbidden him to display. They expressed horror and dismay that in this country the police should be used to prevent an

innocent man making a simple and harmless statement of faith, using the words of Holy Scripture.

- 6.2 They commented on the fact that vast numbers of Christian missionaries had gone from these islands bringing enormous benefits throughout the world. They were saddened to hear that the proclamation of the Gospel in this modest way, and in a country globally renowned for freedom, tolerance and democratic institutions, could be so severely curtailed.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 In view of this case, it is not known if on any future occasion members of the public will be deemed to be committing an offence because of the public display of a portion of scripture. Because of this police action, people now simply do not know under what conditions they are likely to be restrained, investigated, arrested or possibly charged.
- 7.2 If the police are deemed to have acted reasonably and responsibly in this instance, citizens who wish to avoid investigation, accusation, litigation and possible punishment will now have to cease expressing their religious views for fear of the consequences.
- 7.3 There is a very real danger that if this complaint is not properly dealt with and appropriate action taken, the police will soon be perceived as potential persecutors of responsible, law-abiding citizens.

8. The Complaint

- 8.1 The Complaint against the London Metropolitan Police is that their officers in this case acted improperly and that they inappropriately caused aggravation to an innocent member of the public, depriving him of his freedom of religious expression.
- 8.2 In violating his religious liberty and freedom of expression the impression was given of a form of totalitarianism which is totally alien to the UK.

Note: A further submission to the IPCC is being made concerning the failure of Sir Ian Blair, Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis to respond properly to correspondence regarding the criminalising of statements of belief. This partly embraces the case of Mr J Banda.

4th August 2006