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Assessment of Inter Faith Activity amongst Grassroots Faith Communities in Wales

Research Summary

Social research

Number: 39/2012

Resources for Change in partnership with the Community Development Foundation were commissioned by the Welsh Government in December 2011 to assess inter faith activity amongst grassroots faith communities in Wales.

The research was commissioned to provide evidence on the current levels of regular inter-faith contact at the grassroots level between different faith communities in Wales, and the support for such activity among people of different faiths.

Introduction

The overall objectives of the work were to:

- Assess the extent to which grassroots faith communities within Wales are engaged in sustained positive contact with each other (e.g. types of activity, level of community support, participants, geographical spread) and why.
- Provide evidence of good practice to the Faith Communities Forum, to support the promotion of appropriate inter-faith activity.
- Increase the Welsh Government's knowledge of inter-faith activity, to enable it to make more informed decisions on how it can engage with faith groups, and how forums such as the Faith Communities Forum should be constituted.

The aims of the research set by the Welsh Government used the term interfaith broadly to describe interactions between individuals from different faiths and between individuals from different denominations of a faith (e.g. Catholics and Protestants within Christianity).

However, the research highlighted the value of using the terms 'inter faith' (between faiths) and 'intra faith' (between denominations) respectively.

Methodology

The techniques used to gather information were:

- Literature review.
- Hard copy and online questionnaire survey to local faith groups.
- Local faith group interviews.
- Stakeholder interviews.
- Case studies.

The research focused on the following key topics:

- Motivation
- Barriers and enablers
- Outcomes
- Mechanisms for information flow
- The nature of inter faith and intra faith activity
- Interpretation of the terms 'inter faith' and 'intra faith'
- Sustainability of activities

Findings

Terminology: 'Inter faith' is well understood and seems to be the term in preferred use. 'Intra faith' is recognised, but not well used. Rather, 'inter denominational' seems to be more frequently in use, particularly for Christians. Ecumenical activity is also a preferred term for Christians.

Beyond the 7 faiths: There were several instances where participants proactively mentioned other spiritualities, such as Pagans, Druids, New Age. It was not within the scope of this study to do any research on the topic, so many questions remain unanswered, in particular how such communities might become involved in inter faith activity, whether they have any desire to, and whether the current inter faith 'sector' have any desire for them to become involved.

Representation: A picture emerged sub-nationally of inter faith activity at a regional level, with key individuals being particularly active and remaining active over many years. There seemed to be a sense of how this can make it difficult for others to get involved,

particularly if they are not community leaders or prominent individuals. Getting the 'right' people to sit on an inter faith group will be challenging, as it seems that different people will have different views of who the 'right' people are.

The importance of key people:

The research uncovered several examples of local level inter faith activity which were not between congregations, but between individuals. This seems to be a really important attribute of grassroots level inter faith activity, and will influence how it can be supported most effectively. There is a risk that inter faith and intra faith activity is vulnerable to ceasing when this key individual is no longer leading, for example where they move away.

Funding: Nearly half of survey respondents indicated that lack of funding was a barrier to engaging in inter faith activity, which was a higher proportion than in relation to intra faith activity. The invaluable input from volunteers was recognised, but it was also noted that there is a limit to what can be

expected of volunteers.

The importance of geography: Outside of the main conurbations in South Wales and Wrexham, it was commonly noted that there are often very few members of minority faith communities. In these areas, it is much more difficult for the local Christian communities to reach out to these other faiths, as they don't know where to find them, even though they may know some individuals.

Why?: For some, inter faith activity is inspired by their faith and is carried out as part of their faith practice. In other cases, there is a faith-based drive to bring about improvement for the local community, and its implementation may be achieved through working with or for people of other faiths. On the whole in Wales, the level of community tensions related to faith is low and was rarely seen as the main driver for inter faith activity. However, examples were given where people of faith wanted to take a stand to show their support for another faith.

One –off or sustained activity?:

In instances where inter faith activity was stimulated by a negative incident, the activity was short-lived, and rarely led to sustained activity. However, when there were incidents of tension, it made a positive difference to have pre-existing inter faith relationships. There seems to be a trend of inter faith activity levels rising and falling in cycles of a few years, according to the level of interest locally and related to this, the presence or absence of particular individuals who take a leading role in organising activities.

The nature of inter faith activity:

Inter faith activity is focused on understanding more about one another's faith, building relationships with people of another faith, doing constructive things for the wider community together with people of another faith. There seems to be most appetite for simple dialogue (rather than in-depth discussion of religious materials and theological debate) and for joint activities for community benefit.

Recommendations

With the main driving force for grassroots inter faith activity coming from individuals, the potential actions focus on supporting and linking individually inspired inter faith activity.

Build up a network of inter faith mentors

The real need here is to support those individuals who are already playing a key role in local and sub-regional inter faith activity, and to build the capacity within the 'sector' to bring other people in behind them.

The Inter Faith Council for Wales' regional representatives offer a base to build on, and in time, more individuals could be recruited.

Their role would include: information sharing between grassroots activists, and with regional and national activists; enabling and supporting grassroots activity; building capacity for succession by finding new people and to upskill existing activists.

There is a discussion to be had about where the responsibility and

accountability for the network of inter faith mentors lies. However, an initiative such as this requires co-ordination and guidance, so would need to sit within some existing body. The Inter Faith Council for Wales may be the most natural 'home', but thinking more broadly, the Welsh Council for Voluntary Action could offer advantages too. (Please note that neither organisation were approached about this).

There is considerable further work needed to develop from this concept stage to implementation, and an interim feasibility stage may be sensible.

Providing targeted support materials

With or without a network of inter faith mentors, there is a need for information that can be used to promote inter faith activity in general, as well as more specific practical support materials. There are existing materials, such as those published by the Faith-based Regeneration Network and the Inter Faith Network, that may be suitable, or additional materials that build on these or are specific to the

Welsh context may be needed.

A 'glossy' or 'easy read' summary of the benefits of local inter faith activity, including some examples, and information to signpost people to regional and national sources of support may be helpful. This could be widely circulated by faith communities, the voluntary sector and local public sector bodies.

There should also be 'how to' guidance, providing succinct and practical information about how to organise different forms of local inter faith activity. This could include potential pitfalls and how to avoid them, ideas for activities, explanations of simple techniques, sources of further information and support, and case studies.

Improve mechanisms to hear from the grassroots

The research shows that the greatest need is to improve the flow of information from the grassroots 'up' to national level. This would give activists at national level more depth of information and would contribute to activities and decision-making nationally that support local work.

With a network of inter faith mentors in place, there would be a mechanism in place for 'upwards' communication, including reporting in person and via briefing papers to national inter faith bodies.

Another suggestion is some form of national 'award or recognition' for good practice. This could be linked

to Inter Faith Week. It is important to note that this is not intended as a competition, but rather as a way to highlight good practice. Criteria for judging could include the potential transferability of an idea, innovation, relevance to different contexts, e.g. rural or urban communities.

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