

# **RELIGION OFF THE AGENDA IN 'CHURCH OF LAUGHTER'**

By Jonathan Petre, Religion Correspondent

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*Note from Pastor Kevin Lea: Another sign that the great apostasy is upon us.*

*2 Tim 4:3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. 5 But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (NKJ)*

*2 Pet 2:21 For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. 22 But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire." (NKJ)*

*Titus 1:16 They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.  
CHAPTER 2 1 But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine: (NKJ)*

For those who are curious about Christianity but disillusioned by the institutional Church, there is a novel solution - drop the religion.

The Rev Ian Gregory, a cleric well known to readers of The Daily Telegraph for launching the Campaign for Courtesy in an attempt to improve manners, has embarked on a new project which he calls "Christianity without religion".

Out goes the "archaic mumbo-jumbo" of church services and the "silly arguments about things that don't and shouldn't matter"; in come chats about anything that makes you feel good and the world's first dedicated "laughter room" because "laughter is as important as prayer".

Mr Gregory, a congregational minister who retired last year after 20 years, is launching the radical experiment in an unused chapel in Cheadle, Staffs.

He said that he had recently realised that much of his ministry had missed the point.

"I look back on the past 20 years and think, what the Dickens was I doing? I now advise people who are bored with church not to go," he said.

"People are fed up with religion. The bar-room talk is that it causes too much trouble in the world. But people are intrigued by spirituality and by figures such as Jesus and Buddha."

The traditional Sunday morning service will be replaced by "coffee and laughter" - videos of classic comedy films during which people will be able to come and go or read the Sunday papers over tea and toast.

Mr Gregory, a colourful figure who prefers bright ties and a trilby to clerical garb, will then be available to people for "one to one personal consultations" and "healing prayers".

He will also launch a course devoted to people's self-image and confidence, with sessions entitled "Have you a right to be happy?" and "The art of conversation."

In a concession to more traditional religion, he will hold Christian worship on some Sunday afternoons, which will consist of a mixture of hymns, prayers, readings and discussions.

Mr Gregory said that religion-free Christianity was first promoted by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was hanged by the Nazis in 1945 for his part in a plot to kill Hitler.

"He saw the way people were disillusioned with church, but attracted to Jesus Christ," said Mr Gregory. "I'm convinced that Jesus Christ had profound and important things to say to people, but they have got lost in squabbles and worries about church buildings.

"The politics has taken over and the message has been obscured."

The Church of England has been experimenting with new ways to attract people back to the pews, but none so extreme that they dispose of institutional religion altogether.

The Rev Mark Ireland, the Church of England Missioner for the Diocese of

Litchfield, wondered whether Mr Gregory's church was proclaiming the "good news of Jesus Christ" in what he was doing.

"People are very interested in the good news but not so interested in church," he said. "We have to accommodate that. But church is an indispensable part of the package. Being part of a worshipping missionary community is how we encounter God."