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# Your say...

## An open letter to MP

THIS IS an open letter to Gary Streeter MP from Susan Blackmore, writer, psychologist and Visiting Professor at Plymouth University

Dear Mr Streeter,

As one of your constituents, I am writing to tell you how shocked I was to hear your comments on yesterday's Today programme on Radio 4.

It is not true that Christians and people of faith do more volunteering and charity work in their local community, or anywhere around the country. Perhaps you have not read the research on this, which is understandable, but if you had, you would know that the proportion of volunteers who are religious and non-religious is practically identical.

According to the 2011 Citizenship Survey, 39% of non-religious volunteers take part in formal volunteering at least once a year. That is precisely the same proportion as those volunteers who are religious – a figure which includes Muslims, Jews, Hindus and other non-Christians. When it comes to informal volunteering, the numbers are slightly in favour of non-religious people, at 68% to 67%.

Either way you look at it, while churches may do good in their communities, so do non-religious people. We may not be particularly good examples, but my husband and I are both atheists, as are probably most of the people we know. We give to many charities and are deeply involved in local affairs.

There is no justification for the Prime Minister's comments, which you seemed to agree with, that we need 'more evangelism' and 'more belief' in this country. Would it do any good? No. It would be deeply divisive, setting one type of belief against another and making out that the non-believers amongst us are somehow inferior or less altruistic than believers, when this is not true.

According to the latest Census figures, 32.9% of people in Plymouth report having no religion. Comments which alienate one third of voters

aren't just divisive and untrue, but politically foolish.

I call upon you to apologise to your constituency and to recognise all the good work which is done by non-religious people not just in South West Devon, but right across the country.

**DR SUSAN BLACKMORE**  
via email