

When Christians disagree: Lanka Evangelical Fellowship of Churches

In BCN 527 (5 May), we published a full-page article (page 8) on the recent good work being done by the *Lanka Evangelical Fellowship of Churches* (LEFC) in Sri Lanka, taken from its *Lanka Link* magazine. This work has been going on for decades. We also published a further article on page 22 headed, "LEFC forced to defend itself from 'unfair' attacks".

LEFC was defending itself following the publication online of a strongly-worded 94-page "Investigation Report" compiled by Pastors David Cooke of Banbury Evangelical Free Church and Mark Mullins, a barrister, from the Strangers Rest Evangelical Church in London. Much of their report relied on allegations made by Muralee, a Sri Lankan pastor, and his friends.

Muralee responded to our article with a letter, which we've published on page 12 of this issue, in which he accuses us of not contacting him before publishing our article.

ATTACKS

In reply, we repeat that before writing our article, we read the *two* "Investigation Reports" published by Pastors Cooke and Mullins, *and* attacks by certain others on the good work of LEFC, plus, of course, LEFC's comprehensive, 192-page, rebuttal of their allegations, titled 'Definitive Public Response' (DPR).

Muralee also accused us of, quote, "failing to reflect biblical values of integrity, fairness, and accountability...falling short of both journalistic ethics and Christian principles."

As we have set out in response to his letter (page 13 of this issue), the evidence is quite clear, namely, that his own church *disapproved* of his using funds, supplied by a generous English donor, to buy a vehicle *in his own name*. Muralee then withdrew from that church and subsequently resigned from it.

In addition, having met Muralee in person, in our judgment there is doubt as to whether one can rely on all that he says.

We turn now to the way Pastors David Cooke and Mark Mullins conducted their "investigation" and, in doing so, thanking them as brothers in Christ for travelling up with Muralee to see us and discuss their report. Points of dispute were exchanged frankly but amicably.

Our view remains that they did not conduct a fair, nor independent, enquiry. This became very clear when we read LEFC's DPR.

MISTAKE

In addition, before our meeting with the two pastors, we were made aware of the following.

In the lead-up to the 'Christian Worship Conference' held at Ebenezer Chapel, Old Hill, Birmingham, on 21-22 March 2024, an administrator for the conference mistakenly sent out a message which included *all the email addresses of those attending the conference*. That list of addresses should have been 'blind copied'. This was an inadvertent breach by the organisers of the Data Protection Act.

Pastors Cooke and Mullins were amongst those who received this email. They took full advantage of this data breach, using the confidential Worship Conference email address list to email all attendees with their 94-page report, highly critical of LEFC. Unsurprisingly, the Worship Conference organisers were suddenly inundated with complaints from its attendees as to why they had been circulated with this unsolicited report and its aggressive list of complaints about LEFC.

THE END JUSTIFIES THE MEANS

When your editor met with Pastors Cooke and Mullins on 14th May, they justified this apparent breach of Data Protection regulations and discourtesy to the Christian Worship Conference with the argument that "the end [making public their attack on LEFC] justified the means".

Examining just one of what we say are a number of flaws in Cooke and Mullins' original 94-page report, they made two serious complaints against LEFC, which they repeated in a *second* attack on LEFC. These were:

- (1) That LEFC was "not a recognised legal entity in Sri Lanka" and
- (2) That vehicles and properties were held in the names of individuals and not LEFC.

We now quote from Paragraph 8.12 (page 86) of LEFC's Rebuttal:

"LEFC is a registered body, recognised by the Sri Lankan authorities and has been for a long time, The LEFC Council of Reference [proved] this fact at a meeting with Cooke and Mullins in May 2022, showing them the documents."

"NO LEGAL EXISTENCE"

Yet, in their attack on LEFC, Pastors Cooke and Mullins wrote, *"As far as we have been able to ascertain, LEFC has no legal existence"*.

On page 89 of its Rebuttal, LEFC exhibits a document signed by S.K.C, Fernando, Administrative Officer for the Department of Christian Affairs, ***confirming LEFC's legal status in Sri Lanka and naming its nine key officers.***

A further document was signed by LEFC's lawyer T. Karikalan, Attorney-at-Law, on 6 May 2023, confirming the above, and giving the specific reference numbers for land owned by LEFC (page 90 of their DPR report).

"PERMIT LAND"

On the claim by Pastors Cooke and Mullins that "vehicles and properties were held in the names of individuals and not LEFC", they provided no documentary evidence in their report. By contrast, on pages 92-94 of the DPR, LEFC exhibited a copy of a letter, also dated 6 May, from their lawyer, T. Karikalam, listing 31 properties, carefully listing the true owners of each. For example: "This is permit land. This land is only for the utilisation of LEFC. Not in Pastor Jeyakanth's name."

Moreover, regarding the ownership of vehicles, LEFC exhibited on page 87 of its report a specimen copy of a legal document concerning the ownership of a car, registration EP PR-9038. ***The owner is given as "The Secretary, Lanka Evangelical Fellowship Church, Illuppaikulam, 6th Mile Post, Sampalathvu"***.

LEFC states (page 88), ***"In May 2024 LEFC referred 31 vehicle documents to a notary in Trincomalee (T. T. Karikalan) who confirmed the status of each of these assets."***

From all the above, the two allegations made by Pastors Cooke and Mullins appear therefore to be, at best, unproven.

FAR AND WIDE

We could address other specific matters of concern about the contents of the two reports by Pastors Cooke and Mullins. We doubt whether they can maintain their claim that their investigation was "independent" and "impartial".

Was it right to circulate far and wide a series of unproven allegations against Christian brothers and sisters, who for decades had worked hard to spread the Gospel in unpromising territory?

Were they justified in using fellow Christians' confidential database without permission?

Have they burdened LEFC by saddling them with the burden of compiling a lengthy rebuttal document?

May we respectfully suggest that in the light of the detailed, documented, 192-page rebuttal by LEFC of their two reports, Pastors Cooke and Mullins might reconsider their actions, and formally withdraw any accusations against others that they cannot strictly prove.

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" (Exodus 20:16).