

January 2018 Update on the work of Cytûn 'Laser' Group – in relation to the National Assembly and the Welsh Government

The 'Laser' Group of church representatives met at the Church in Wales's new offices in Callaghan Square, Cardiff, on 10 January. Unfortunately, Gethin Rhys, Cytûn's Policy Officer, was absent because of illness; and the group worked through the legislation and policy 'matrix' as best we could.

We noted (again) that Brexit overshadows all the work of the Assembly and the Government.

One point of interest to Friends (I expect) is the Government's proposal to get rid of the "reasonable chastisement" defence in criminal law, as regards parents' disciplining of their children. I hope that meeting of Friends in Wales will support this. We do not expect there to be large scale "criminalisation" of parents – rather, the culture will be changed. After all, how many people smoke in pubs, nowadays?

The Government also proposes changes to the use of teacher assessment and test data in schools.

We were not clear about certain housing matters, especially leasehold reform, so we decided to invite the staff of Housing Justice Cymru to come to our next meeting (16 March).

We learnt that there is a Churches' Legislation Advisory Service, based in London. (See their website.) Quakers and Cytûn are member organisations.

Membership organisations of Cytûn were invited to advertise an event held at the Baptist College, Cardiff, on 30 January. Those attending were people familiar to me from the 'laser' group itself. I attended, with the intention of reporting back to Friends (see below).

On 30 January, then, Matthew Rees, gave a talk (followed by discussion) on his PhD thesis, worked for under the auspices of Aberystwyth University and Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol.

The title of his thesis is: Faith in the Public Sphere – can faith-based organisations gain traction in the Welsh policy process in 2018?

The short answer to his question is 'yes'. But I'll elaborate below. And I'll add that I hope to obtain a digest through Gethin Rhys.

The thesis could be described as sociological in nature.

Matthew looked at both Northern Ireland and Wales – both with devolved administrations (well, in the case of NI, in principle) - with a view to exploring the political engagement of faith-based (and certain other) organisations. He plotted selected bodies on a two-scale matrix: (a) stronger - weaker roots within society; (b) more moderate – less moderate theological orientation. The Church in Wales he placed in the box "more moderate + with strong roots in society" (the latter point arising from the C in W's presence in all parishes in Wales).

Matthew said that the existence of the National Assembly has influenced faith-based organisations and has prompted them to engage. He noted that Cytûn was politically engaged already, before devolution.

In his work, Matthew concentrated on three issues, in NI and in Wales, respectively. For Wales, these were: education, "presumed consent" re human organ transplants, and constitutional issues.

Matthew classified modes of engagement in the following terms: "insider", "outsider" and "thresholder".

The “insider” negotiates, has a conversation with ministers and civil servants.

The “outsider” stirs controversy, makes a lot of “noise” outside State institutions, and tries to change society. (See, for example, Greenpeace, especially in its early days.)

The “thresholder” balances between the two approaches outlined above. (Latterly, Greenpeace manages this.)

Matthew argued that deeply rooted organisations are able to get media attention and also to engage in “threshold” activity.

(The Church in Wales lobbied successfully to change the wording of the “presumed consent” legislation, to provide for a veto by families on the removal of loved ones’ organs for transplants.)

Matthew moved on to coalitions. These can be church or faith-based or wider (faith and secular). Gethin Rhys mentioned the Society of Friends’ “coalition” with Forces Watch to oppose the militarisation of schools.

Matthew Rees asked us to think about how a (our) faith-based organisation is received by the Assembly and the Government. What can it offer to the Assembly or Government (in terms of resources and knowledge)? The Church in Wales and the Roman Catholic Church have schools – but this may have disadvantages (see below).

Gethin proposed that, to be effective, in the political arena, faith-based organisations need:

- To have staff or committed volunteers
- To take advantage of formal structures
- To offer the right resources
- And to avoid becoming a “prisoner”.

The “prisoner” notion refers to the risk of being “co-opted” by the establishment, to the extent that the faith-based (or any) organisation becomes defensive of the establishment in public, after becoming somewhat embedded, in private. Given the “contract culture”, moreover, the Church in Wales and the Roman Catholic Church are reliant on public moneys to maintain their own schools. (Does this restrict their voice?)

In the ensuing discussion, several points were made. Believers vote; churches “show up” to consultations; we are well informed about issues. Government officials seek responses to consultations – it is good to make the effort. (Gethin Rhys commented that with regard to one technical consultation, only Cytûn and the RSPB responded. We wondered what it was that united these two bodies!)

Notes of caution were sounded. Is Cytûn itself too defensive of the Assembly in public? Is it healthy that one political party has been continuously in government? Is the Opposition weak? Are the media (in Wales) adequate?

Finally, my own thoughts about Quakers, prompted by these discussions, are along these lines: in Wales, Quakers have weak roots in society, and this has consequences for our work; we need the “coalition” of Cytûn to be effective (and we are not alone in this). Meanwhile, at the UK level we are probably “balancers” (see above), while in Europe and the UN we are “insiders”.

David Harries

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