

REPORT for CIDAC Panel: Dr Aaron Edwards (AE)

CIDAC hearing date:	30 November 2023
Year of events:	2023
Employment at time of events:	Lecturer, Methodist evangelical college
Issue:	Found guilty of misconduct following disciplinary hearing
Was there a legal outcome?	No. CLC pursuing.
Sex:	Male
Denomination:	Evangelical
Use of data	No restriction
Evidence	Emails: 22 Nov 2023 with links (EA); 11 & 15 January 2024 (RH).

Background: the college and AE's role

AE worked at Cliff College for seven years as a lecturer in theology, preaching and mission. He says that the College, which is evangelical, is one of two remaining Methodist colleges, the other being liberal. The College is affiliated to the Methodist Church and covers lay training, providing informal courses and certificates, as well as validated degrees up to PhD, whereas the other College, Queen's, does ministerial training.

His day-to-day role involved teaching BA students, running a Masters admission programme and supervising PhD students. He stressed that, primarily, the focus was on mission and preaching. AE had contact with up to 150 students annually, either in tutorials, lectures or other formats.

Student age range varied from early to mid-twenties for undergraduates and, for postgraduates, it was mainly forties and fifties. Student denomination was, AE says, probably more Anglican than Methodist, with many others from free evangelical churches. There were West Africans from Pentecostal backgrounds.

Chronology of key events

AE sent tweet	February 19
Suspension meeting	February 20
AE received Investigation Report	February 28
Disciplinary meeting & dismissal	March 8
Appeal	March 22
Dismissal upheld	March 27

The Tweet

Aiming to address evangelicals, AE tweeted:

“Homosexuality is invading the church. Evangelicals no longer see the severity of this because they’re too busy apologising for the apparently barbaric homophobia, whether or not it’s true. This is a gospel issue by the way. For if sinners no longer sin, we no longer need a Saviour.”

When the College told AE to take down the tweet the following day, he explained that in “good conscience” he could not do this and believes doing so would have shown cowardice. He told the College that the tweet had made him a target of harassment, and that he would welcome a conversation about the College’s demand. Within a few days, AE reports that his tweet went from 25,000 to 250,000 views.

AE reports that he was “Twitter-mobbed”, with LGBT activists slandering and accusing him of homophobia. The College publicly denounced the tweet, and AE says, by proxy, him too. They said that it was unacceptable language that did not reflect the view or ethos of the College.

AE subsequently clarified his tweet, defending the College, saying, “it is actually a place where we can discuss different views. It’s a place of higher ed.” An academic should, AE explains, speak freely, as long as it “isn’t defamatory or out of bounds but as a preacher, I’m telling my students what needs to be said...The Church needs sermons to hear the truth otherwise we could just give everyone their Bible and off they go. They don’t need to hear sermons.”

Responses from the College and others

Students were, AE recalls, a mix of heterosexual, gay and heterosexual with pro-LGBT views. There were also celibate, same sex attracted students, who expressed public support of AE at this time. AE states that he was “always trying to encourage open, transparent conversation” with the LGBT students.

AE believes that a majority of students from across all course programmes shared his views on LGBT and marriage. However, he understands that during his time at the College, there was a shift among undergraduates towards a more theologically liberal stance. On each module there were at least two or three African students who, AE recalls, fearlessly expressed their biblical views on homosexuality and were met with condescension from progressives, who saw their views as backward. Feeling outrage, AE would come to their defence.

Suspension meeting and investigation report

AE says the College Principal first told him: “This is not a conversation. I’m going to read you your suspension letter.” When he asked the Principal why there was no conversation, as requested, he was told it was because he refused to take down his tweet.

Just over a week later, AE received a 17-page investigation report which said that the College was considering referring him to both Prevent, for hate speech, and the Office of Students. He says the College later claimed he was lying to the press when saying the College had threatened him with being referred to Prevent. AE believes that when the report stated his case was “under review”, this was clearly a threat.

Disciplinary meeting, dismissal and appeal

A disciplinary meeting lasted seven hours. AE’s advocate was present to assist him. The investigation report had claimed that the impact of his tweet would detract from the College’s ability to attract and retain students. AE offered arguments in his defence but, he says, no responses were offered. He believes that because the College receives annual funding from the Methodist Church, it did not care about retaining him.

AE understands that the College recognised his right to hold his views on homosexuality but, fearing the College would be brought into potential disrepute, he would not be free to express them. AE says that he had previously expressed his views about homosexuality on various public platforms.

The College enabled an appeal which was heard by someone connected to the Jayne Ozanne Foundation. The dismissal was upheld.

Adverse personal impact and supportive responses

AE suffered stress in the form of cardiac symptoms. He has lost friends and believes a few members of his own church do not now want to be associated with him. Academics from other bible colleges and university departments, with whom he had previous contact, have since deserted him. He has been the object of online hostility, being called “bigoted” and “fascist”, while others have claimed he fails to understand the Gospel.

AE also reports that thousands of people across the world have sent him supportive messages by email, Twitter and Facebook.