

Ex head of 'sect' school in tribunal wrangle

Friday, 27th May 2005, 11:12

The woman head of a school run by a secretive Christian sect had her pay slashed and was then replaced by a male member of the religious group, an industrial tribunal heard.

Sue Collins, 54, was employed as the Centre Co-ordinator for the Three Counties Education Trust, a school run by the Exclusive Brethren, an evangelical sect which restricts contact with the outside world and believes God made women to act as "helpmates" to men.

But after nearly a year in the job, the trustees of the school slashed Mrs Collins pay from £31,529 to £20,571. Her hours were cut by 40 per cent and many of her responsibilities were taken over by senior male member of the organisation brought in over her head.

The first time Mrs Collins realised she was being demoted was when she was handed a new contract out of the blue.

The independent school, for 11 to 17 year olds is part of a network of 43 in the UK run by the Brethren – which bans children from using computers and reading fiction.

The 15,000 Brethren in Britain reportedly keep themselves separate from the outside world, which it regards as evil, and even shuns contact with other Christian groups.

Members are said to follow a rigid code of conduct based on a strict interpretation of the Bible and are forbidden from attending university – which is regarded as too worldly.

Men must be clean-shaven, keep hair short, and not wear ties and women should leave hair uncut and wear blue or white headscarves.

In a bizarre clash of beliefs Mrs Collins, a catholic, is taking the Trust to an employment tribunal claiming unfair dismissal and breach of contract.

She told the Croydon hearing she had been promoted from Assistant Head Tutor to Head Tutor in October 2003, after the head failed to turn up for work.

She said: "I was informed of lesson parameters and what clothing to wear and not to wear.

"I was provided with the materials and facilities that I needed to fulfil my role and was informed as to the religious beliefs of the organization which would prevent me from utilizing certain technology such as computers, televisions or video recorders."

A year later and without warning she was invited to a meeting by the school's trustees. "After the meeting in my car I opened the contract and among the many points of dispute I was horrified to see that my hours were cut to 60 per cent of a week. This was a great material change."

Even while she was trying to negotiate over her contract Mrs Collins, who also taught history at the school, discovered her job had been advertised in local papers.

Then she complained the contract was withdrawn and she was told she could only be employed as a history teacher.

She was signed off work with stress related problems and on September 13 last year resigned from Three Counties.

The Trust claims that Mrs Collins left of her own accord.

Explaining the Brethren's views Ben White, one of seven trustees, said: "We are Christians so we follow the Bible and in the Bible God created man and he created woman to be their helpmates. But he created men to be responsible."

he then added: "I'm talking about in the family."

Referring to her Mrs Collins complaint about the new contract he said: "I live in a community of very, very self-disciplined people and I have never been faced with a woman in the that kind of situation before. To me, because of my upbringing and the life I live, her reaction completely threw me and left me very shaken."

Giving evidence Simon Rich, another trustee, said he shocked when Mrs Collins 'blew her top' over the new contract.

The father of six told the tribunal: "Her reaction shocked me to quite an extent. If she could react like that, what could happen if she was still feeling the same way when she was in front of the students? It was for the protection of our children, which is why we set the school up in the first place."

He said the new CEO was brought in simply to assist Mrs Collins.

Defending their approach he said the Brethren were "family men" with little experience of running a school.

Tribunal chairman Sarwan Singh interjected: "Unfortunately, there are statutory frameworks out there and anybody who is responsible as an employer has to take this on board. Other pressures don't mean that these disappear and doesn't allow an organisation to say 'We didn't do X.'"

Speaking outside the tribunal, Mrs Collins, who has taught in the private and state sector for over 25 years, said: "If I was a man, this probably wouldn't have happened. They do have a view that women are inferior and should stay at home. They probably thought I didn't need a full time job.

"Once the women are married they are expected to stay at home and have lots of children to increase the numbers of Brethren. Women are supposed to be subservient to their men. They are not even allowed to speak during religious services."

Mrs Collins added that the curriculum in the school had to be altered to fit in with the Brethren's closed view of the world. She said: "I was criticized for talking about the Nazi view of homosexuals during the Second World War –

even for using the word homosexual.

“When you teach the Middle Ages you are supposed to talk as little as possible about religion, and you must never talk about evolution. They are even trying to stop them learning biology.”

The hearing was adjourned until July 19