

COMMISSION ON RELIGION AND BELIEF IN BRITISH PUBLIC LIFE:

COMMUNITY, DIVERSITY AND THE COMMON GOOD

Submission from the Church in Wales

May 2015

This submission has been prepared by Revd Canon Carol Wardman, Bishops' Adviser for Church and Society, in particular consultation with Revd Canon Edwin Counsell, Director of Statutory Education, and Anna Morrell, Archbishop of Wales' Media Officer. Content has been organized around the questions put to the consultation event in Wales in April 2015.

1. In relation to issues of religion and belief, what are Wales's most distinctive features, challenges and successes, and what are the factors underlying its successes?

At both informal, grass-roots level, and at 'official', national level, faith communities in Wales enjoy amicable relationships with one another, and are well-regarded by statutory bodies.

Amongst the Christian churches, there is a greater diversity than in many parts of the UK (England in particular), with no one outstandingly dominant denomination, and no established church. A distinctive feature of Wales is the prominence of the Welsh language: Wales is officially bilingual, within a wider UK context which is in the globally unusual position of being monolingual. Churches in Wales reflect the strength of the Welsh language: some denominations operate predominantly through the medium of Welsh, whilst others – Methodists and Baptists – have both Welsh and English divisions. The Church in Wales, as the largest single denomination, has done much to promote the Welsh language, including translations of the liturgy, the encouragement of the use of Welsh in all services, assistance to Welsh learners, particular encouragement of vocations from Welsh-speaking congregations, and a bilingual policy for all official communications.

Inter-faith and Multi-Ethnic Relations

All faiths are represented in Wales. Particularly well-established faith groups include Jewish communities in Cardiff, Swansea, Wrexham, Llanelli, Merthyr Tydfil and the South Wales Valley (some dating from the C18th and before, as well as those from the Industrial Revolution); Cardiff's Somali community, which dates from the late C19th, is the longest-established Moslem community in the UK. Christian communities from all over the world are also to be found here – including Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Chinese and Asian.

Within an overall harmonious environment, in which faith communities find they have much in common, there is an awareness of current risks, particularly within the minority communities. These include the radicalisation of disaffected young people (of which none are more aware and concerned than the mainstream Moslem communities); the dangers to health and self-determination of some traditional practices relating to women and girls (such as FGM, arranged marriages, and withdrawal from education); and the ever-present issue of prejudice affecting minority groups and preventing them achieving their rightful representation in all areas of life, including the public square.

Important challenges include helping faith communities themselves to address some of these problems, without stoking prejudice; and combating the effects of unhelpful pronouncements on immigration, particularly in geographical areas where there is little real experience of cultural diversity. Against a backdrop of international events which threaten to increase tension at local level, the faith communities work hard to model harmonious relationships, even where opinions differ.

Church Concerns

Looking more internally, churches are facing the challenge of numerical decline, and – along with other nation-wide services and organisations – must consider re-organisation, co-operation and partnership, to continue to serve the changing needs of Wales. Pressures created by an ageing population, low and insecure incomes, pressures on working families (especially generated by economic and caring responsibilities), social mobility, and family change all add to the picture.

For some time, churches have experimented with services at different times and in different styles. ‘Messy Church’, and its distinctively Welsh version ‘Llan Llanast’, have proved tremendously popular in many different denominations, offering an interactive all-age experience, typically at a time other than a Sunday morning. As part of its re-visioning of structures and mission under the ‘2020 Vision’ review, the Church in Wales is prioritising work with young people and families, especially through the appointment of Children, Youth and Family Mission Enablers. Church-linked projects such as Plant Dewi (St Davids Diocese) or Faith In Families (Swansea and Brecon Diocese) provide after-school or lunchtime clubs with distinctively Christian focus, as well as purely community activities and services. (See also attached report, *Light Under the Bushel*, especially Section 3.)

Success Factors?

Traditionally, Wales is a ‘friendly’ place, and this seems to affect all levels of society – from relations with the devolved Government, to communication between faith and ethnic groups. Factors which might contribute to this include:

- the small size of the population overall, and of individual population settlements (even the major towns are relatively small, by GB standards);
- a continuing sense of community and neighbourliness: people are interested in one another (the cliché of ‘nosiness’ is not without foundation, but is very much generated by benign interest!);
- an historically rich ecumenical mix, where no church is overwhelmingly dominant;
- the absence of an established church, so that no denomination is seen to be linked with government (now accompanied by a local, devolved government);
- historically strong religious practice, leaving a legacy of good religious literacy: faith is not seen as a culturally alien force (see also answers to Q2 and Q4), even though the devolved government is rigorously secular;
- the Welsh language and the bilingual status of the nation, which possibly creates a more culturally sympathetic environment for non-English-speakers than the (internationally unusual) monolingualism of most of the UK¹.

¹Also alluded to by Leanne Wood AM, Leader of Plaid Cymru, during BBC Radio 4’s *Election Call*, 29th April 2015.

2. Do you feel at ease with the diversity of modern society in terms of religion and belief?

Faith and Shared Values

As mentioned above, people of faith tend to relate well to one another; they have an understanding of one another's values, and of how they can be shaped by faith.

Tensions can arise on the interface between religion, culture and politics; and it is not always easy to disentangle the factors involved. Nor is it on the whole appropriate for an outside group to determine what is 'cultural' or 'political' rather than 'religious'. It may be regarded as 'cultural' that Moslem women wear a full-face veil rather than a headscarf, because practice varies across the Moslem world; but Moslem women themselves report choosing to wear the niqab for religious reasons². It may be 'political' rather than 'religious' when the Church in Wales criticised the behaviour of the State of Israel towards the Palestinian territories during the summer of 2014; but the Jewish community felt it to be a criticism of the Jewish faith, because of its beliefs in the importance of Israel. Common sense as well as sensitivity is required (though perhaps hard to enshrine in legislation!).

Resolving these issues and maintaining friendship at local level requires considerable trust between faith groups, fostered by personal contact and non-threatening encounters, as well as through an understanding of the importance of faith and its demands. For example, following the Church in Wales' Governing Body resolution in September 2014, expressing concern at the situation in the Middle East (and including reference to Israel's bombardment of Gaza during the summer of 2014), a 3-way demonstration of solidarity against religiously-motivated conflict was organised by the Church in Wales in the Senedd in December 2014. This was hosted by Darren Millar AM (Chair of the Cross-Party Faith Group), and involving Christian, Jewish and Moslem representatives.

As an (unscripted!) example of good relations developed through other networks, and the ability of those who know and respect one another well to co-operate, whatever their differences over some issues: the group involved on that occasion then spent some time discussing, over coffee in the Senedd cafe, how to make the best of the Human Transplantation (Wales) Act, which was about to introduce 'deemed consent' for organ donation. (This is a development which has caused the faith groups some concern, whilst they are unanimously committed to promoting voluntary organ donation.)

Visibility of Faith and Practice

Within a multi-cultural society, Christian faith and practise tends to be less visible than that of other faiths, because it is part of the historical fabric of life. Prominent religious buildings are Christian churches, chapels and cathedrals; weekends and public holidays are designed around Christian days of worship and festivals; clothing, food, and social norms – such as marriage and family life – all reflect a Christian heritage. It is not essential for Christians to follow a particular dress code, or to wear or display symbols of their faith. It is not compulsory for Christians to abstain from work on certain days, even when their faith requires them to attend worship. Some Christians may on these grounds feel 'discriminated against' when told not to wear religious jewellery with work or school uniforms, or when they are not guaranteed exemption from work on Sundays; but these are not essential articles of faith, and have always been subject to compromise.

²Presentation and discussion with Moslem teenagers at launch of 'Discover Islam' exhibition, Senedd, 21st April 2015.

A feature of the 'belief landscape' which has recently attracted attention is the number of people who identify as having no faith at all. The last census showed a particularly high incidence of this in Wales³. Without under-estimating the decline of religion, this may, paradoxically, indicate a higher, rather than lower, level of religious literacy amongst the population of Wales. Some areas with high levels of self-declared atheists (eg in the South Wales Valleys) have historically shown political allegiance to Communism, which consciously rejects belief in God; and this, combined with a society where there is no established church, but a strong tradition of 'nonconformity' (dating from a time when there was an established church against which to 'not conform'), defining one's faith is more of a conscious choice than a default setting. Welsh citizens may be less likely to identify themselves with a particular denomination without serious thought, because they are more aware of what it means to confess themselves as members of a faith group. If they do not regularly attend a place of worship, or feel a personal sense of belief, stating that they have 'no religion' may (paradoxically) reflect more understanding of what it means to have a faith, rather than a thoughtless indifference to religious matters.

On the other hand, recent Church in Wales figures for weddings show that the highest proportions of church weddings took place in areas coinciding with those recording high levels of atheism – so it appears that some people, at least, are not deterred from using the church by a lack of personal faith, and see the church as providing an appealing service at an important time!

Understanding the importance of religion in people's lives, and the valuable part it can play in maintaining communities and supporting social cohesion, is advantageous to civic society. Religions are not undermined when there is a variety of faith and practice, and there is no need to feel threatened by diversity.

³ONS: *Religion in England and Wales 2011*, p7 (Dec 2012)

3. Are the current systems of civil and criminal law in Wales satisfactory in relation to issues of religion and belief and in relation to the overlap between these and issues of race and ethnicity?

This is a complex area of law and civil society, and one which – particularly in relation to the overlap between ethnicity/race and religion, and regarding the criminal law – does not impact on the culturally dominant indigenous groups as much as on minorities.

Some issues relating to civil law – such as the freedom to wear religious insignia or take time off work for religious reasons – are touched upon in the answer to Q2, above.

The Welsh Government recognises hate-crime or religiously-motivated crime. The Hate Crime Independent Advisory Group to the Welsh Government, chaired by Lesley Griffiths AM (Minister with responsibility for equality) advises on the impact of the Welsh Government's policies to tackle hate crime. Victim Support has been commissioned by the Welsh Government as the Official National Hate Crime Report and Support Centre for Wales, to ensure that there is a single mechanism and process for ensuring victims receive support and can report hate crime.

All this has been supported by the Faith Communities Forum, of which the Church in Wales is part: for example, the Church in Wales is represented on a 'promotional video' made about the new provisions, in the autumn of 2014.

4. Do the media accurately and helpfully portray issues of religion and belief, and communities and groups identified by religion or belief?

The media overall emphasises the identification of religion with conservative morality, and its reaction varies between “shock” when churches refuse to uphold (for example) traditional models of family life or personal morality, and criticism when they do not move fast enough in the face of social change. Coverage of same-sex marriage offers example of both!

In mass-media fiction, there seems to be a slightly greater degree of sympathy towards a faith perspective than in the past. Previous popular TV comedies, for example, typically featured dim-witted vicars (eg *All Gas and Gaiters*), or clerics who barely believed in God or were more interested in other faiths (eg the episode of *Yes, Prime Minister* about choosing of a new Archbishop of Canterbury). More recently, series such as *The Vicar of Dibley* and *Rev* might present gross exaggeration and caricatures, but they at least take seriously the setting of a faith community, and show the church wrestling with contemporary problems.

The use of language in news reporting can be unhelpful, especially in relation to non-Christian faiths. There is careless use of religious labels when the real issue is something else, as in ‘Moslem extremist’, ‘Islamic terrorist’, or ‘Islamist’. Even the term ‘moderate Moslem’ implies that ‘Moslem’ normally means ‘fundamentalist’, ‘extremist’ or ‘terrorist’: no-one would say ‘moderate Christian’ to mean ‘non-violent’. To reflect a recent comment: “How would you feel about being called a ‘moderate Christian’?”

Viewed from the outside, recent members of the ‘Harries Report’ team who prepared the *2020 Vision* document were impressed by the amount of coverage given to the Church in Wales by Welsh newspapers. They felt that this reflected a greater degree of interest in religious matters in Wales than in England. It may also reflect long-standing, well-established relations between Church in Wales media officers and Welsh journalists.

Viewed from the inside, the news media in Wales tend only to be interested in religion and belief when there is something negative to report. They are interested in churches closing, not opening; complaints about untidy graveyards, not schemes to cherish them; decline in congregations, not successful new services. (A recent example of seeking only negative coverage was when a newspaper received a complaint “the church” had removed a teddy bear from a child’s grave. When it became clear that the church had not removed the item at all, but it had been stolen, the story did not run. ‘Heartless Church Removes Child’s Memorial’ was news; ‘Callous Thief Steals Child’s Memorial’ was not.)

The media perceives clergy to be old-fashioned and obscure, so looks for ‘novelty’ stories which show them engaging in the modern world such as on social media or taking services via Ipads. While they see the Archbishop of Wales’ views as newsworthy enough to be put on the front page, there is generally an undercurrent questioning of “what’s this got to do with the church?” or “why is religion meddling in politics?” On a more positive note, local papers will print good human interest stories from our churches if they are provides, such as a piece introducing a new vicar to a town or a service for pets.

The news media’s interest in religion tends to be confined to Christianity. The church is scrutinised regularly about equality policies and procedures and safe-guarding practice, while similar questions about other religions are not posed.

The Church in Wales receives more scrutiny and attention than other Christian denominations in Wales. This is partly because it is the largest denomination but also because there remains the perception that it is the

established church, part of the Church of England. Therefore when the Church of England is in the headlines, the Welsh media seek a Welsh version of the story from us, regardless of whether or not it is relevant. The emphasis on Christianity and the Church in Wales may also reflect ease of access and familiarity with structures: it is easy to ask for a Bishop to comment.

Away from news, BBC Wales offers a more balanced and reflective portrayal of religion and belief in their programmes *All Things Considered* (BBC Radio Wales) and on the Welsh-language channel Radio Cymru, *Bwrw Golwg*. They also broadcast a weekly service of worship, and a 'Word for the Weekend' ('Thought for the Day'-type item) on the Friday morning radio news programme. BBC Radio Wales' *Good Morning Wales* regularly features clerics of all denominations as guests on the daily newspaper review, and (reflecting the BBC's substantial presence in Cardiff) Welsh clerics are well represented on Radio 4's early-morning *Prayer for the Day*.

5. Are issues of religion and belief well handled in the curricula of the UK's systems of education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, and in relevant systems of training and continuing development?

A clear divergence has developed between Welsh and UK education policy over the last few years, driven to some extent by a variance of political ideology, and partly by the poor funding available in Wales.

Provision and Standards

Children and young people in Wales are not doing particularly well in relation to other parts of the UK, or as benchmarked against other countries. This has emerged as a particular problem, especially regarding the skill-set that our young people bring to the world of work. Economic disadvantage has been identified as a significant contributor to this, with many communities in Wales unable to lift their young people into a position where they can aspire to better outcomes in life. This is of great concern to all faith communities, where we are working to put in place robust pastoral support networks within those communities.

With regard to denominational schools, we are starting to see a number of examples of Church in Wales schools where the most disadvantaged learners are achieving above expectation. It is not always helpful to use specific situations to try to prove a general rule, but a clear focus on a values-led curriculum, and a concerted effort to support standards of teaching and leadership in schools, is at the heart of our strategy to support this.

Donaldson Review

Professor Graham Donaldson has just completed a major review of the curriculum in Wales, which has been passed on to the (Welsh) Minister for Education and Skills for consideration. The Church in Wales contributed to this and, in particular, to his recommendations about Religious Education. Donaldson has emphasised the need for high quality RE, to prepare young people in Wales for life in a pluralist world where faith plays a major role in the lives of many. In the wake of the terrorist atrocities in France in early 2015, Donaldson has emphasised the need for clarity of learning to create mutual understanding, if Wales is to develop a characteristically inclusive and tolerant society.

The Church in Wales Situation

In terms of our role as an education provider in Wales, we currently have 160 schools across the 6 dioceses, with 26,000 learners and more than 5000 staff members. Key relationships with local authorities and regional school improvement consortia are mixed, with some examples of excellent communication and committed shared-working. That said, there are plenty of examples where the role of the Diocesan Education Authority is ignored or even marginalised, often to the detriment of the schools, pupils and staff concerned.

A great deal of work has been undertaken to establish strong partnerships to support our provision and, while these relationships have been positive and useful over time, the political realignment in education in the last few years has seen major policy change and restructuring. This has left Diocesan officers starting from scratch within the revised structures.

On a practical level, it is a matter of concern to the Church in Wales and the Roman Catholic Church that some Local Authorities operate an apparently discriminatory practice regarding learner transport. Church schools are in Britain as elements of the maintained school system; however, some Local Authorities provide

learner transport to community schools, but are refusing to provide it for Voluntary Aided schools. This undermines the rights of parents to an education for their children in conformity with their religious beliefs (Article 2 of Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights).

In summary, the role of the Church in Wales as an education provider has developed greatly over recent times and we are increasingly able to identify the positive impact that the religious character of our schools has on the pupils in our care. Working in close collaboration with the Roman Catholic Church, we jointly provide around 12% of the school places in Wales, making us a major contributor to the system in Wales. We are currently working on a revision of the joint CinW/RC publication *Faith in Education*, which we hope will reaffirm the Welsh Government's commitment to the place and development of our place within the education system across Wales.

6. Should faith-based organisations be involved in social and political action and, if so, in what ways and to what extent?

The demands of the Gospel have always led to individual churches and to Christians becoming involved in social and political action. This can be seen in the Church in Wales in the usual range of activities, from civic engagement (such as with Mayor-making services, town centre carol services and Remembrance Day) to running community projects at Parish and Diocesan level – embracing an enormous range; and commenting on local or national government policy in the ‘prophetic’ tradition: recent examples include responses to Welsh Government consultations on legislation such as the Human Transplantation (Wales) Act and its implementation, the Domestic Violence Bill, and the Child Poverty Strategy for Wales; and campaigning reports such as *Truth and Lies About Poverty* and *Time to Rethink Benefit Sanctions*, in conjunction with the GB-wide Public Issues Team (Baptist, Methodist, URC, Church of Scotland) and other churches and organisations .

In some cases, it is important to comment from a self-interested as well as altruistic perspective: for example, it was important to ensure in the recent legislation about same-sex marriage, that appropriate provision for the Church in Wales was included – which requires a separate section of the Act, since we have a unique position covered by neither the provision for the Church of England, nor that for other denominations.

In a country with a plurality of beliefs and opinions, it is entirely appropriate for all interests to have access to decision-makers and the lobbying process, and this should by all means include faith organisations. Some faith organisations may promote a particular shade of opinion or incline to support a particular party; some may be more comfortable with a range of opinions. The Lobbying Act has imposed on churches new requirements to observe a higher level political neutrality at particular times, and this may be seen as burdensome or inconvenient by some individuals or pressure groups; but (so far) the Church in Wales has managed to live with this, and, without compromising its ability to comment on policy developments, it and other churches continue to be regarded as impartial hosts for the majority of hustings organised in Wales for the 2015 General Election.

It is impossible to suggest rules for who and how should be allowed to engage in social or political action, but it is also legitimate for faith organisations to disagree; and in a free and open democracy, opinions promoted should not themselves contradict or seek to deny the rights that underpin that free and open democratic society. (The delicate balance which sometimes needs to be struck between different rights is a complex subject, which would overtake everything else if it were to be fully explored here; and it has not emerged as a major issue in Wales.)

For a more detailed discussion of the Church in Wales’ engagement in social action, in particular, please see the attached report, *Light Under the Bushel*. This was produced in response to questions raised about the value of such work to the church, by the 2020 Vision Implementation Group. Rather than repeat its contents here, please see in particular Sub-Sections 1.2, 2.1, 2.3 and Section 3, as perhaps most relevant to this discussion.

7. How should disagreements be handled between and within different traditions and communities, and between these and other interests in public life and wider society?

Many organisations, including those based on faith, have procedures for handling internal differences. Where these do not contravene the law or other human rights, it seems reasonable for faith groups to be able to use them. In accordance with the response to Q6 (above), it should not be possible for faith groups to impose requirements which break the law or violate other rights (such as forced marriage or FGM, as mentioned in Q1). There seems no reason to require different rules for settling disagreements between or within faith groups than to those between any other parties. Religious groups, subject to human rights considerations, should not be above or outside the law.

8. Would you like to indicate to us the kinds of recommendation you hope we shall make for public policy?

Lack of response here does not indicate lack of interest, but the question is framed in a very a vague way. It would be more helpful to be asked to consider specific policy areas.