

# Welsh Government Faith Communities Forum

## Skype meeting

11:30-13:00 on 29 April 2020

### Attendance:

Aled Edwards	Cytun: Churches Together in Wales
Gethin Rhys	Cytun: Churches Together in Wales
Rheinallt Thomas	Free Church Council of Wales
Christine Abbas	Baha'i Faith
Vivian Bartlett	Baha'i Faith
Naran Patel	Hindu Council of Wales
Radhika Kadaba	Hindu Council of Wales
Angela Keller	Roman Catholic Church (representing Archbishop of Cardiff)
Sian Rees	Evangelical Alliance
Abdul-Azim Ahmed	Muslim Council of Wales
Saleem Kidwai	Muslim Council of Wales
Kate McColgan	Chair of the Interfaith Council for Wales
John Davies	Archbishop of Wales
Nor'dzin Pamo	Buddhist representative

### Apologies:

Gurmit Singh Randhawa	Sikh Council of Wales
Saleem Kidwai	Muslim Council of Wales
Laurence Kahn	South Wales Jewish Representative Council
Melody Odey	South Wales Jewish Representative Council
Meraj Hussein	Muslim Council of Wales
Joga Singh	Sikh Council of Wales

### Minutes

#### **1 Welcome**

The Deputy Minister and Chief Whip (DMCW) welcomed everyone to the meeting and emphasised the importance of communication despite the challenges of lockdown. The DMCW thanked the Forum membership for their strong inter-faith and collaborative approach in response to the Covid 19 pandemic.

#### **2 Item 1 - Covid 19 and Faith impacts**

The DMCW invited contributions from members. Responses included:

- Hardship and distress to congregations caused by the loss of communal spaces.
- Digital resources and social media:
  - o A noticeable growth in the development and use of digital resources.
    - These have been used well for support and activism (foodbanks etc.)
    - Also very successful in relation to communicating in the Welsh language including S4C.

- There are more worshippers online than attending physical services pre-lockdown.
- Educational and storytelling resources are available from some members.
- A unique Ramadan. MCW launched 'Radio Ramadan Cymru' using streaming to share content to bridge the gap.
  - The DMCW has written to Imams in Wales regarding Ramadan.
- The Archbishop of Wales passed on his thanks to the Welsh Government for the provision to visit churches for recording and streaming.
  - Church in Wales would not open churches for funerals, given the challenges presented by lockdown regulations.
  - Noted various requests for bell ringing, now around VE day. The Church in Wales will stick to guidance on clergy only attending churches.
- Baha'is are trying to link to all communities, sharing devotional meetings with all religions and none.
  - People are sharing more from home.
  - Food packages sent to vulnerable Baha'i from Muslim women in Swansea.
- Bereavement:
  - There is a need for compassionate support for people facing bereavement.
  - Hindu groups have been serving food to NHS and care workers, and praying for everyone.

Links between Roman Catholic parishes and Roman Catholic schools are no longer active due to the Corona Virus.

In the evangelical church, people are looking for a theology of suffering.

- EA working with chaplains, re-imagining how the church could serve post-lockdown.
- As well as sadness, lots of hope and community spirit.

The Church of Jesus Christ of the LDS has regular meetings, and calls to the elderly.

- Church of Jesus Christ of LDS coordinated 8000+ dignity bags around S.Wales.
- 7 coordinators (officially approved) on street collections for food banks / hygiene for care homes.
- Aim to get work of Interfaith Council for Wales out in the media.

The group was reminded that not everyone's spiritual path includes faith in God and worship.

The DMCW made the following additional points:

- Offered to pass on comments about bereavement support to Health colleagues for consideration at the Covid 19 Ethical and Moral Advisory group.
- Noted social media's importance and an opportunity to maintain some of the positive effects of lockdown in the future.
- Noted the importance that the interfaith support continues, also food bank work.

On burials:

- Cancellations have caused distress.
- Good work has been done with LAs and with WG, with good connectivity.
- We have a sense of what is required and who to contact.
- Local providers have challenges managing visitors.
- There are significant differences in approach across localities.

The Welsh Government has provided more funding for school counselling services:

- The Minister for Education has made points this week which will be of interest.
- Isolation is also a key feature for all faith communities.

The DMCW noted Covid 19 is having a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable in our communities and that we must not deepen any inequalities during the pandemic but mitigate them.

### 3 Item 2 - Covid 19 and BAME impacts

Heather Payne, chair of the Covid-19 Moral and Ethical Advisory Group for Wales gave an overview of the WG's work:

- Emerging data demonstrates the need to focus on the high impact of Covid 19 on the BAME community.
- Advisory group set up, co-chaired by Judge Ray Singh, also looking at Risk Assessments for workers.
- Data analysis is underway to assess possible causes.
- A faith-based perspective is required because there is ethnicity based on faith.
- Medical and socio-economic issues will be considered followed by constructive steps.

Aled Edwards noted that systems are in place for refugee doctors to work in the NHS.

- Officials are checking conformity with the English qualification system.
- Concerns about putting new workers at risk on the front line but engagement shows individuals want to decide for themselves.
- An organisation wishes to fund refugee organisations, contact Aled for details.
- Concerns regarding funerals guidance - limits on larger BAME families attending.

The DM responded:

- We are working with Public Health England and Scotland on BAME issues.
- Social care workers are also on the frontline.
- Supermarkets recruit from BAME communities, need to understand impacts.
- BAME workforce's contribution to the Covid 19 response is significant.

Naran Patel raised the absence of Hindu organisations from the UK Consultation into effects of Covid 19 on the BAME community.

The DMCW urged a specific focus on the situation in Wales:

- There is a Welsh Advisory group, in addition to the UK enquiry.
- For the UK Labour party Doreen Lawrence is leading, DMCW will pass on concerns from the Hindu community.
- Faith aspects will be key to the Advisory group's work.

**ACTION: Forum members to send any further feedback to the Equality Team, to be channelled to the Advisory group.**

### 4 Item 3 – Leading Wales out the pandemic: the possibility of re-opening places of worship for private prayer.

The DMCW spoke on the FM's framework / 7 questions to lead Wales out of lockdown and outlined the opportunity to consider whether places of worship should have restrictions lifted.

General agreement across the group that opening places of worship for limited use would not be practical, with issues around independently run venues, volunteer staff, difficulty in limiting access to individuals, cleaning etc.

The DMCW informed the group of the following:

- Officials will feed views into the First Minister's framework. There is pressure to follow England but we must do what works for Wales.
- Public health is at the forefront of the work.

The Archbishop of Wales said Faith leaders have been criticised for following official guidance.

- The DMCW confirmed that public health guidance is based on evidence and decisions by Ministers on the advice of the Chief Medical officer.

## **5 Item 4 – Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence**

The DMCW said:

- The lockdown has seen an increase in domestic abuse, affecting some children.
- Despite growth there is a reduction in referrals, and calls to the Live Fear Free helpline.
- Refuge providers and domestic abuse workers are classed as key workers.
- Calls to 999 followed by 55 indicates to police that someone is in danger.
- Women are the main victims but there are huge pressures in families:
  - o socioeconomic factors, generational issues, digital exclusion, access to gardens all playing a role.
- Faith leaders are aware of your communities and neighbourhoods and can help families in need.
- The Don't be a Bystander campaign is about community support and the lockdown has brought some communities together.

Officials asked for faith leaders to consider honour-based violence and forced marriage and to raise these issues as crimes with their congregations.

**ACTION: officials to share information about the Don't Be a Bystander campaign**

## **6 Item 5 – Education consultation: the Curriculum for Wales: Religion, values and ethics (Pete Kennedy)**

The DMCW invited Peter Ray Kennedy to present this agenda item on the latest in a series of WG consultations relating to the curriculum.

- This consultation relates to changes in education legislation to religion, values and ethics to fit with the Curriculum for Wales and the requirement for pluralism.
- Religious Education is mandatory for all registered pupils, and will continue to be so as part of humanities, with a name change to Religion, Values and Ethics.
- Schools of a religious character have different rules.
- Proposals include provisions that any syllabus must reflect the wide range of views in Wales as well as non-religious views such as Humanism and Atheism. This reflects case law.
- Agreed Syllabus Conferences will decide on syllabi but must consider WG guidance.
- Status of voluntary aided schools will be clear on the face of the Bill.
- Officials shared contact details with members of the meeting for further input.

There was discussion on the draft definition of "religion" for this purpose

- Earlier definitions which do not refer to a deity caused concern with the Evangelical Alliance, however a definition of religion that specifies a God excludes Buddhism.
- The definition was developed with stakeholders but won't be used in legislation, only in the framework which will be consulted on later in the year.

**ACTION: Education officials agreed to feedback with an update on the definition of religion.**

The DMCW suggested a specific meeting on the consultation over the next twelve weeks.

**ACTION: officials to plan a meeting to discuss the latest consultation on religious education in the next 12 weeks.**

## 7 Any Other Business

The Forum was created during a time of crisis. The DMCW emphasised the importance of the forum during the current time.

- The Forum should meet again within this 12 week period of consultation on Religious Education.
- The DMCW thanked all members and their communities for their work and impact on people's lives.

## 8 Close.

### **ACTIONS:**

1. Forum members to send any further feedback on BAME impact to the Equality Team, to be channelled to the Advisory group.
2. Officials to share information about the Don't Be a Bystander campaign.
3. Officials to plan a meeting to discuss the latest consultation on religious education in the next 12 weeks.