

Media Ownership Consultation Responses
Broadcasting Policy Division
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
2 – 4 Cockspur Street
London SW1Y 6DH

24 January 2002

Dear Sir or Madam

Consultation on Media Ownership Rules

I would like to submit a response to the consultation paper on Media Ownership on behalf of the Methodist Church. The Methodist Church has around 330,000 members and 6,100 churches across Britain. This submission arises from a consultation with the Methodist Media Issues Group. This group consists of people with experience of programme-making, broadcasting, journalism, consultancy, production and regulation.

We have previously had correspondence with the Department over issues around religious ownership, and made a response to the White Paper, *A New Future for Communications*.

In our response to the White Paper we recognised there were concerns about the controversial nature of some religious broadcasting. However we were of the opinion that religious organisations have been treated unduly harshly by current legislation, and that ownership of licences should be opened up to them.

Although the White Paper stated that concerns about exploitation and offence could not be dealt with by the regulation of religious content, we believed that the regulation of content and ownership could be used effectively. We suggested that guidelines, similar to those that currently prevent advertising from groups with cult-like tendencies, could be adapted as a test for licence holders. Existing programming guidelines prohibit programmes that play on people's fears and susceptibilities or denigrate other beliefs or religions, whilst requiring the clear identification of religious bodies, and forbidding direct appeals for funds for religious purposes. These guidelines could be developed by OFCOM to regulate content.

We are still of the opinion that ownership of licences should be opened up to religious organisations, within careful guidelines for ownership and content. We understand that the vetting process currently used by the Radio Authority (Guidelines for Religious Ownership) could be used to ensure that the aims of the applicant body, and the type of programmes they wish to promote, would be

compatible with the appropriate codes which preclude exploitation or abusive treatment. It would also be important to research the credentials and standing of the applicant body.

One of the arguments used against religious ownership is that if just one religious body owned a licence this might lead to religious disharmony. However with the likely increase in the spectrum and channels available, this argument is weakened. We would also make two further comments. We would not wish to see licences awarded on the basis of the highest bid as a “bidding war” between religions would most certainly be divisive. Secondly this issue underlines the importance of researching the credentials of the applicants, to find out what support they have, including from other religious bodies.

We recognise that there are concerns about issuing multiplex licences to religious bodies. Holders of multiplex licences determine who owns licences to run the channels covered by the multiplex. Fears have been expressed that, should multiplex licences be opened up to religious bodies, then particular religious groups could be given an unfair advantage, leading to a lack of plurality. However if multiplex owners are prohibited from discriminating against any particular licence applicants, religious or otherwise, on grounds related to belief, safeguards should exist against fears of unfair advantage.

I hope that these comments will assist you in your deliberations.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Lampard
Secretary for Parliamentary and Political Affairs